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Creative dance for preschool children

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Currently, educators seem faced with a particular dilemma: as society becomes increasingly information-oriented, how will there be time for teaching and learning it all? Teachers of young children struggle with the increasing demand that students know the “basic academic skills” at an earlier age, while parents struggle to schedule all of the activities that seem necessary for their children to become accomplished and productive individuals.

Parents of preschoolers (almost always girls) frequently ask me to recommend a dance class for their children. The parents express their desire to support the apparent interest and talent of children who love to dance spontaneously to music. Some parents wish to encourage creativity and self-expression while others have heard that one must start early to be a dancer, and wish to leave this career option open to their children. An increasing number of commercial dance studios are trying to tap into this potential market by contracting with local day care centers to offer dance classes—usually a combination of ballet, tap dance, and perhaps some acrobatics—to children whose parents will pay an additional fee. However, study of stylized dance forms such as tap dance and ballet is not the most appropriate form of dance education for young children. While preschoolers can learn some simple steps and routines, they have far more important things to learn and do during these years than train for future careers. They need to explore their world and discover what they can do in it. Through such exploration, they build a rich store of sensory experiences, laying a foundation on which abstract concepts and more complex skills can later be built. Such experiences are the most appropriate steps toward future dance training for those children who might desire it. Even more important, these exploratory experiences contribute to the life of every child, not just those little girls who dream of wearing a tutu.

The kind of dance that is most appropriate for young children is most often referred to as “creative dance” or “creative movement.” It is an art form that is based on natural movement rather than movement of a particular style such as tap, dance or ballet. Of course, not all natural movement is dance. In our everyday lives we walk to a cabinet, reach up to get a box, turn to hear someone talking, but it is not dancing. Yet a dance can be made of the same movements—walking, reaching, turning. ...What is it that makes movement *dance*?

Dancing involves making movement significant in and of itself. The first step in making movement become dance is to *pay attention to it*. Most of our everyday movement is so well mastered that we no longer have any conscious awareness of what we are doing; we are “on automatic.” To dance is to discover a new world of sensory awareness through the kinesthetic sense, which comes from the nerve endings in our muscles and joints and tells us what our bodies are doing.

Kinesthetic awareness is critical in the development of motor skills. Children need the opportunity to explore movement possibilities and pay attention to what movement feels like when they do it. Such questions as “How can you get higher when you jump?” and “How can you fall down without crashing on the floor?” are important ones for children in developing and refining more complex movement skills.

Dance for preschoolers, then, involves not just body movement, but an inside awareness of the movement. However, dance as an art has to do not only with the body but also with the spirit, another dimension of the self. This does not mean that dance is always an expression of emotion, but that it is more than just exercise with kinesthetic awareness. Preschool children have told me that the difference between dance and other movement is that dance is *magic*. This description has been so meaningful to young children that I use it often—not in the sense of magic tricks, but in the sense of a magical state of being. Our magic comes from deep inside us, and each of us possess it. We use our magic to transform *movement into dance*.

Older dancers have spoken of this magical power of dance using other words, such as “I lose myself . . .,” “I feel like I’m in another world . . .,” and “I *am* my dance. . . .” Probably all of us have experienced transcendent moments in our lives; times of total involvement when we feel some deep connection, whether it is with movement, music, or even a sunset. It is difficult to find words to talk about these experiences, because the words often do not seem to make sense in a conventional way. Philosophers who study the arts refer to such times as “aesthetic experiences.” While an aesthetic experience has other characteristics as well, the sense of total involvement, connection, and transformation is essential. Another characteristic of aesthetic experience is that it is unified, integrated, and set off from other experiences by its qualitative nature.

We can never *make* aesthetic experiences happen for children or for ourselves. However, there are some things we can do as teachers which can set the stage and motivate children to do more than just “go through the motions.” Generating involvement is an important consideration in helping a movement experience for young children become an aesthetic experience. For children to become totally involved in an experience, they must feel like the experience belongs to them. Teachers can facilitate the connection between movement and children by building classes around themes and ideas that have significance for these children. Even more important, the teacher must

respond to the ideas and feelings of the children as they are presented. In a creative dance class, each child's contribution should be valued, and the diversity of different ideas (different ways one can travel backwards, for example) should be appreciated. The emphasis in a dance class for preschoolers is not on imitating the teacher, but on discovering the dance within each child. This is the reason it is called *creative* dance.

Another important consideration in facilitating aesthetic experience involves planning the class as an integrated whole, one that possesses both unity and variety. I have found that a theme drawn from the world of young children not only gets them involved, but also provides a structure for both unity (through the theme itself) and variety (through different activities that relate to the theme). Many of these themes are seasonal; for example, in the fall, children in most parts of the country notice the colors of leaves. Through dance experiences, they can relate to their shape, texture, and pathways as well. Other themes may be drawn from the general preschool curriculum or from ideas suggested by the children.

Dance for preschool children, then, involves sensory awareness and aesthetic experience. It also includes a cognitive component: children learn movement concepts dealing with the body, space, time, energy, and the relationships between them. In the preschool class, we work with these abstract concepts in concrete ways to help children see that they exist not only in dancing, but in all parts of their world. Children come to realize that they can make shapes; they can move with strength and lightness just as the wind can move with these qualities.

Such experiences provide an important link with cognitive development. Movement and sensory awareness are the primary ways children learn about themselves and their world. The Swiss educator Piaget studied how children form symbols—and therefore language—by “internalizing movement.” For example, children move up and down before they know the words “up” and “down.” Next, the words become associated with the movement and accompanying body sensations: young children cannot think or talk about movement without *doing* it. Gradually the words begin to stand for the movement: the need to do the full movement disappears, and the movement gets smaller and smaller until it is not physically demonstrated. It still exists inside, even though it may be reduced to only a slight degree of muscular tension, and although we are not always aware of it, we still use this internalized movement to think about many concepts. Even Einstein (North, 1973) noted that he made his discoveries initially through visual and kinesthetic images of movement: he saw or *felt* an idea first, and the words came later.

The important link between movement and cognitive development is a major reason why the preschool curriculum should involve concrete experiences through which children may encounter and interact with their world. Words, which are abstract symbols, gain meaning only through experience with what the symbols represent. Preschool dance provides concrete experiences through which children become more aware of movement they see in their world, try it on themselves, and notice how it feels.

Creative dance for preschool children, then, involves exploring movement organized around themes that are significant to children, with an emphasis on sensory awareness and aesthetic experience. To explain how this is accomplished I shall describe how I taught a group of four-year-old children last spring. Just before the children enter the dance space, one of their teachers reminds them to find their magic: they enter with

whispery voices, remove their shoes and socks and come quickly to sit around the circle taped on the floor. This is a large group of 24 children, but I am assisted by their two classroom teachers who participate with the children and repeat favorite activities on days that I am not there.

It is gardening season in North Carolina, and I know that many of their families are beginning backyard gardens. We speak briefly of their own experience with gardening and how it seems like magic when seeds grow into plants. There is magic in seeds and plants and gardens, just as there is magic inside each of them. As we talk, movement spontaneously appears when words are not enough for what they are trying to say. We are ready to dance.

“What do you do first when you want to plant a garden?” One child says you have to dig it. “Yes, you must dig up the soil and turn it over, so it can breathe and get soft. Who can show me how you push a shovel into the dirt—can you push that hard with your arms? Yes, it makes your muscles tired. Try standing all the way up and push yourself down, just as strong as when you were pushing the shovel . . . now turn yourself over and pull yourself back up. Nicolas, you pulled yourself up with a jump; let’s all try that: push yourself down, turn yourself over, pull yourself up with a jump, and freeze . . . Kristen, even your eyes are frozen. Tommy, your fingers are frozen in midair.” During the next few sequences, I begin singing the directions. Then the recorded music goes on and we do our magic digging dance. This dance is basically my structure, but each child has an individual variation. When it ends, we breathe and make ourselves soft as soft earth.

We make other dances that day, and over the next several days their enthusiasm for the theme continues. We imagine magic seeds that plant themselves—again, with a jump—one of the favorite movements of preschoolers. Thinking of earthworms, a necessity for a good garden and a real fascination to young children, we make a slow twisting dance that ends with the children twisting themselves into knots. The sun suggests to us a dance of slow rising, turning around (to shine on everything in the room), and sinking. Their first, almost automatic response to the ideas of rain is wiggling their fingers while their hands slowly fall in front of them, but I encourage them to explore other possibilities as well. Eventually our rain dance involves running to make light rain sounds with our feet, then freezing our feet and making light sounds by tapping other body parts. Their favorite dance is one about magic weeds—plants that pop up into one shape after another, then pull themselves out and throw themselves away.

After several days, when we have gone through many of our ideas about gardening, I invent a story for them about a magic garden. Inspired by Frances Hodgson Burnett’s, *The Secret Garden*, our version is a place where seeds plant themselves, and the sun always shines when needed. What grows there? Magic plants, which, like children, each dance their own dance in their own way.

Each daily session lasts about one-half hour, but it is the children not the clock, that let me know when to stop. The intensity of the concentration and the involvement of group activity are tiring, not to mention the physical exertion. We end each session with relaxation to help them return to the classroom.

Thinking back over that week of dancing, I ask myself what the children learned. It is not a question I have always asked myself in regard to preschoolers, but it has taken on particular significance with today’s emphasis on achievement and accountability. I

cannot think of any skill that the children completely mastered during this week, any concept that become solidly memorized, any achievement that could be measured. But learning for preschoolers is rarely like that, in dance or anything else. We might think of education for young children as painting a picture: through each experience the child adds a bit of color, some shading, a line, or a shape to his or her own painting. Trying to produce a picture too fast means making only a superficial outline. We need to remember this when we are tempted to hurry young children to participate in forms of activity better suited for older children.

Dance is certainly not the only kind of movement preschool children want or need. But through its emphasis on sensory awareness and aesthetic experience, it can help give depth, richness, and texture to childrens' "pictures"—their understanding—of themselves and their world.

Portions of this article were adapted from my book Dance for Young Children: Finding the Magic in Movement, published by AAHPERD in 1988. The book gives further detail on planning and teaching dance to preschool children. The appendix includes many suggestions of appropriate themes, as well as the full story of the Magic Garden dance.

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