

Empowerment through dance: Taking a turn

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Abstract

This paper presents and examines a project undertaken by a teacher in an elementary school and a dance professor in an arts education university program in Saskatchewan, Canada. The project has been ongoing for five years, usually in the winter semester, as a partnership between students in grades 3 to 5, and second-year preservice university students. It involves the pairing of a grade school student with a university student. Together they work through dance tasks and reflective writings led by the professor, teacher, and guest artist. Reflections indicate that these were worthwhile experiences generating a sense of pride in the work; an understanding of the power of dance to get to know about themselves and others; a development of knowledge about dance and dance education; and the courage to share their ideas with others in a regular performance entitled “Dance Discovery.”

Keywords: dance, education, curriculum, pedagogy, preservice education

Introduction

Dancers and dance educators have experienced the power of dance to heal, to educate, and as a catalyst for personal growth. This paper describes two programs: a university teacher preparation program in arts education, and a community school, which provides arts/dance education experiences for elementary school students. In particular, a project that later developed into a research study and that was created from discussions between the community schoolteacher and the university dance education professor will be outlined. The project involved students from grades 3 to 5 who were paired with preservice university students in dance sessions over several weeks. The goals of the

project were for preservice teachers to establish their identity as future educators and to prepare them to work effectively in dance with students they encounter in today's classrooms, and for the school students to understand and value arts expressions throughout life.

Arts education program at the University of Regina

In 1982, the implementation of the arts education program in the Faculty of Education, University of Regina influenced and supported the need for a comprehensive arts education program for schools and specialist and generalist teachers who would be trained to teach arts in schools. Since its inception, the arts education program has established a BEd degree and an After Degree in Arts Education, leading to a comprehensive education in the teaching of arts, full teacher certification, and a combined BA in each of the arts areas. Students enter the program with various backgrounds in dance that consist of little or no experience at all; dance studio training in different dance forms; professional dance training from professional ballet programs; syllabus knowledge and examinations in specific dance genres; teacher training in specific dance forms; and professional dance experience with companies. Those students graduating from the program with a major or minor in dance education will teach in diverse contexts, employing dance for many purposes. Additionally, students in the program who major or minor in one of the other art forms and teach in the elementary schools will need to teach all the art forms, including dance. It is not unusual that dance is provided by teachers with a variety of experience, as Risner (2012) articulates:

In the USA, the teaching artist field in dance is a diverse assemblage who see their work from a variety of perspectives: dance artists who teach as part of their professional responsibilities; dance arts educators working in schools and community settings; cultural workers who employ dance for constructive social change; activists who use dance arts to improve people's lives and circumstances; professional dance artists and performers who supplement their income with teaching; and those who clearly classify themselves as professional teaching artists in dance. (p. 175)

The challenge is to provide experiences for those who have in-depth background in dance and those who do not, and go beyond the “pedagogic and cultural” divide that Huddy and Stevens (2011) discuss that traditionally the dance teacher teaches “about dance” and the teaching artists teach “through dance” (p. 157). Furthermore, the students need to understand how gender and body issues have an impact on the way dance is understood and accepted (Risner, 2007, 2010; Risner & Stinson 2010; Shapiro, 1998; Stinson, 2005) and the low priority given to the dance curriculum in school and university programs. It is also important that they understand and implement curriculum and provide good learning experiences for their students and, reflecting on the work of Bruner (1961), consider that the purpose of education is not to impart knowledge, but, instead, to facilitate a child's thinking and problem-solving skills and to develop symbolic thinking which can then be transferred to a range of situations.

Most importantly, Koff and Mistry (2012) identify the importance of a “healthy professional identity” that will lead toward improved teaching and learning, and assist in the development of an effective teacher, thus creating job satisfaction (p. 85). Thus, in a program for preservice educators for K-12 teaching contexts, experiences in reflective practice, collaboration, and interactive experiences are of paramount importance as well as courses on various topics related to education. The goal is to prepare teachers to work effectively across the full range of students they encounter in today’s classroom, providing authentic learning contexts whereby through the use of open-ended inquiry, the students engage in discourse and social learning in a community of learners and direct their own learning in project work. It is also significant that they address real-world problems, learning about the work of professionals and presenting to audiences beyond the classroom.

The school

Over the course of this five-year dance project, the students participated in two different buildings. The first three years were spent in the old, dilapidated building that would be literally knocked down, and the additional two years were spent in a new vibrant, bright, and creative space. The school was the first of many new schools in the city designed with an open concept model utilizing many versatile learning spaces. Due to the socio-economic needs in the area, the provincial government gave the school “Community School Status.” This classification directed extra funding for a full kitchen

complete with a nutrition program, laundry services, clothing, and a Community Coordinator to support outreach programs with various partnerships.

The students were a diverse group of Grades 3-5 who brought genuine excitement and challenges to the project with a wide range of learning and behavior needs. Some children were new to Canada and considered to be English as an Additional Language Students, and a few students had visual impairments. It was clear the students had preconceived notions about dance as some proclaimed, “I don’t dance.” Other students warmed to the idea, as they had seen people on television programs dancing and thought, “dance is cool.” Finally, a small group seemed very open to this new dance experience, as they had exposure to a variety of cultural dances such as Ukrainian and Indian classical dance classes. We knew the challenges some students had and were aware that adaptations would have to be made. Questions still remained as we wondered how the students would react with openly expressing themselves with their preservice teacher. We sought ways to build connections and trust with the students early in the project.

Arts education in the school context

Arts educators, such as Edmund Burke Feldman (1987 –) and Eliot Eisner (1933 – 2014), have argued that arts education is not about creating artists, but about something much broader. They have suggested that the arts are central to education, providing students with an opportunity to create and acquire knowledge and understand the world around them. Involvement in the arts is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills. Arts learning can also improve motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork. The focus of the Saskatchewan K-12 Arts Education Curriculum is to enable students to understand and value arts expressions. This provincial curricula goal gave us a foundation to build on our own vision for the development of the project.¹

When the teacher began working at the school, she was a Grade 3/4 classroom teacher. She noticed that there was a small music program within the current school and very little focus on dance education. To introduce dance into the school, she created an

¹ https://www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/moe-curriculum-BBLEARN/index.jsp?view=goals&lang=en&subj=arts_education&level=1

extra-curricular hip-hop dance class. Eventually becoming the Arts Education Specialist, she expanded and introduced creative dance experiences to students through dance notation as well as through this particular dance project. This dance project spanned six weeks so when the program became a success, she included the project into my Arts Education Year Plans, which included the drama, music, and visual art strands. From the success of this recurring project, we were able to create a “Culture of Movement” and passion in the building, offering daily movement opportunities through dance fitness, yoga and hip-hop classes.

Dance project

The aims of the project for the university students were to establish their identity as future educators and to prepare them to work effectively in dance within the school context. The aims for the school students were to ensure they had a positive experience in dance, to explore and express personal ideas, to gain a better understanding of the arts, and to connect the dance community within the city.

During the five years of the project, usually in the winter semester, with grades 3 to 5 students and second-year preservice university students, the length of the individual sessions and the entire project varied from three to six weeks. The university professor guided the preparation of the sessions with the university students and lead sessions in the school, prompting the warm-up, exploration, and sharing of the work. One or two grade school students were paired with a university student and together they worked through the prepared movement tasks and reflective writings leading to a theme that formed the dances. On two separate occasions, a professional dancer and now Ballet Master and Community Outreach Coordinator of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company, Jaime Vargas, joined the project, sharing his experience and expertise with the students. At the end of the sessions, the school students invited their parents to a performance of the created dances entitled “Dance Discovery,” which took place in the school or a university facility.

Research project

The informal responses and enthusiasm of the university students, the grades 3-5 students, and the administration and teachers in the school instigated the research project that examined the value of the dance sessions and what was learned in the dance project.

The research project began a few months after the final dance performance. Firstly, we invited the university students to write about their experiences, answering three questions (Appendix), and to agree to have their responses used in the research. Secondly, individual university students and school students were invited to complete a short interview that asked further details about their dance experiences and involvement in the dance project (Appendix). In interviewing the students, we wished to ascertain the following: the types of dance activities the school and university students had previously participated, such as formal, informal, or non-formal contexts (Keuchel, 2014); the value of the project for the students; and what was learned by the students who participated in the project. A semi-structured interview format was implemented using the designed questions for each group, and the students were encouraged to provide descriptions and stories to illustrate their experiences. This format allowed the opportunity to compare across interviews because questions were the same or similar (Reinharz & Chase, 2003). Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina, granted approval for the research project.

Analysis of data

Applying Hycner's model (1999), the written reflections and interview comments were bracketed to identify recurring themes, and then delineated into sub-themes relevant to the goals of the research. Three major themes with subthemes emerged. *Connecting through dance*: friendships, knowledge of dance, value of arts expressions, learning; *Creating a sense of community*: understanding self and others, teamwork, safe environment; *Creating a sense of pride*: rewarding, joy, passion, trust, expression, confidence.

What the university students said

The majority of the university students had varied experiences in dance that ranged from only dancing in informal settings to several who had danced seriously in recognized programs. Several students explained that they did not have a dance program in either their elementary school and one felt, "that it would have been a rewarding and enjoyable experience" (C). Those who had danced in various programs identified that they loved learning different dance forms" (F) and also felt that the experience built

“lifelong friendships” (D). Three of the four students who were interviewed had danced in a studio setting from a young age; the fourth student began skating at a young age and later had a professional career. Each of the students expressed a joy in dance and a passion for teaching dance. Those who had dance experience described experiences where they danced with friends, at home, and at family celebrations, and acknowledged that they continue to dance.

Reflecting on the theme of *connecting through dance*, most students explained that through the experience, they broadened their knowledge about dance education. One student identified “One thing I have learned through dance is that it is ok to be myself, because everyone is different and no two people are going to perform the same way” (J). Those whose experience in dance had only been in the studio setting acknowledged, “Teaching dance in a school setting is very different compared to the studio setting” (C). They were keenly aware how it is important to understand how people learn, and they appreciated gaining some awareness of the reality of the school context. Additionally, the importance of connecting with the students was expressed by one student: “to play, to let go and have fun, to set up guidelines, to be open to changes, to create trust, to recognize that students have ideas and experiences and it is important to accommodate them, teaching dance is about movement and expression, every student, at heart, is a dancer” (G).

The theme of *creating a sense of community* was explained through comments about the importance of creating a warm and trusting environment while including all students regardless of ability. One student stated, “It is important to be enthusiastic about dancing, to create a safe, fun, and non-judgmental environment to dance in” (K). They talked about the practicalities of teaching dance, such as using metaphors and similes to help the expression and to have ideas that relate to the children, such as our sports dance and the jungle party. They recognized they could explore various concepts through dance that help in other areas, such as responsibility, organization, and time management. A student further explained, “Through dance, students can learn aspects of dance such as rhythm and movement, and also to express their emotions through dance” (A).

The theme of *creating a sense of pride* was reflected in such comments about the value of dance to assist students to express themselves, become more physically active, and enjoy themselves. Some identified that “Through dance, one can learn the self-

confidence, grace, compassion, teamwork, strength, and motivation to make it through anything life can throw their way” (I) and that “Dance allows every student, regardless of his or her abilities, to participate and find immense joy” (T). Many students acknowledged that dance helps you get to know one’s self and others. They also talked about how rewarding the experience was and how they gained confidence and learned how to express themselves.

What the school students said

The majority of the school student’s view of dance was based solely on what they have seen in a pop culture context and informal dance experiences in their homes. One student reflects on his dance experiences by saying, “Mom, she will fool around and tell me to come two step with her” (K). Three students were selected for the interview process, two boys and one girl. These particular students took part in the project for three consecutive years (grades 3, 4, 5) and were now reflecting on the project in the 6th grade.

All students reflected on *connecting through dance* and the *sense of community* they felt when collaborating with the preservice teachers. One student stated, “It was super fun that they appreciated your ideas; that was the most fun part” (E). Another student remembers, “We took a group picture together and I still have that picture” (S). The other male student highlights that the preservice teachers’ modeling persuaded him to be more open to the experience: “...it was really cool watching them do dance moves” (K). These memories have left a positive imprint of their first formal exposure to dance. One male student reflects on how this creative dance process allowed him to “... let his imagination just soar” (E). He also remembers how the music selections influenced his creativity: “...if it was mysterious you would do something mysterious” (E).

It was never an aim to have the students perform their dance creations publicly, but their enthusiasm and drive was strong and this was a new and exciting experience for the majority of the students. One student reflects on the *sense of pride* she felt: “I got to do my dance with my group in front of people and my uncle actually made a video of it and I got to see it” (S). She goes on to explain that she remembers that she was smiling in the video and she felt very happy. This was a big accomplishment, as many students had never stepped foot on a stage before. Both male students highlighted how the consistency of the project allowed them to be more receptive to the experience. One says, “I was kind

of shy and then the second time I wasn't" (K), and the other boy recalls, "... grade 3 I was not used to it, but then grade 4 I got used to it. Ya, even grade 5!" (E).

Final thoughts

We realized that our passion to continue the project greatly impacted the students, as we were providing a consistent dance experience for them. Some students were part of the project for three years so that we saw commitment and creativity grow. Each year, the students would have a sense of excitement yet ease in knowing that the university group would be visiting. The format and themes would change for the work, but the students knew what to expect and could grow from the year before. This consistency was incredible as a genuine dance community was being created. Responses indicated that these were worthwhile experiences: generating a sense of pride in the work; an understanding of the power of dance to get to know themselves and others; a development of knowledge about dance and dance education; and the courage to share their ideas with others.

Appendix

Reflection and Interview Questions

Reflection Questions

Experience in the Dance Project

What did you learn about teaching dance through this experience?

What did you learn about yourself as a dancer and/or teacher through this experience?

What can be learned through dance?

Create in ONE CLEAR SENTENCE a statement that can be used to advocate for dance.

Interview Questions

1. School students

Do you take dance lessons in school or out of school?

What was your favorite activity during the project with the university?

What kind of dance do you like — in your classes, at home?

Tell me something you know about dance.

2. University students

What is your previous experience in dance? Did you take dance at school, at a dance studio, or in a community setting? Did you dance at home?

What did you learn about yourself through the experience with the school students?

What did you learn about teaching dance through the experience with the school students?

What can be learned through dance?

How would you advocate for dance?

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