

THE EXPERIENCE OF DANCE AS A CONDITION FOR FOSTERING SOCIAL, TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL SKILLS AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD

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An Early childhood dance program is a way to open the door to social competence, tradition learning and cultural integration besides achieving motor skills. The past few decades have demonstrated that dance education and the use of symbolic movement in early childhood, greatly enhance young children's learning. While a great amount of attention has been devoted to understanding how a variety of learning modes function in young children, an understanding of the benefits of dance education has not received strong recognition in the equation [3]. I suggest that movement and dance are the first communicative "language" that enables learning. Creating new contexts in and through dance for learning offers young children opportunities to understand and negotiate their community and the surrounding world.

Keywords: *Early Childhood, Dance education, Culture, Tradition, Social competence, Embodiment, Dance Language.*

DANSUL CA CONDIȚIE ÎN FORMAREA COMPETENȚELOR SOCIALE, TRADIȚIONALE ȘI CULTURALE ÎN PERIOADA COPILĂRIEI TIMPURI

Un program de dans specific copilăriei timpurii, pe lângă faptul că dezvoltă abilitățile motorii, este o modalitate de a forma competențe sociale prin învățarea tradițiilor și de integrare culturală. Ultimele decade au demonstrat că educația prin dans și utilizarea mișcărilor simbolice în copilăria timpurie au un impact pozitiv asupra învățării. În timp ce o mare parte de atenție a fost acordată înțelegerii funcționării variabilelor moduri de învățare la copii, înțelegerea beneficiilor educației prin dans nu s-a bucurat de aceeași recunoaștere din partea cercetătorilor. Sugerăm că mișcarea și dansul sunt primele limbaje de comunicare care autorizează învățarea. Crearea noilor contexte în și prin dans oferă copiilor oportunități de a înțelege și a negocia atât în cadrul comunității lor, cât și în afara acesteia.

Cuvinte-cheie: *copilărie timpurie, educație prin dans, cultură, tradiție, competență socială, personificare, limbaj al dansului.*

We live in a time in which, I believe, there is too much talk about early childhood as preparation for school and not enough discussion about the essence of the early childhood experience; too much talk about formally-structured teaching/learning and not enough about informal, spontaneous learning; too much talk about literacy focused teaching/learning and too little about fostering expression and creativity. Many researchers point out "play" as a learning tool (Rogoff, 1990; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Blum Kulka & Hook – Tglicht, 2002; Tuval, 2003). Even if they differ in their definitions of "play," most of them agree that the contribution of playing to the child's socialization process is critical, as it helps children to absorb social norms and skills which are vital if the child is to develop and become a loyal [20] and ethical [13] member of society. Sutton-smith [17] lists 300 types of activity that are described as playing of which one is dancing. With this in mind, I suggest we call attention to a possible connection between informal learning that takes place in an environment of movement and dance, and the nurturing of social skills, culture and tradition. This paper builds on sociology of the body as a cultural decoding, and dance as a system of meaning in order to argue that dance in early childhood education "maintains a society's cultural patterns, helps it attain its goals, (and) adapt to its environment" [7, p.27]. I will attempt to explain that dance experience and socio-cultural skills are necessarily connected and we need not choose between the two, but rather integrate them in a fruitful and promising way.

The status and role of artistic education in early childhood are subject to debate. The divergent approaches are supported by two different philosophical and educational perceptions. One holds that art as a distinct discipline must be studied as part of the humanities; the other maintains that art should be used as an experiential tool to support cognitive development and the learning of non-artistic disciplines [12, p.16]. Both the socio-cultural philosophy and the philosophy of education embrace the approach that combines dance/body with other disciplines. Sociologists have argued that the human body is a product of social processes of interpretation and fabrication [18, p.12] and that different cultures have different body techniques which must be mastered if the child is to be accepted into society [18, p.12]. Margaret Mead (1928) and Gregory Bateson (1942) approached the dance from the perspective of culture and personality, the arts being a reversal

of social norms or a projection of child-rearing socio-cultural patterns. Since the 1960s, researches provided dance descriptions and discussions of form and symbolism [7, p.11] The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984) has been important in demonstrating that the human body has to be trained to occupy a habitus within which the individual acquires an appropriate deportment that is shaped by social class.

The philosophers of education, like some of the sociological theoreticians, perceived the body as part of the learning process. Already in the 4th century B.C.E., Aristotle discerned that our formation in early childhood has a tremendous impact on our development throughout adulthood. This insight was further developed in the beginning of the 20th century, when lots of theoreticians addressed the developmental process that occurs in early childhood, and this subject was expanded and reinforced as part of the theories that dealt with the components of personality (such as Freud and Ericsson); the cognitive components (such as Piaget and Vygotsky); the emotional components (such as Lawrence Kohlberg and Stanley Greenspan). The goals of education, the means to achieve them and the methods for assuring that children's ultimate development is achieved, were also extensively examined, modified and updated to suit contemporary thought. John Dewey considered the arts, as key educational agents and important models for learning through experience and integrating physical, intellectual and emotional aspects of learning [8]. Dewey believed in education which is based on experiencing. He maintained that children learn concepts not through lectures but rather through experiential education. The theoretical basis for active and experiential learning is Dewey's confrontation with the dualism underlying Western philosophy, which separates human existence in two: material and spirit, body and soul, knowledge and action. According to Dewey, this separation does not properly reflect the nature of the world and mankind as these are revealed through human experience. These contrasting pairs as revealed in human experience are found to be part of the same sequence. Dewey found that this dualism existed in education as well. For instance, in education the child's body is ignored, and focus is placed only on the mind, as if it were a separate entity. Dewey wrote about holistic learning processes that actually occur within the body. He gave the example of a child learning to fly a kite; this child receives direct, non-verbal information from the pull of the string in his palm, unmediated by conscious conceptual learning. These forms of learning, by and through the body, are discarded once the child enters the institutes of educational systems, where all instruction is entirely directed at the child's reason. Dewey recommended focusing on the child as a whole, including body, emotions, imagination and reason. Vygotsky coined the main metaphor of the socio-cultural approach, according to which children are inherently social creatures, who both influence, and are influenced by, their interactions with their environment. Vygotsky maintained that the child's cognitive functions materialize through experience and interactions with the surrounding socio-cultural environment [16]. Much emphasis within the Vygotskian theoretical tradition has been placed on the role of language in the development of children. According to Vygotsky any cultural tool or symbol system can be internalized and used by children as a tool for behavioral self-regulation, including music, dance and mathematics. Dance, (as a language and) as another cultural system of symbols and meanings, may also be used by children as a mechanism for attaining social and Cultural skills [21, p.505].

Description of dance as a social component of a child's education can be traced back as early as religious rituals of tribal societies where dance required strict adherence to the tradition's rules and any mistake could impair the magical powers. It was therefore mandatory for all members of the tribe to learn and know each and every detail of the dances. "This was the customary rule among primitive peoples [...] It was the mothers' duty to teach their children the basics of dance from infancy" in order for the children to become integrated in their community [22, p.120]. Zacks gives the example of a circle dance in Western Malaysia which symbolizes the dance of the sun; the inner circle of the dance consists of men, around them is a circle of women, and the outermost circle consists of children who are in the process of learning to dance according to the tribal tradition [22, p.79]. Asante describe the Zimbabwe Dance: "Children must learn the dance exactly as taught without variation. Improvisation or a new variation comes only after mastering the dance, performing, and receiving the appreciation and sanction of village elders" [2, p.60]. Huet recounts the story of the Fon tribe of Western Wooded Savanna in Africa, where at the Voodoo ceremonies the children accompany their mothers during the entire initiation process, learning the meaning and the representation of the traditional ceremony [9, p.128]. The famous David Livingstone recorded a traditional Bantu greeting between members of different South African groups in which, instead of a question directly "what is your tribal affiliation?" translated to "what do you dance?" [4, p.403] as one's role in a dance is often based on one's place in the social hierarchy.

Dance at the African tribes often metaphorically represents social roles, especially with respect to gender and children [4, p.404]. Most of the children of the Tamiar tribe play is "imitation" of adult life including the dance. Jenning refers to such behavior as "play-dance". In this way children learn their society's code of behavior. Sometimes during the ceremonies and rituals children get up and caricature the adult. This extends beyond dancing as an activity of socialization of the young and the maintenance of values and beliefs, to adapt themselves to the social world [10, p.48-49]. The body became a major vehicle for the enactment of tribal myths and customs, especially through dance performances. We can view the body as a cultural medium that indicates a person's social status within the social group [18, p.85].

Dance as an educational tool was held in high regard by the ancient Greeks. It was viewed by the Spartans as an essential part of a warrior's training. Music and gymnastics were the two main compulsory subjects of study in ancient Athens, where it was considered to be an integral part of children's life [6, p.94]. Choreographer Jiri Kylian drew on Australia's Aboriginal culture of dance. The prologue to his work "Stamping Ground" features the tribe's young children, some of them dancing, the others watching and learning the steps and the underlying significance attributed to the dance by the community and its tradition. [dvd, a]. In these communities..., ritual is the center of life, and educational figures and agents of culture use dance, among other things, as a medium for conveying traditional knowledge to the younger generations. Dances can be viewed as pedagogical practices that serve the purpose of instilling tradition and social norms in the children of the community. At the turn of the 20th century we meet the importance of dance to children's education with Isadora Duncan's work with young children. In the 1930s and in the 1950s, dance was being promoted as a means to support children's positive growth and develop their awareness of the world outside themselves [14, p.35-36]. In the 1960s this focus appears again in the research of Piaget, Vygotsky, and the symbolists and it became evident that the reality of young children was based on physical and psycho-motor experiences [20]. It is evident from the above survey that the early childhood period in all societies is a particularly important time for the development of knowledge of social skills, culture and tradition. It is at this developmental stage that children begin to expand their social interaction and take on the developmental task of building relationships with their community peers [21, p.503] while body awareness is seen as an essential step in becoming the first step toward the development of social behavior. It was proved that in schools where dance is recognized as an academic subject, it plays a significant role in social integration, in cognitive learning, and in interpersonal and group communication. Hence, an early childhood dance program is a way to open the door to numerous cultural benefits, tradition learning benefits and personal identity.

Learning and understanding socio cultural behavior can be obtained through different kinds of talk [5, p.272] and as a genre of talk, dance provides experiences with inner context. Thus, the marriage of dance teaching and socio-cultural studies is natural, especially in early childhood, when learning is best achieved through participation, movement, and constructive practices [14, p.36]. In the current era of globalization, we witness to the phenomenon of transformation from one area of knowledge to another, and it is evident that, increasingly, tools from other areas are used for educational purposes. Examples of this are the use of guided imagery, drama, and art. With the help of these new tools, we can offer students a wider and more creative range of tools through which we can have a greater influence on their learning, adjustment and communication. I maintain that dialogical learning which takes place as part of dance education and draws on culture and tradition on the one hand, and the art of dance on the other hand, is a learning process which shapes the individual identity of learners at early childhood. The use of movement and dance in early childhood education, enables discourse in an additional and different language, an experiential and flexible language that can improve the learning of social, traditional and cultural skills alongside motor skills.

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