

Arts and Young Children

Learning About Culture Through Dance in Kindergarten Classrooms

Tamara Lutz¹ and Wilma D. Kuhlman^{2,3}

INTRODUCTION

After seeing an African dance troupe perform for our school, kindergartner LaTeisha⁴ commented, “We saw some amazing dancing, didn’t we, teacher? We could do that, couldn’t we?” LaTeisha’s confident remarks followed the studies of West African culture and Native American Plains Tribe culture through the use of dance and subsequent journal responses. Students who participated in this yearlong study learned about unfamiliar cultures as they became more confident with their body movements and their own identities.

The multicultural curriculum is inclusive of differences and broadens students’ perspectives of the world and its people in ways that are respectful and participatory. Educators encourage teachers to include instruction about culture in order to combat prejudice, increase self-esteem, and function better in community (Bull, Chattergy, & Fruehling, 1992; Davidson & Davidson, 1994). Dance is common to all humankind, regardless of the culture. Thus, the marriage of dance and cultural teaching is natural, especially for young children, who learn best through participation, movement, and constructive practices.

DANCE, MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION, AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Research on the importance of dance to a child’s education can be found as early as the turn of the century with Isadora Duncan’s work with young children (Rosemont, 1981). This focus appears again in the 1930s

(H’Doubler, 1936, 1940; Waterman, 1936) and in the 1950s (Sehon & O’Brein, 1951). These educators promoted dance as a means to support children’s positive physiological, psychological, and academic growth. The literature continues to repeat this theme, because “Dance is a way for children to know themselves and to see connection with the rest of the world” (Stinson, 1988, p. 4).

The “rest of the world” is pluralistic and diverse with many ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions. It is that tapestry of diversity that we choose to value as we help students recognize and respect people who differ from themselves and/or appreciate their many similarities. Learning about other cultures and ethnicities is one way to combat prejudice. As children learn about new cultures and fit their experiences with their new learning, they can appreciate all people’s uniqueness and similarities and not rely on racial and ethnic generalizations (Davidson & Davidson, 1994).

Teaching children about cultures other than their own leads to greater self-esteem, especially among minority children. Research has shown that for every child, racial awareness is a step-by-step process and that as racial awareness changes, so does the level of any self-esteem that is rooted in race (Davidson & Davidson, 1994). One job of schools, then, is to nurture racial understanding and develop an increased level of self-esteem.

Dance provides opportunities for students to learn about their inner selves and show how they feel about people, objects, and phenomena (Stinson, 1988). Dance benefits a child in three major areas of development: psychomotor development, affective development, and cognitive development (Purcel, 1994).

Movement is one of the first means of expression and of learning about the world and, from infancy, each new movement gives children more information about the capabilities of their bodies. Children also develop spatial awareness—something very important to chil-

¹Omaha Public Schools, Skinner Magnet Center, Omaha, Nebraska.

²University of Nebraska—Omaha, Omaha Nebraska

³Correspondence should be directed to Wilma D. Kuhlman, University of Nebraska—Omaha, Kayser Hall 514, 6001 Dodge, Omaha, Nebraska 68182; e-mail: wilma_kuhlman@unomaha.edu

⁴Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

dren who live and work together in classrooms. In the same manner as children are learning how their bodies work, they are learning how their feelings work. Body movements have always been a way to communicate feelings, and creative movement in dance "is a function of our innate biological rhythms and is thus closer to natural human expression than any other art form" (Lynch-Fraser, 1991, p. 2). Through dance, children develop self-control, particularly in reactions to feelings such as anger, fear, and joy.

Dance can also provide means to communicate feelings and be successful in that sharing of feelings. Since each dance and dancer is unique and creative dance can never be wrong, children can always feel successful with their expressions and begin to appreciate differences. This, coupled with learning about personal space versus shared space, helps students practice sharing ideas and compromising—skills invaluable in each child's educational process (Russell, 1975).

While developing community skills through dance, children are cognitively developing awareness of the world outside themselves. Young children often cannot think or talk about a movement without doing it. Concrete experiences are vital to preschool and kindergarten curricula, and dance is another concrete experience where children involve their whole bodies in the academic endeavor. Hanna (1988) wrote that "dance appears to be the result of processes that have been selected for in human evolution: exploratory behavior, a sense of rhythm, symbolic capability, and the ability of the brain to make fine distinctions" (p. 4).

LEARNING CULTURE THROUGH DANCE

Children in Tamara's kindergarten classroom learned about cultural and ethnic practices, especially those exhibited in their dance customs, through the use of dance and journal responses. The students are primarily of African American cultural/ethnic backgrounds with a few European American and Native American backgrounds as well. Their teacher, Tamara, is of European-American ancestry.

Data were collected over a year's time in this teacher research project. Careful observational records were maintained of students' responses to all of the activities during the African and Native American cultural study units. The typical procedure was (a) experience of some cultural event through videotape, literature, or speaker; (b) discussion of the presentation; (c) drawing pictures of something learned. Responses to the experiences spilled over into all phases of the school day, and discussion was not limited to the time allotted to the specific study.

The first unit of study focused on traditions of West Africans, particularly as exhibited through their dances. Children watched the video "Dancing Through West Africa" (Davis, 1986) and saw villagers using dances that depicted activities from their everyday lives (such as grinding corn), dances that imitated African animals, and spiritual dances to chase away evil spirits. The video showed villagers, including small children, dancing just for the pleasure of dancing. When, at a later date, children watched and participated with the African dance troupe, *La Belle Afrique*, several students said they felt happy when dancing with the troupe. Angela made connections with prior learning when she said, "That's why the Africa ladies were smiling when they danced, wasn't it? They were happy!"

When dance was used, the excitement level of the children increased. Students initiated many of the discussions as well as some of the learning activities. One day, after discussing African drums and their importance to dancing, Jamal came to school excited because he had seen a video on Africa and in the video they were making a water drum. Tamara asked him to describe the sound the drum made when the water was in it, and he said it was a "glub, glub" sound. Sierra asked what would happen if someone put water into the coffee can drums they had been making. Together, students and teacher decided to try it to find out. As the coffee can was being filled with water, the students were asked to make a prediction concerning the sound. Would the sound change? The predictions were split down the middle.

After the can was filled, Jamal tried playing the "water drum." Another student played a coffee can drum that was empty. Marcus commented, "The empty coffee can is louder. The one with the water is soft." Tamara asked the students why the coffee can drum with water had a quieter sound. Angela said, "Because it is filled with water. It takes away the sound."

Students used their new information about drums in other settings. As they watched *La Belle Afrique* dance troupe, Mark commented on the way the drums seemed to influence the dancing. "If the drums are soft, they (the dancers) move small. The drums go fast like their feet." Later, after reading *A is for Africa* (Owoo, 1992), Susan mentioned the letter D and commented on the picture of the drums: "The drums talked to the people and they were used for dancing. They were important, weren't they?"

According to Davidson and Davidson (1994), it is important for children to be able to integrate information they learn concerning the uniqueness of individuals into the assumptions they already have. Children's comments indicated some of their thoughts and integration. Regarding skin color, some commented about physical at-

tributes of Africans and how, “They look like me. I am African American.” Variations of skin color were related to friends and family. The students noted housing differences. Nathan commented, “Their houses aren’t big like ours.” Terry said, “My house has bricks, the shack in the Africa village doesn’t.” Sierra said, “My house has more rooms.” Students also noted school differences and similarities. After reading *A is for Africa* (Owoo, 1992), Susan noted “Just like us—they go to school and have computers like us.” After hearing *Learning to Swim in Swaziland* (Leigh, 1993), Dean noticed, “They have no lights. Did they run out of money? Sometimes our lights are cut because Momma ran out of money. They are like me.”

The level of participation in class discussion during the study of Africa was high. Children such as Dean and Terry, who had problems recalling letters of the alphabet they had studied, seemed to easily recall information they had learned about Africa. They also asked more questions during dance classes than during other subject areas. LeRoy, a student with a short attention span, sat for longer periods of time when discussing Africa and dance. He even asked questions, which he did not ordinarily do with other topics.

As the children learned to move their bodies and gained confidence in their ability to dance, there was an increase in their self-esteem. When faced with a new task, “I can’t” was rarely heard. When LaTeisha noted, “We could do that, couldn’t we?” she expressed what other children were showing in other ways—they were feeling empowered.

The second unit of study focused on traditions of the Plains tribes, again as exhibited through their dances. Children watched videos, and Tamara introduced basic Plains Native American dance steps—the toe-heel step and flat-foot step. Students practiced the dance steps on a regular basis. They also heard books on the culture of the Plains tribes. One such book was *Pow Wow* by Ancona (1993). The children were able to distinguish the dance steps as illustrated by the pictures in the book. As the class was going through the pictures, the students made observations concerning the dancers. LeRoy said, “Look, that dancer is doing the step-hop dance like you taught us. His foot is off of the ground like he is hopping.”

As the study of Native American dance and culture continued, children shared their understanding of purpose for dance for this new group of people. When asked to draw a picture of why dance is important to Native Americans, students’ comments demonstrated their understanding. Six students drew pictures and noted that dance was done to celebrate (see Figs. 1 and 2), six noted dance was for pleasure (see Fig. 3), four



Figs. 1 and 2.

They like it.

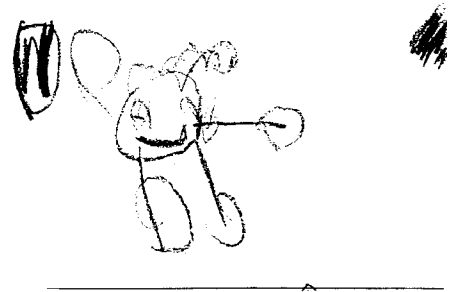


Fig. 3.

commented that dancing was for food, three for bravery, two for rain, and one each for shelter and sun. The children’s responses indicated a growing awareness of the roles of dance for different people.

A pattern that emerged throughout the Native American unit was one of comparisons between African and Native American cultures. First, students compared housing of past Native American people with those of African people. “Those earth lodges remind me of the

shacks in Africa.” “The grass houses look larger than the African houses.” “The tipi is a different shape than the houses we saw in Africa.” Students also compared dances and dancers. “That lady has jingles on her dress like the jingles the African dancer had on his ankle.” “Does that Ghost Dance dress scare away ghosts like the masks and costumes of the African dancers?” After listening to Native American music and seeing pictures from a pow wow, students commented, “Do the drums talk to the Indians like the drums in Africa talked to the Africa people?” “The drums are in all music, like the drums in Africa.” “The Indian drum is larger than the Africa drum.” This synthesis of knowledge about Africa with new knowledge about Native Americans attests to the way students were able to retain and use cultural information about people who were both similar and different from themselves. That synthesis is an important step in cultural sensitivity. Synthesis of information is also a higher level of thinking than much of the basic skills curriculum in kindergarten.

During the Native American unit students again demonstrated their excitement for learning that continued past formal lessons. One day, Tamara noticed LeRoy making beaded necklaces and draping them over his body. He then started dancing in a circle and explained that he was at a pow wow in his regalia doing a dance. LeRoy had delegated the responsibility of making headdresses to children at the art center without any prompting from the teacher.

After the class had seen a video of a Native American dancer, while the class was walking to the library, LeRoy started doing movements that were very similar to the dancer from the video. Tamara commented that he was doing very well. He responded by saying, “I need to practice a little more.” Tamara asked how he was dancing without the music. LeRoy replied, “I still hear it in my head.”

Most of LeRoy’s classmates shared his growing comfort with his own dancing abilities. Their movements became larger and less timid and some students were even comfortable enough to dance in front of children from other classrooms. Many tried new steps on their own, without instruction. Many students had been unwilling to take those types of risks prior to the dance and culture units.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

It is important to keep in mind the physical and mental development of kindergarten-age children when embarking on a project like this one. Teaching dance to

young children is a gradual process. Children need to feel comfortable with moving expressively before they are able to learn particular dance steps. This project actually comprised three different levels of movement. Each level was a little more involved than the one before. Any kindergarten teacher can begin to use dance with his or her students, also by starting with simple activities.

Level 1: Body Awareness

How can a teacher, especially one who is not comfortable teaching creative dance, make movement significant for the children? According to Stinson (1988) a teacher needs to help the children become aware of their movements. This can be done with very simple activities. One example given by Stinson is to have the children notice the movement of their arm. Does it move all in one piece or by parts? Have the children point one arm at an object. Feel the muscles in the arm as it is pointing. Do they change when the arm is brought to rest by their side? The same activities can be done with their legs. Have the children feel their legs as they sit on the floor. Next, have them extend their legs. How did the muscles change? Have them notice what happens if they point a toe fast or slow. These activities help students develop both internal awareness as well as external awareness of body movements.

Level 2: Creative Expression

Once the children have developed an internal and external awareness of body movement they can begin to use the movements as a way to express an idea or feeling (Purcel, 1994). Often the body can be the child’s way of expressing feelings that are inside. Movements can also help a child tell a story when the child is unable to do so verbally.

This is a point at which it is good to introduce dances from West Africa. Many of the dances tell a story, such as catching fish for the village. The children can understand the meaning of the dance through the movements. They also begin to see how they can tell their own stories through movement. At this time the teacher should give the children ideas or themes which are significant to them as starters for their own creative dances.

Level 3: Learning Actual Dance Steps

Once children have had opportunities to become comfortable with using their bodies as a means of expression through dance, they are more willing to learn

specific dance steps. This is the level at which it is appropriate to introduce basic Native American dance steps. The toe-heel step and flat-foot step are both basic steps that involve little more than the placement of the foot. It is the speed of these steps and the addition of upper torso movements that make them look harder than they are. For kindergarten-age children the focus should be just on the foot movements.

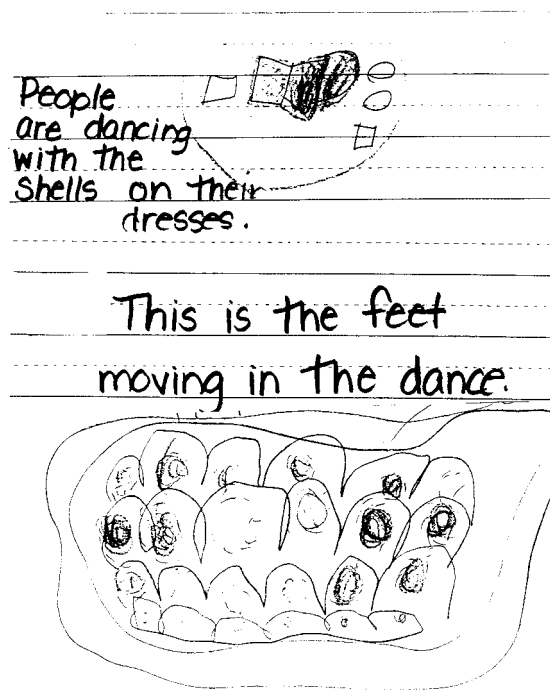
It is important to start out at a very slow pace and to allow many opportunities for practice with and without music. Once the children have learned the steps at a slow pace, gradually increase the speed of the steps so that the frustration level stays low and children continue to enjoy the dance experience. The focus should be on the attempt and not on mastery.

CONCLUSIONS

When dance is infused into the kindergarten curriculum as a means to teach about African and Native American cultures, children respond positively. The children involved in this project retained and recalled new information with great detail. In fact, children who were seen as academically at-risk engaged in high-level thinking activities such as comparing and contrasting, even doing so spontaneously. Tamara’s sense was that these students were more successful than children of years past, when the introduction of dance was absent. “The whole process was very exciting. When students noticed their own progress and how to transfer knowledge from one area of study to another, they were excited. It was also neat to see how their sense of belonging and participation in the whole school community grew during the year. I continue to incorporate dance into my curriculum. It truly makes teaching fun.” In contrast to previous students, for example, these children were able to relate the information learned from things learned during cultural studies to letters of the alphabet. The success students experienced with dance and learning about cultures spread into all areas of the school day.

The higher retention rate of information was also evident in journal entries. The pictures class members drew, on a whole, contained great detail. This was evident by looking at children’s statements concerning their drawings: “People are dancing with the shells on their dresses,” (see Fig. 4) “This is the feet moving in the dance,” (see Fig. 5) or “I drew the lady scaring off the ghost by dancing” (see Fig. 6). Overall, there was extensive incorporation of information learned into the stories surrounding students’ pictures.

Just as the children learned about content on a deeper level they also learned about themselves and oth-



Figs. 4 and 5.

ers on a deeper level. Students became cognizant of their stereotypes concerning skin color, Africans and Native Americans. This year the discussions explored what skin color meant. The children discussed their perceptions of light skinned versus dark skinned, white versus black. One student in particular had been told that white people were bad. After a discussion on race perceptions, this student came up and said, “Teacher, you are getting

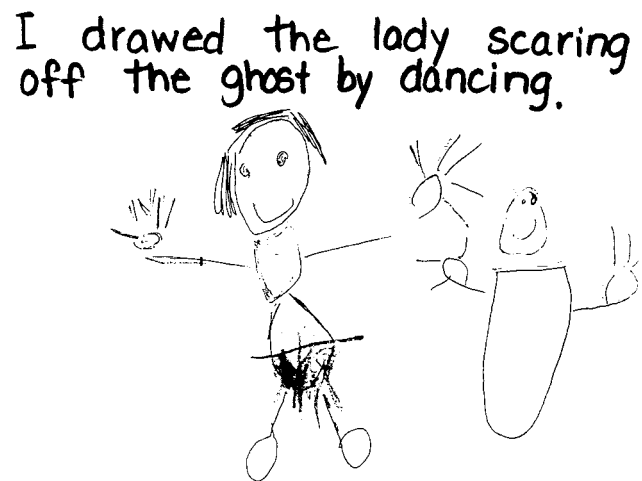


Fig. 6.

darker." Tamara asked if that was good or bad. The student answered, "It is good, because white is bad." These lessons provided a chance for Tamara to help this student consider thoughts and ideas, in a nonthreatening way, which she would not have considered otherwise. Although not all their misconceptions were changed, the children were willing to openly discuss their perceptions and feelings.

Dance provides a means for expressing emotions and understanding the feelings of others, particularly as they are expressed in others' body language. When learning occurs through movement, the learning appears to last longer, and dance can be used to assist that learning. When dance is integrated into the curriculum, particularly when learning about other cultures, children benefit in many ways: body awareness and control, personal confidence and esteem, and cultural understanding and respect.

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