



Constructing a Child-Centered Dance Curriculum

Loren E. Bucek

To cite this article: Loren E. Bucek (1992) Constructing a Child-Centered Dance Curriculum, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 63:9, 39-48, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.1992.10606644](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1992.10606644)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1992.10606644>



Published online: 25 Feb 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 27



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)


Constructing a Child-Centered Dance Curriculum

LOREN E. BUCEK

Few dance educators would argue that children's dance education exists as isolated pockets of activity in K-5 schooling throughout the United States. This exclusion of the dance discipline from the basic curriculum identifies a lack of awareness and understanding of the intricacies of human learning. Gardner (1983) presents a broad, complex conception of cognitive ability by defining intellectual capacities in linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and personal dimensions. Rugg (1963) also pointed out that "felt thought," a characteristic inherent to dance movement, is a way of knowing the self and the world. Dewey (1934) suggests that the arts (dance) are markers that record the lived experience. A curriculum devoid of dance reflects an uninformed view of what it means to develop to one's fullest human potential. A young child's early "sensory-logic" (Burton, 1980a) capacities unleash a "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1978) of the entire being, thus propelling natural curiosity through the dance experience itself (Dewey, 1934) as the kinesthetic, spatial, visual, aesthetic, and personal intelligences integrate within the whole person.

Along with progressive educators Dewey (1934), Greene (1978), and Burton (1980b), the author believes in a humanistic, holistic approach to learning. Children's dance should be studied for its own sake as a discrete body of knowledge in the K-5 school context. Furthermore, it should be integrated with, not studied in the service of, other academic and artistic subjects. This article proposes a curricular framework grounding the philosophical view that children's dance, as an art form, is for all children and that everyone can and should participate by learning experien-

tially about dance, through dance. The domain of children's dance, like other academic disciplines, has its own content and forms that are studied, applied, and understood as part of a total education for life.



Children's dance, like other academic disciplines, has its own content and forms that are studied, applied, and understood as part of a total education for life.

Two distinctly different forms of children's dance exist: formal and spontaneous. Spontaneous forms of children's dance are aesthetic experiences, which have their origins in the child's capacity to shape feelings and ideas to make sense of the world. This form of children's dance is created and fashioned through direct, sensory engagement with spatial, temporal, and dynamic qualities of movement; it invites imaginative journeys, informs choice making, and communicates human thought and emotion. Each element shapes or is shaped by individual and collective experience depending on the child's personal developmental level and cultural contexts. Children's dance is a fundamental way to give aesthetic form to human experience (White, Bucek, & Mirus, 1992) and through that experience, the child's voice may emerge.

In contrast, formal forms of children's dance may be characterized primarily as movement patterns and structures which are learned through

imitation. This form of children's dance requires conformity to a set of movement standards, invented, prescribed, and perpetuated by adults. The formal forms of children's dance are rooted in familial, cultural, and societal value systems, and defined by a set of cultural codes that either elevate or squelch the child's voice within personal and/or collective meaning systems. Learning formal dance forms with peers often solidifies the children's secret world of codes and provides rites of passage (e.g., playground games, neighborhood dances). In lineage-based societies (Dixon, 1991), such formal dance forms are often passed on to children through oral tradition at home, family gatherings, or places of worship. The dances children learn from tradition and ritual become symbols of status or importance. In a culturally rich educational environment, both spontaneous and formal forms of children's dance are necessary for a child's development.

This article will focus on a brief description of the conceptual framework for a comprehensive, child-centered curriculum, K-5. This view is based on my experiences as a K-12 dance educator, a dance educator in higher education, a performing artist/ choreographer, and a person in the community. It is reinforced by the National Dance Association's *Dance Curriculum Guidelines, K-12* (1988), *Columbus K-12 Dance Course of Study* (Bucek & Yoder, 1991), and *Dance Education Initiative: Curriculum Guide for Teachers* [in Minnesota] (White, Bucek, & Mirus, 1992).

The necessary components of children's dance curriculum are:

- the developing child;
- the essential dance content;
- the dance context; and
- the assessment and evaluation of learning.

Children and Development

Constructing meaningful dance experiences for K-5 children requires an understanding of their developmental characteristics at various junctures, their real-life experiences, the content of the subject of dance, and a variety of teach-

materials of dance provides each child with an expanded vocabulary and solid foundation for immediate use in various dance-making ventures; furthermore, it empowers them with their own dance movement voice. At this juncture, fantasy/pretending and reality are still

ideas. Children remember the material from class to class and can build upon prior experience rather quickly. If same-sex groupings are allowed, yet not forced, more productivity occurs. Animated storytelling will continue to enrich the learning process as fantasy; pretending

and factual information integrate naturally.

Third through fifth grade children love folk dances of various cultures, and enjoy moving together as a whole class and in small, cooperative groups. They like learning about the dances, why they are danced, and who danced them. Individual and/or small group projects are appropriate at this developmental stage, while informal sharings continue to be a

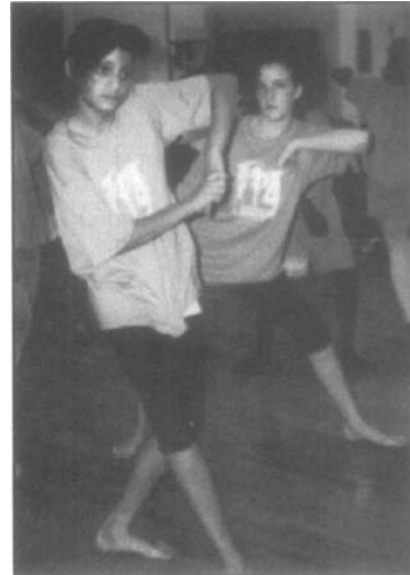
nonthreatening form of viewing. Formal sharings occur when children perform their dance work for school or community. The study of dance, therefore, is integral in the general learning process in elementary schools. The following is an example of how children respond to the dance experience.

Developmentally intrinsic artistic response. Recently, a group of fifth grade students attended a Young People's Concert to see a dance reconstruction of the 1932 anti-war ballet, *The Green Table*, by German choreographer Kurt Jooss. This classic work juxtaposes distinctive universal characters: politicians, everyday people, young soldiers, an old mother, a young woman, a profiteer, and Death. After a round table conference, the politicians vote to engage in war. Death exhibits its ultimate power throughout the choreography as each character inevitably succumbs in the war game.

After the performance, students were asked to reflect on the choreography and record their reactions in their dance journals. Ingrid's journal entry stated:

My dad was shot when I was four years old. I still remember the violent way it happened. Death can mean so many things to so many people. My heart still aches.

Another student, responding differently from Ingrid, visited the dance studio at lunchtime and danced the entire hour.



Photos: Virginia Shuker



All children need to feel empowered, through personal action and discovery about self, with others in the world.

ing/learning methods and strategies.

Kindergarten through second grade. Children aged five through eight are inquisitive, fun-loving, and have an uncanny ability to acquire vast amounts of information quite effortlessly through their senses. They are eager and ready to learn just about everything. Since their attention span is relatively short, dance experiences with short-term resolutions work better.

Children at this age will be challenged by large, full-body movement explorations, body part identification, and short sequences of one, two, or three movements. Holding a frozen shape for more than a few seconds is almost impossible since the body's energy is in constant flow. A child who takes a shape, names it as a shape, then collapses out of it, has just learned a major dance concept—stillness and movement.

Kindergartners through second graders love games. Guided movement explorations, game structures, and group improvisations are crucial aspects of the dance experience. Unlike games in sports contexts, dance movement has aesthetic qualities rather than competitive ones and the outcomes are recognized differently. Playing in the basic

somewhat blurred. Children love to play all of the characters of a story as the teacher facilitates the dance-a-story exploration/improvisation, observing and dancing in turn.

Third through fifth grade. Children aged nine through 11 are curious, analytical, and team- or group-oriented. They freely express their emotions, ideas, and dreams kinesthetically through independent dance experiences. Gradually extending experiences with longer-term resolutions allows for a more comprehensive, thought-out dance study.

Children at this age love to invent new ways of doing things. Each class should include time for experimentation, thus building on a child's natural ability to create and extend movement

Lauren whirled onto the dance space, running back and forth. Leaping and spinning wildly through the space she flailed her arms about as her body contorted angularly. Lauren then collapsed to the ground in a clump, heaving deeply—stillness. When asked about her dance experience, Lauren replied pensively:

I'm searching for my dad. I haven't seen him in a long time. I look everywhere. I don't know if he's dead or alive. I miss him very much. Maybe he's been kidnapped by the government. The war [Liberia Civil War] is so cruel to my mom, brother, and me.

These two children authentically constructed personal meaning by shaping movements and words into dances and prose. Each child's thoughts and feelings were revealed in two distinctly different symbolic languages. Both students represented their sense of how the world is constructed, what they come to understand as the lived world, and how they feel about that world. Dance educator Katherine Lee (1991) points out that these dances and prose present, "life histories, sensibilities and idiosyncratic perspectives on the child's lived world. What was given is a human event" (p. 7). These examples show vividly the power of dance as a means of personal expression.

It is not enough for a child to have only information about his or her world. All children need to feel empowered, through personal action and discovery about self, with others in the world. Yet in many schools throughout the United States, it is the written and spoken languages and mathematics that are valued as opposed to personal knowledge which children gain through dance, the other arts, and sciences.

Dance Content

The four essential components of dance content consist of dance movement vocabulary, dance making, dance sharing, and dance inquiry (White, Bucek, & Mirus, 1992):

- *Dance movement vocabulary*—the materials of dance (body, space, time, and movement quality); guided exploration

and imaginative journeys; learning from self-discovery and collective understanding in relation to images, ideas, feelings, stories, or structures.

- *Dance making*—mindful play or engagement with the materials of dance; attending to the narrative qualities of an idea or feeling; inventing shapes, movements, and dance phrases, studying structures and dances; making personal meaning through kinetic symbols to expressively participate in the world. Dance making involves the processes of exploring and improvising, and evaluating and reflecting.
- *Dance sharing*—communicating ideas, thoughts, dreams, and feelings through movement; sharing and responding in a variety of informal and



In "sport dances," used with 5 to 8-year-olds, throwing, catching, or kicking gestures vary in space, time, or movement quality.



formal sharings with peers, teachers, parents, and other members of the school's community. Dance may also be recorded through computer, film, or video as well as dance notation, specifically Laban's Motif Description.

- *Dance inquiry*—asking questions; in-

terpreting gestures; finding personal meaning or significance in dance as an art form; seeking to develop an understanding of dance within diverse cultural, social, and historical contexts as relevant to children's lived experiences.

Ideally, all of these dance discipline components are primarily rooted in the spontaneous forms of children's dance. However, if, for example, fourth and fifth graders are studying the Colonial and Westward Expansion periods, learning about the formal social dances (contra, quadrille, square, Ring Shout, Juba) of that time in America and cross-culturally would be appropriate and would also provide interdisciplinary involvement within other aspects of the school curriculum. Fourth and fifth grade children are at a developmentally appropriate stage that enable them to learn these formal dance forms.

The Curricular Contexts

Children's dance may be studied separately as a discrete subject, as part of another subject, in an interdisciplinary fashion, or in combination. The context of a children's dance curriculum is directly influenced by a school's academic



Photos: left, Helen Smith; right, Carla Barragan © 1992

philosophy, student and teacher demographics, and a school district's financial base. School programs have different needs and interests. Curriculum designers making these distinctions set out to match up the school's intended learner outcomes with student and teacher de-

mographics and financial appropriations. A school's established curricular context often determines how student and teachers experience dance.

Dance as a discrete subject. Children's dance, studied as a discrete subject, requires the learning/teaching process to focus solely on dance as an art form. Specialized study of the concepts, skills, and vocabulary of dance movement, dance making, dance sharing and dance inquiry within various dance forms and styles should be the structure of this type of curricular orientation.

Children's dance should focus both the spontaneous and formal dance forms, specifically, the elements—time, space, movement quality—and dynamic group relationships and the roles and functions of dance within a variety of contexts. The formal dance forms or styles which students learn are dependent upon the teacher's knowledge of dance as an art form, choice of dance material, and peer group invention or recapitulation of social dances.

Dance as a part of another subject. Dance is often a curricular component of K-5 physical education, particularly the formal forms of children's dance. Specialized study in one or more of these dance forms—folk, international, square, ballroom, or jazz—usually occurs in a unit of study over one semester or as part of a semester.

Some physical educators find it advantageous to employ Laban's principles of space, time, and movement quality in constructing movement studies for five-through eight-year-olds. An example of this is seen in "sport dances," where the throwing, catching, or kicking gestures may be varied in space, time, or movement quality.

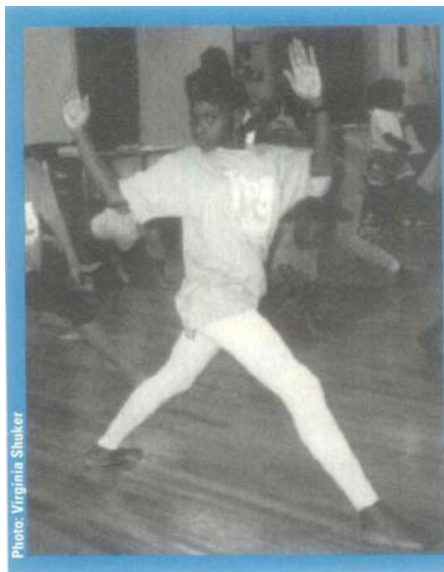
Children's dance may also be linked with social studies, where it can be studied as a form of human expression and communication in cultural, historical, and social contexts. For example, students studying the Renaissance can learn the forms of the *basse* and *haute* dances of the French, and the *Volta* and *Branles* of the English.

Interdisciplinary dance. Children's dance studied in an interdisciplinary context compels the deliberate integration of two or more subjects. An interdisciplinary thematic approach merges se-

lected discipline content, goals, and intended learner outcomes of two or more subjects.

Integrating a theme with other subjects requires an understanding of each subject's concepts and their relationship to and support of the larger, underlying theme. For example, in a science unit, idea mapping or webbing on a study of insects may lead to the larger concept of transformation. In science, observing, describing, and recording the physical body and life cycle (egg, larvae, pupa and adult) of an insect are part of the scientific method.

When this theme is integrated with children's dance, a sequence of lessons



may follow the study of human body part identification, isolated/simultaneous movement, locomotor/nonlocomotor movement, selected movement qualities, and working together in small groups. A final group project, such as a narrative dance study based on "A Day in the Life of an Insect," may emerge out of authentic, spontaneous dance improvisations and studies. In language arts, the study of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs may describe the insect throughout its metamorphosis. Where do insects go, and where do insects live are two questions which lead to the study of places in social studies. In math, distance, graphing pathways, counting body parts, or measuring food consumption of insects can be learner outcomes.

As students engage in the materials of each subject (words, numbers, move-

ment) and use the imagination to link similar concepts in different frameworks, new understandings emerge. This holistic approach to learning invites collaboration among teachers of different subjects. Children's dance can serve as a vehicle through which thematic ideas may be expressed or where other kinds of learning can occur. Dance may also be a catalyst in the selection of thematic ideas. As students create new dance forms or styles, meaning and dance become deeply infused. Relating and integrating dance material with other subjects is essential in this context.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment in education in general is undergoing many changes. The dance profession is at the threshold of defining appropriate means to assess and report student learning. Dance educators often have been skeptical about word and number approaches as appropriate assessment methods of student learning. Such instruments fall short of properly reporting the kinesthetic knowledge inherent in this form of learning.

As White, Bucek, and Mirus (1992) state, assessing and reporting student learning in K-5 children's dance:

- establishes and validates dance as a significant and unique form of knowing in education;
- carves out a place for dance alongside other subjects now regarded as basic to human learning;
- assists teacher reporting on child learning;
- provides teachers with a description of the quantitatively and qualitatively learning that is taking place;
- guides the selection of dance experiences based on the needs of children, particularly in terms of dance content, and within varying school contexts; and
- strengthens the argument for teacher and student accountability in regard to school, school district, state, and national educational curriculum goals.

Portfolio assessment is an appropriate means to assess student learning in children's dance. The portfolio concept, which has been adapted from the visual arts, invites children and teachers to

—Continued on page 48

6(2), pp. 4-5.

- Diamond, M. (1988). *Enriching learning*. The Free Press, New York: Macmillan.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: University Press.
- MacLean, P. (1980, fall/winter). A meeting of the minds. *Dromenon: A Journal of New Ways of Being*.

Bibliography

- Gilbert, A.G. (1977). *Teaching the three r's through movement experiences*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gilbert, A.G. (1992). *Creative dance for all ages: A conceptual approach*. Reston, VA: AAHPERD.
- Gilbert, A.G. (1981). Movement as a teaching tool. *On the Beam: New Horizons for Learning Newsletter*, 1(1), p. 10.
- MacRae-Campbell, L. (1990). Research supports arts education. Washington, DC: *Perspectives: The Kennedy Center Summit Report on Arts Education*.

Anne Green Gilbert is the director of the Creative Dance Center and Kaleidoscope Dance Co., 7327 46th Ave., Seattle, WA 98115.

Dance Curriculum...from page 46

share their learning/teaching processes through open-ended questioning, interviews, apprenticeships, modeling, facilitating, and cooperative learning. It is a collection of child-made work which represents various stages of completion. It represents various types of learning and various types of spontaneous or formal dance projects. This collection of work helps both teachers and students to reflect on the degree or level of work produced over time.

Portfolio assessment expands the concept of evaluating beyond written and numerical forms. It provides a more objective standard and a variety of interpretations. Both student and teacher voices are expressed as a result of this model. Assessment tools used in portfolio assessment include:

- improvisations;
- dance studies;
- written reflections and journals;
- sketchbooks and illustrations;

- webs, jot lists, or idea maps;
- collages;
- guided, open-ended questioning;
- playwriting (monologues, dialogues, scenes);
- tests (matching, true/false, multiple choice, fill in the blank);
- class critiques of dances;
- photography;
- audio- and videotape of individual and group process and rehearsals;
- dance game structures;
- sculptures;
- song writing and instrumental compositions;
- costume, lighting, and set design;
- class discussions; and
- peer exchange.

This article provides a philosophical grounding for the inclusion of children's dance in K-5 education and proposes that understanding child development is essential to teaching children's dance. Based on the National Dance Association, Columbus, and Minnesota (White, Bucek, & Mirus, 1992) curricular models, children's dance education K-5, should be rooted in essential dance discipline content. Children's dance learning can be assessed through a portfolio method which is intrinsic to child-centered, Deweyian learning.

References

- Bucek, L., & Yoder, L. (1991). *Columbus K-12 dance course of study*. Columbus, OH: Columbus Public Schools.
- Burton, J.M. (1980a, October). Developing minds: The first visual symbols. *School Arts*.
- Burton, J.M. (1980b, November). Developing minds: Visual events. *School Arts*.
- Dance curriculum guidelines, K-12*. (1988). Reston, VA: National Dance Association.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Dixon, B. (1991, January/February). The Afrocentric paradigm. *Design for Arts in Education*, pp. 15-22.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lee, K. (1991, November). *To speak or not to speak, that is the question: The powers of the weak*. Paper presented at the Congress on Research in Dance Annual

Conference, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA.

- Rugg, H. (1963). *Imagination*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Stinson, S.W. (1985) Piaget for dance educators: A theoretical study. *Congress on Research in Dance: Dance Research Journal*, 17(1), 9-16.
- White, E., Bucek L., & Mirus, J. (1992). *Dance Education Initiative: Curriculum Guide for Teachers*. Golden Valley, MN: Minnesota Center for Arts in Education.

Bibliography

- Bucek, L. (1991, March). *Under the microscope: K-5 dance education a model for the future*. Paper presented at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY.
- Blaine, V., & Bucek, L. (1988, January/February). Creating a public image for K-12 dance education. *Design for Arts in Education*, pp. 38-40.
- Stinson, S.W. (1988). *Dance for young children: Finding the magic in movement*. Reston, VA: AAHPERD.

Loren E. Bucek is coordinator of the Dance Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

Introduction...from page 41

ministrators to go beyond predictable rote learning and into detailed planning, with aesthetic awakening and critical thinking predominant. Dance educators K-12, in public and private sectors, must be willing to meet that challenge; educators in higher education cannot ignore these changing concepts in their education of dance educators.

Reference

- Rogers, F. (Ed.) (1941). *Dance: A basic educational technique*. New York: The Macmillan Co. (Replicated and abridged, 1980. New York: Dance Horizons.)

Virginia B. Shuker is dance director at C.R. Drew Elementary Center for Expressive Arts, Dade County Public Schools, Miami, FL 33142. She is also co-chair of Florida's Task Force on Dance Certification, which recently won approval for state certification of dance teachers.