

# Creative Dance in Elementary Schools: A Theoretical and Practical Justification

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This article presents a theoretical and practical justification for the inclusion of creative dance in the elementary school curriculum, using findings of a study in which I examined the effects of six creative-dance workshops on elementary school teachers' attitudes to and practices of creative dance. The study found that teachers' attitudes and practices changed as a result of the workshops and that children enjoy and benefit from creative-dance activities. Teachers' reflections on their experiences show that creative dance has a vital role in the elementary school curriculum and illustrate the close relationship between theoretical and practical aspects of creative dance.

Cet article présente une justification théorique et pratique de l'intégration au programme du primaire de l'expression corporelle, justification faisant appel aux conclusions d'une étude dans laquelle l'auteur se penche sur les effets de six ateliers d'expression corporelle sur les attitudes des enseignants au primaire à l'égard de l'expression corporelle et sur les pratiques de ceux-ci en la matière. L'étude révèle que les attitudes et les pratiques des enseignants changent à la suite de ces ateliers et que les enfants prennent plaisir à ces activités et en tirent parti. Les réflexions des enseignants sur leurs expériences indiquent que l'expression corporelle a un rôle clé à jouer au primaire et illustrent les rapports étroits qui peuvent être établis entre les aspects théoriques et pratiques de l'expression corporelle.

## CREATIVE DANCE: A DEFINITION

In this article, *creative dance* refers to bodily activities that express inner thoughts and feelings and enhance those thoughts and feelings. This art form emphasizes creativity, problem solving, and the expression of thoughts and feelings. It involves participants physically, emotionally, and intellectually, uses techniques from other dance forms, and is non-threatening and non-competitive, recognizing and encouraging individual differences while challenging participants to improve physical skill and aesthetic expression.

## THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE

Creative dance is of extensive value and importance to children (Best, 1985; Courtney, 1982; Riley, 1984; Silver, 1981). Children's feelings in dance are

particular to and inseparable from that art form (Best, 1985). Only those children who have experienced creative dance can appreciate its physical, intellectual, and emotional impact, since physical movements are external representations of internal events. Because these movements could not take place without inner experience, the inner experience cannot be denied.

Creative dance helps children explore their views on life issues, on the human condition, and on their own condition. As Best (1985) states, "If faced with integrity, experiences in life are perplexingly heterogeneous and serious involvement with the arts helps us realize this" (p. 192). A similar view is expressed in a dance instructor's recollection of a child's perception:

Dance Instructor: What are you saying in this dance?  
 Child: Well you see, Miss, I'm married to her, and she's married to him. And she leaves him for me, and I leave her for her. But it all works out in the end.  
 Dance Instructor: Does it always work out in the end?  
 Child: [Pause.] No. . . . No, it doesn't.  
 (Dance instructor's recollection of an exchange with a young student, presented in *The Child as the Creator*, a video-tape made at the "Dance and the Child Conference," University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1978)

Creative dance may facilitate children's personal development, showing them how situations have a number of meanings, encouraging experimental solutions of problems, and inviting acceptance or rejection of one another's ideas (Boorman, 1973; D'Houbler, 1957; Duncan, 1969; Riley, 1984). Creative dance may also be integrated with other subjects, since it is a generalizable method of learning (Gardner, 1985; Mac Donald, 1991, in press).

#### *Creative Dance and the Concept of the Whole Child*

Holistic curricula emphasize the relationship between the mind and body with a view to sensing the *connection* between them. Miller (1988), for example, finds appealing the vision of an interconnected universe of which we are a part. He advocates harmony between the child's inner world (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, judgments, and so on) and outer world (movements and behaviours), and supports creative dance as a method of facilitating this balance. Miller thus endorses the assumption underlying this article, namely, that creative dance is more than physical, involving our whole being.

A holistic view of dance was forcefully promoted as long ago as the early part of this century. In the early 1900s, Isadora Duncan developed dance methods that encouraged a connection between the dancer's outer movements and inner feelings. Duncan stressed that the dance should not be an end in itself, but rather an outward result of inward awareness. Eva Le Gallienne has elaborated Duncan's ideas:

The dance was not merely an art to [Duncan], but was part of her very being; she was obliged to dance, as we are obliged to breathe. There was to her no difference between dancing and living. She felt that through the dance one became inseparably a part of the great rhythm of the Universe, and that the harmony between Self and centre of being resulted as a matter of course in harmonious living. [quoted in Duncan (1969), p. 41]

In Dimonstein's (1971) recent holistic approach to dance for elementary school classrooms, the body is the centre, and children learn to express their feelings as they develop awareness of their muscles. As Miller (1988) puts it, "As we center ourselves and deepen our inner life, we find we have more internal resources to work with the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the developing child" (p. ix).

In a curriculum espousing holism, creativity would be of paramount importance in all subjects, the arts would be integrated into all core subjects, and creative dance would have an integral place in the curriculum. For example, mathematical fractions might be taught by rhythmic chanting and movement, poems interpreted through creative dance, or the meaning of the planets, and their positions in the universe instilled by creating dances.

In sum, creative dance can help children reach their full potential, for it encourages the development of *the whole child* by involving the child physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and thus enhancing creative exploration and facilitating emotional expression. Moreover, if children feel good about their bodies and their movements, and if these outward expressions help children realize and interpret their inner feelings through the medium of the body, *everything they do* will be affected.

#### PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE

##### *Introduction*

This section presents research findings on the practical importance of creative dance. These findings are drawn from a study (Mac Donald, 1989) whose purpose was to determine whether elementary school teachers' attitudes to and practices of creative dance would change through workshop intervention.

##### *Research Design*

I selected case-study subjects from a larger group of 20 teachers teaching junior kindergarten, kindergarten, or grades 1, 2, or 3. All had taught at these levels for at least one year, and none was currently teaching creative dance as the term is defined here. Subjects were recruited in university courses, practice-teaching sessions, and professional development workshops.

All teachers participated in a pre-workshop interview. Interview questions emphasized teachers' attitudes to and practices of creative dance, and their intentions, beliefs, anxieties, and needs in dance teachings. After pre-workshop interviews, I selected case-study subjects on the following criteria:

- that junior kindergarten, kindergarten, and grades 1, 2, and 3 be represented;
- that varying amounts of teaching experience be represented;
- that a variety of beliefs (traditional and non-traditional) about education be represented.

The eight case-study subjects I selected were: Chris, Donna, Gerry, Hanna, Katie, Nancy, Viola, and Wendy. There were two junior kindergarten teachers, one kindergarten teacher, one grade 1 teacher, three grade 2 teachers, and one grade 3 teacher. Three case-study subjects taught split grades: grades 1 and 2 for two case-study subjects, grades 2 and 3 for the third. Teaching experience ranged from 4 to 27 years, and the average number of years taught was 11.7.

Workshop intervention took place in teachers' schools and consisted of six three-hour workshops held approximately one week apart. Teachers were active participants during all six workshops and were given opportunities to experiment with and to explore suggested creative-dance methods and practices. Teachers were encouraged to implement workshop ideas in their classrooms between workshops and to write about these experiences in journals. At the beginning of each workshop, teachers discussed the teaching of creative dance and received answers to their questions. The entire workshop series emphasized creative-dance skills teachers can use to enhance lessons in mathematics, science, language, and other content areas.

The workshops also included practical plans on how to start, develop, and integrate creative-dance programs. For instance, I wrote mathematics problems (addition and subtraction problems are recommended for grades 1 and 2, multiplication and division for the higher grades) on large cards randomly positioned on the gymnasium floor. I played music, and teachers moved to it in various creative ways: punching, walking on their heels, moving their arms, and so on. When the music stopped, teachers chose one of the cards on the floor, solved the corresponding mathematics problem, and then made any body shape in which the number of body parts touching the floor equalled their answer. As a variation, teachers chose a card when the music stopped, solved the problem, and then gathered the number of people needed co-operatively to make any body shape matching the answer to the problem. The workshops also included basic dance theory and practical ideas, such as body shapes, body levels, focus, transitions, floor patterns, locomotion and transfer of weight, flight and elevation, group work, and dancing with props or to different sounds.

Case-study subjects were asked to keep personal journals during the workshop series and to record their opinions of the content of the workshop series, their intentions as to implementation of workshop content, and

changes in their attitudes to and practices of creative dance. I encouraged case-study subjects to make journal entries during their classroom activities, and during and between two observation visits. I collected the journals after the second observation visit, and used their content to supplement pre-workshop findings, observations during the workshop series and in case-study subjects' classrooms, and information I gathered during the post-workshop interview.

I made two observation visits to each case-study subject's school. My purpose was threefold: to establish the relationship between teachers' reported and actual practices, to determine whether there was any relationship between teachers' practices and the workshops' content, and to act as a trouble-shooter—to identify problems, to help solve them, and to provide advice and additional support.

Four months after the end of the workshop series, case-study subjects were interviewed a second time. The purpose of this post-workshop interview was to establish teachers' reported attitudes to and practices regarding the teaching of creative dance; to assess whether the workshops had a long-term effect on these attitudes and practices; and to determine why changes occurred or failed to occur. Interview questions asked case-study subjects about their attitudes, practices, anxieties, beliefs, intentions, and needs concerning the teaching of creative dance.

### *Research Findings*

Research findings from interviews, journals, and my field notes show that the practical importance of creative dance takes three main forms: children enjoy and benefit from creative-dance activities and are therefore enthusiastic about learning through this art form; creative dance may be used as an alternative, integrative method of teaching; and creative dance can enhance whole child development.

One of the most significant findings of this study was children's overwhelmingly positive response to creative dance. For example, in her post-workshop interview, Wendy reported: "I tried it with the children and they loved it" (Mac Donald, 1989, p. 125). Similarly, during her first observation visit, Chris reported, "The children love it! They just love it! They ask for it!" (Mac Donald, 1989, p. 74).

Teachers reported in workshops, journal writings, and observation visits that children responded to creative dance with an intensity, concentration, "ownership," and enthusiasm they did not usually see in children's educational activities.

One girl in particular, who is very creative in art but generally restless and very active, concentrated so intensely that she was oblivious to the rest of the class. I watched as she manipulated her hoop, trying one position, rejecting it, trying another until it suited her, and then she froze. (Mac Donald, 1989, pp. 72–73)

After the workshops, I arranged with individual case-study subjects to meet and to observe their teaching of creative dance. During these observation visits, I, too, noted children's positive responses in creative dance:

Donna was so impressed with her children's creative-dance efforts that she had one child run back to the portable to get her camera so that she could photograph their work. Donna's children reacted very positively toward creative dance, and the children's enthusiasm seemed to affect Donna and make her even more enthusiastic. . . . All the children appeared to enjoy the freedom to move, express themselves, and work on something on their own. The children appeared to be having fun. They were concentrating, excited, laughing, smiling, and enthusiastic. (Donna's observation report 2; Mac Donald, 1989, p. 78)

In post-workshop interviews and in their journals, teachers reported on their use of creative dance as an alternative, integrative method of teaching. Teachers discovered it was relatively easy to incorporate creative dance into many areas of the curriculum, were astonished at the possibilities it offered, and even commented that it changed their entire perspective:

I enjoyed the practical examples used showing how creative dance can be integrated. . . . I can see endless possibilities with these activities and realize now how easy it would be to incorporate creative dance in many areas of the curriculum. . . . After the workshop series, everything just took on a new perspective. By using creative dance as a method of instruction, to teach the alphabet, to teach language, arts, and math, everything is more integrated. (Hanna's post-workshop interview; Mac Donald, 1989, pp. 87-90)

Similarly, Katie found she could use creative dance to enhance her program: "I integrate creative dance, sometimes using it to enhance other disciplines and other times as a lesson on its own. It depends on the needs of the children. They love it, and so do I!" (p. 93).

Moreover, both the teachers and I noted that using creative dance as an alternative, integrative method of teaching facilitated development of the whole child. Children tremendously enjoyed the challenge of simultaneously solving problems, collaborating and socializing with their peers, and expressing themselves physically. As a result, children became more enthusiastic about learning in general and individual subject areas in particular:

The next activity Wendy did involved integrating creative dance and math and was an adaptation of an activity presented in the workshop series. When Wendy pulled out her cards with math equations on them, one child asked, "Oh, are there any times?" Wendy replied, "Yes, there are times; plus there are take-aways." . . . The Grade 2s were to choose multiplication problems; the Grade 1s, subtraction problems. . . . The children were busy thinking. You could see them counting on their fingers to figure out the answer. . . . Wendy extended the math activity by encouraging the children to work in partners. . . . This challenged the children more physically, and they seemed to enjoy the social aspect. They

laughed, smiled, and were enthusiastic about working with their friends. (Wendy's observation report 2; Mac Donald, 1989, pp. 113–114)

During my observation visits, I was able to confirm case-study subjects' journal reports about their experiences with creative dance. For example:

Chris was teaching creative dance according to my definition. Her activities involved the development of the whole child. They were physically challenged, encouraged to think, be creative, explore, and problem-solve, and they worked in social peer groups. She incorporated many of the ideas presented in the workshop series which she attended. Furthermore, she adapted many of these ideas to suit the needs of her class. Chris seemed to have taken ownership of the content. (Mac Donald, 1989, p. 72)

#### THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The three main findings on the practical importance of creative dance in the elementary school curriculum have a theoretical basis. Creative dance makes learning more fun for children, helps to integrate and to enhance existing programs, and facilitates whole child development.

Children's enjoyment of dance is consistent with Best's (1985) view that creative dance provides an opportunity for children to experience the human condition and *their* condition, to communicate, share ideas, socialize with peers, and increase their self-confidence. My findings on integration and enhancement are consistent with the views of D'Houbler (1957), Boorman (1973), Riley (1984), and Gardner (1985).

Teachers realized creative dance could be used as a vehicle for enhancing children's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. They agreed that creative dance facilitates the development of the whole child, by creating harmony and balance between the child's inner and outer worlds. These findings support the position of Courtney (1982) and Miller (1988), that dance is an appropriate method for developing the whole child.

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