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SYMPOSIUM ON EARLY CHILDHOOD ARTS EDUCATION

Dance Education in Early Childhood

SUSAN W. STINSON

Current educational discourse reveals concerns that our chil- are not learning enough during their school years. In the twenty-five years since my own public schooling ended, knowledge has multiplied dramatically. There is more and more to know, yet our children seem to know less and less. Anxieties are extreme in my own state of North Carolina, which is suffering the shame of having the lowest SAT scores in the United States. Throughout the country, proposals abound to extend the school day and the school year and to begin teaching basic skills earlier. Kindergarten is now what first grade used to be; free play in the housekeeping corner and the dress-up area are being replaced by workbooks and computers. The despair of early-childhood professionals at such curricular changes has not been as loud as has the outcry of the public over test scores. There is increasingly less time for anything not considered a basic academic skill or anything that cannot be readily evaluated to determine improvement.

Dance for young children should both facilitate what they might become, and cherish who they are.

Arts education professionals are reexamining arts curricula to assure the consideration of arts as one of the "new basics." The Getty Center has exercised leadership toward reshaping arts education to become more academic, less concerned with creativity and affect, and more concerned with arts history, criticism, and aesthetics.[1] The National Endowment for the Arts has recently called for more emphasis to be placed on studying the "great works" of art.[2] When I hear dance educators of young children discussing this trend, I hear some convinced that criticism and aesthetics require abstract thinking skills unattainable by their students and noting that time—even *yesterday* and *tomorrow*—is a concept not well grasped at this age, making the study of dance history inappropriate. Others are equally convinced that dance history, criticism, and aesthetics can be presented in ways that are accessible to young children. In addition, it does not seem possible to get high school dance students to the advanced level suggested by the College Board[3] unless some academic study of dance is begun by kindergarten.

"Starting young" was considered of value in the dance field long before the current educational debates, although for different reasons. The technical demands made by Western art dance are such that one must start early to be able to reach a high level of technical excellence before age-related decline of the physical body overcomes the abilities that increase with experience. While this has been most extreme in ballet, competitive pressures are making it increasingly true in modern dance as well.[4] Parents of preschoolers frequently ask me to recommend a dance class for their children. The parents describe their desire to support the apparent interest and talent of children (almost always girls) who love to dance spontaneously to music. Many parents have heard that one must start young to be a dancer and they therefore wish to leave this career option open to their children.

There are, then, pressures from two sides to begin serious dance study during early childhood: one for more academic study of dance, one for more technical training. I recognize two major arguments against giving in to these pressures.

- *The first argument: "They're not ready."*

Young children have far more important things to learn and do during these years than train for future careers, even as dancers, choreographers, philosophers, critics, or historians. They need to explore their world and discover what they can do in it. Through such exploration, they can build a rich store of sensory experiences, laying a foundation on which both abstract concepts and more complex skills can later be built. Such a foundation is the best preparation for both dance careers and high SAT scores. In other words, the first argument is not opposed to these as long-term goals of education but is opposed to hurrying the child into meeting them.

MOVEMENT AND WORDS

This argument is grounded in an understanding of the developmental needs of young children. Exploratory movement and sensory awareness are the primary ways children learn about themselves and their world. Piaget examined the way that children form symbols—and therefore language—by internalizing movement.[5] For example, children move *up* and *down* before they know these words. Next, the words become associated with the movement and the 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 no longer physically demonstrated. It still exists inside, even though it may be reduced to only a slight degree of muscular tension. Although we are not always aware of it, we still use this internalized movement to think conceptually. Even Einstein 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.[6]

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

Movement exploration and sensory awareness (particularly the kinesthetic sense) are also essential in the development of motor skills. Children need the opportunity to explore movement possibilities, paying 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 to deal with if they are eventually to be able to develop and refine more complex movement skills.

The kind of dance that can best offer these foundational experiences most appropriate for young children is usually referred to as *creative dance* or *creative movement.* It is an art form that is based on natural movement rather than on movement of a particular style of the sort that one might see in tap dance or ballet. But of course not all natural movement is *dance.* In our everyday lives, we walk to a cabinet, reach up to get a box, and turn to hear someone talking, but it does not feel like dancing. Yet a dance can be made of the same movements—walking, reaching, turning. What is it that makes movement *dance*?

AWARENESS

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 stay aware of what is ordinarily taken for granted, to discover a new world of sensory awareness provided by the kinesthetic sense.

Additional awareness of our movement comes when we name it. This also helps children develop the language to talk about dance and movement. The language of dance includes words dealing with the body, space, time, energy, and relationships. In the early childhood class, we work with these abstract concepts in concrete ways and 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, just as leaves and clouds have shapes; they can move with strength and lightness, just as the wind can move with these qualities.

Developmental arguments, then, rest on logic and on knowledge of young children. Valid knowledge can be backed up by research regarding how young children learn and what skills are needed as foundations for more advanced ones.

I find developmental arguments persuasive, reminding us not to push children too fast. We might think of education for young children as rather like painting a picture; through each experience the child adds a bit of color, some shading, a line, a shape. Dance in early childhood can help give depth, richness, and texture to children's "pictures"—their understanding—of themselves and their world. 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 into participation in forms of activity better suited to older children.

- *The second argument: "Cherish the inner child."*

I find it interesting that we use the same word—development—when speaking of countries and cultures and when speaking of children. In the United States, we refer to Third World countries as being underdeveloped—or sometimes even "primitive"—and our idea of helping them is to have them turn into developed countries, meaning like us. Similarly, our desire to have children develop reflects our desire to have them think, speak, and act the way we do. Individuals who are forty and act like they are four are not highly regarded by most of us.

The point of these rather obvious statements is that a value judgment is implied when we speak of development. We consider it better to be more developed than less developed; development represents a gain, not a loss. Further, the standard and the judgments are based on the perspective of the judger. People from countries we call underdeveloped might just as well look at the United States and question whether, for example, it is better to have running water come into one's own house when that means one no longer sees one's neighbors at the well.

I will not romanticize being without running water and suggest that we all go back to nature in order to have neighborliness. But unless we know what is usually sacrificed in the process of development, we are not able to think creatively about how we can avoid a great deal of loss as we pursue the gains that come with development.

We are accustomed to looking at children as we look at Third World countries—as underdeveloped. The second argument differs from this view in suggesting that most young children have certain capacities in greater abundance than do most adults and that there is frequently a great deal of loss in terms of these capacities, parelleling the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor gains that come with development. This argument is supported not so much by research demonstrating what children can and cannot do as by stories from those who share their lives with young children; some of my own stories will be part of this discussion.

ACCESS TO THE HIDDEN

It is important, however, to state the limitations of this argument: it is quite apparent that adults are more advanced than children in many ways, including cognition. I recognize the importance of cognition not just in the study of dance history, aesthetics, and criticism, but in the creation and performance of dance as well. Studies of the creative process reveal ways in which art and other creative endeavors require adult minds.[7] In particular, we cannot communicate effectively with others in an artistic medium unless we have sufficiently mastered the symbol system it uses. Yet art involves not only skill in communicating—we must also have something to communicate. What artists have to communicate in art is their inner life. As Martha Graham has said, "The reality of the dance is its truth to our inner life."[8] Yet, most adults' own inner life is hidden from conscious awareness. So an important part of the creative process becomes gaining access to the ideas and feelings that are otherwise left locked away. This stage of the creative process requires a different state of consciousness than that required for other stages. One must allow it to occur, rather than work at it; in fact, it often feels more like play than work. It is more often messy than orderly. Instead of repetitious practice, one must rely on spontaneity. Because we cannot *make* it happen, there is often a sense of mystery when it does. As the creative form is first emerging, the artist must be immersed in it, rather than standing outside looking critically at it (which happens later). The actor must become the character, knowing him/her from the inside. The dancer must become the dance. This stage involves play, exploration, transformation.

Young children usually excel in play, exploration, and transformation to a much greater degree than do most adults. I first became aware of this as a twelve-year-old, when my preschool-aged brother would be sent to brush his teeth. An hour later I would find him playing with little puddles of water on the bathroom counter, oblivious to the passage of time and having forgotten the original task. All young children can find untold treasures in a parking lot on the way to the car, most of which go unnoticed and unappreciated by their parents. Young children can change their own identity instantly, and turn a stick or a cardboard box into any number of creations with which they can play for untold hours. They do not, however, possess high levels of analytical and critical thinking skills or complex motor skills. So it is normal that we think in terms of developing the parts that are missing.

THE INNER CHILD

But when I look at most adults, it is easy to recognize that the capacities young children possess in such abundance practically disappear by adulthood. University students with whom I work often despair of ever recovering their own inner child—the part that can unselfconciously play, explore, and transform. It is almost as if one's inner child gets killed so the adult can be born. However, if the inner child were killed in us all, there would be no art, because there would be no source for art to grow from. There would probably not be much science either, since this is another field that requires creative thinking. The question for educators is: How can we allow the child to flourish even while adult skills are being developed?

In order to be able to answer that question, we need to think about the reality in which young children live and the significance of that reality for all of us. One way we can describe such a reality is in terms of its sensory-motor nature—not too different from the way developmentalists speak of this stage of cognitive development. Sensory awareness is an essential aspect of being an artist. For the visual artist, seeing is a critical sense; for the musician, hearing; for the dancer, the kinesthetic sense. The sensory-motor realm is one in which, to a great extent, young children live. Anyone who has tried to get somewhere with young children knows that they have an uncanny way of noticing things that we as adults often miss—the procession of ants down the sidewalk, the rock that has something shiny in it. And once young children discover something, they are rarely content with just looking at it. A puddle is for jumping over or into. A craggy hill or a weathered fence is not beautiful scenery but is something to climb.

The sensory powers of young children sometimes leave me amazed. I remember the day my preschool-aged son picked up a bag of clean clothes, hand-me-downs that were being passed on by a friend. He sniffed them and announced, "They're from Matthew. They smell like Matthew's clothes." He was right; they were Matthew's clothes, but I could not smell a thing. I even asked Matthew's mother what kind of laundry products she used, but this offered no clues.

On another occasion, we were taking a walk outdoors at dusk, playing a "listening game." We took turns stating what we could hear in our neighborhood; "I hear crickets," "I hear cars on the highway." Finally Ben said, "I hear flowers growing." I thought to myself, "How imaginative" and decided I would speak of an imaginary sound too, so I said, "and I hear the moon starting to shine." Ben promptly replied, "Mommy, the moon doesn't make any sound when it shines." But he knew the sound of flowers growing, and in fact was able to imitate for me the very tiny sound he heard.

Now, the rational part of myself (the part I use in being a critic), would classify these incidents as evidence of a good imagination. But I often have occasion to wonder whether children may have sensory capacities that we as adults have lost, because we have learned what is "real" and what is "imaginary."

Sensation fuels the world of feeling, and young children frequently wear their feelings close to the surface. They throw their arms around us spontaneously when in a loving mood, or hold on to our legs when they are too shy or scared to enter a room full of strangers. I am not suggesting that these behaviors are necessarily ones to be encouraged in all situations. But another story illustrates how we can learn from children in this regard.

I remember leading a preschool dance class on a theme of doing the laundry. Dirty clothes are limp; we can make ourselves limp. Washing machines shake the clothes around and then spin the water out, so we explored these two actions and then made a dance of shaking and spinning. We talked about two ways to get clothes dry—using driers and hanging on a clothesline—and then explored swaying while suspending ourselves from two points. I had next intended to have the children find ways to fold themselves up, but one child, who was really transforming, called out, "No, you have to iron us." But when I tried to have them stretch themselves to remove any wrinkles, the same child blurted out, "No, iron us by *touching* us!" How many of us can ask so clearly to have our needs met when we need a touch, a hug, some personal acknowledgment?

ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

In addition to this emphasis on the sensory-motor world, there are other ways we can recognize that young children inhabit a different reality. They see things that we do not see. When we were watching fireworks, my son told me, "The sky cracked open and spiders came out!" Children's reality is often so strong that when we come upon them deeply involved in imaginary play, we feel that we should knock to gain permission to enter. Piaget described this reality as a state of primitive consciousness, in which children perceive inanimate objects as creatures with consciousness, participate in nature, and do not perceive the separations between things.[9] They frequently transform their own identities. How many times have I entered a preschool class only to have a child say, "I'm not Jennie, I'm a cat today. Meow," or had a whole class turn into frogs right before my eyes, when I merely asked them if they could jump *like* a frog. A stick can become a horse, and children can become mommies or daddies or whatever they desire. When I took my preschool-aged daughter to dance performances, she always picked out one dancer and said, "I'm her." Being told "how things really are" is irrelevant, as many memorable moments with young children have convinced me. I remember the day my young son told me that when he grew up he was going to be a mommy and have a baby grow in his tummy. I told him gently that boys could not have babies grow inside their bodies, but they could become daddies, and daddies got to do important jobs too—like giving baths to babies, changing their diapers, and playing with them. Ben chimed in, "Yes! And I'll *dance* with my baby." While my dance educator heart was still warming over how successful I had been in teaching him, he continued, "And when I'm all finished being a daddy, then I'll be a mommy and have a baby grow inside my body."

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Piaget felt that such a primitive consciousness was the result of an inability to understand what really is happening in the world, and he noted that a child's imaginative explanations decrease as the child gets older, in favor of "representational tools more adapted to the real world."[10] Yet it seems important to point out that to the artist, the child's conception of the world is not something to be discarded, but to be cherished and returned to on deeper levels. Artists often attempt to tune into a deep level of connection with nature. While the scientist "knows" that inanimate objects cannot speak, the artist may confront a twisted piece of wood, or a seashell, or a mountain, and open himself or herself to the "language it speaks." The dialogue that results may guide the creative process in the arts. The idea that one might communicate with an inanimate object is not part of the scientist's reality, but may be part of the artist's reality, and also of the child's. As Hughes Mearns said, "To childhood the life within is one of the sure realities."[12]

Piaget further noted that adults may return to more "primitive" states of consciousness in times of stress;[11] the adult who bumps into a table may berate it as though it is a living being who intentionally inflicted pain. The artist may *choose* to return to such a state of consciousness, valuing it as a source of artistic creation and aesthetic experience.

Cultivating the inner life and alternate realities is clearly not the main purpose of many current approaches to arts education, particularly of those that focus more on audience development than on artistic development. But working with young children, attending dance concerts, and reading about theoretical physics all remind me of the importance of recognizing multiple realities—in being an artist or a scientist, in being a person with a rich inner life.[13] Certain approaches to arts education offer an avenue for keeping alive this important part of the self. While I could give many reasons to justify dance in the early childhood curriculum, I think this is the most important.

A Resolution

I think of dance for young children as both a way to provide a foundation of experience necessary for the future development of more advanced skills and as a way to affirm an inner life and alternate realities. From such a multiple perspective, dance for young children becomes concerned with sensory awareness, cognition, and consciousness. Young children helped me find a way to talk about the consciousness one enters while dancing when they told me that the difference between dance and just moving around is that dance is *magic*. This description has been so meaningful to young children that I use if often—not in the sense of magic tricks, but as a magical state of being. Our magic comes from a quiet place deep inside us, and each of us possesses it. I sometimes use a collection of geodes to illustrate this. On the outside, they look rather plain and quite similar. Inside each of them is something different and beautiful. It is our own inside magic that makes each of us different and special, and we need it to make our movement turn into *dance*.

Preparing to dance means finding the magic inside each of us, often by sitting quietly for a few moments in a relaxed state. As we begin moving, we may explore doing simple movement, such as standing up and sitting down, first in an everyday way and then with our inside magic. As the class continues, the emphasis is on inner sensation and allowing the movement to come from inside ourselves, rather than just imitating what is outside. When children devote their concentration to attending to their interior, it does indeed transform their movement and transforms them from "plain ordinary" children into dancers.

I also ask children to notice moments they experience outside the dance class that make them feel magical, and I encourage them to share these with me and with the other children. They have told me about finding an empty blue shell of a robin's egg lying on the grass, a dew-covered spider web in which there are rainbows, a moment just before falling asleep—feeling "as tired as wet butterfly wings." They have told me about waking up knowing it is your birthday, and waiting for grandmother to come for a visit, and watching kittens be born. These are indeed magical moments, and it adds to my life as well as theirs to savor and appreciate them.

Once we have "gotten our magic" at the beginning of the class, we are ready to deal with the theme of the day. I try to choose themes that are in some way connected to the child's world or to a world they can enter readily. As an example, I will describe an especially memorable unit I have done with young children on several occasions, one that was initiated by my desire to correct the stereotype that most young children—and many adults—hold of native American dance. I always emphasize that I am not a native American and I do not know their real dances, but I know that native Americans dance about the spirits of things. Although we cannot do these special dances, we can make our own dances about the spirits of things.

MAGIC AND RESPECT

Before this, in earlier sessions, we usually have visited other worlds, with trips to such places as backward planets, jumping planets, and so forth. We have already discussed how important it is to be respectful of other people when entering their territory, and what respect means. So we take time as we begin our class to find our magic and our respect, and create a ceremony of the drum.

After our opening ceremony, I tell them that fire was important to people who lived on this land, especially before heaters and stoves were invented. Some of the children have been on camping trips and have sat around a campfire. As they try to *tell* me about the fire, their bodies come alive, for words are not sufficient. We are ready to dance.

We explore pointed shapes like flames, changing from one to another. I light some incense so they can watch the smoke drift and curl, and then we explore floating. We put the two parts together in alternation—the pointed shapes and the floating—and create our Dance of the Spirit of the Fire. We talk a bit about the difference between the two parts of the dance (the aesthetic concept of contrast), but the children are more interested in *doing* it.

We talk of how important the sun is to all of us. We explore rising and sinking, slowly because the sun moves slowly. To make our own sun dance, we add a slow turn in between so we can let our own light shine on everything in the room. But young children can move slowly only for so long, so we try doing it with an opposite quality. We laugh together as we think about a sun popping up like a jack-in-the-box.

We dance the Spirit of the Small Animals—taking tiny steps and then freezing, looking for danger. In dance terms this becomes sequence—scurry, freeze, focus. I never ask them to pretend to be squirrels or rabbits. But young children feel their kinship with these creatures and are transformed. The Dance of the Spirit of the Large Animals is similar, but we use galloping or leaping, feeling our weight as large powerful creatures.

We make other dances and have other ceremonies over the next several times we spend together. I bring in long strips of white cloth, and we have a banding ceremony as we each receive our headbands. The headbands, too, become transformed—into streamers when we make our dance about the spirit of the wind; into a stream, giving us something to leap over. The headbands also turn into an art project. Each headband is decorated with each child's own visual symbols to represent the spirit of the sun, the wind, the fire, the water.

As the unit develops over several days, we finally make a larger dance in several parts—the Dance of the Spirit of the Hunt. It includes stalking—with steps so silent it is as though our feet kiss the earth. Each child chooses whether to dance the Spirit of the Small Animals or the Spirit of the Large Animals. The section on the Spirit of the Bow and Arrow is probably their favorite. I bring in a real bow and arrow to show how a string gets pulled, bending it to get power to shoot the arrow. We bend different parts of ourselves, feeling the power in our muscles, and then shoot ourselves through space, landing as softly as an arrow.

Another section is a repetition of the dance of the fire; then we conclude with a ceremony of thanks.

I'm thankful for the sky, and all that's in it
(the sun, the wind, the clouds, the rain).
I'm thankful for the earth, and all that grows
in it and walks upon it.
I'm thankful for my friends . . . to dance with.
I'm thankful for myself.

We never performed these dances on a stage; they have never been polished products to be seen in a theater. The only "criticism" involved with these four- and five-year-olds was a chance to say, "I liked the part when. . . ." Our only costumes have been our headbands, which some chose to wear as belts when they were not being used as props. The only audience has been the class participants, including on occasion various adult groups, from parents to university students to senior adults, dancing with the children; no one has ever been invited to just watch.

WHAT THE CHILDREN LEARNED

As I think back over this and other dancing times I have had with preschoolers, I ask myself what the children learned. This is not a question I have always asked myself, any more than I asked myself what my own children learned from an outing to the zoo or a trip to see grandparents. But questions of accountability have taken on particular significance in today's world, in which there is so much to learn and too little time for learning it.

Perhaps our exploration of images from native American dance could be considered a kind of dance history. I think that aesthetic experience was part of what happened for the children, but we never analyzed it philosophically. I certainly can make lists of vocabulary, concepts, and skills that children develop through dance classes; these become part of their total store of knowledge. But learning involves not just adding to a store of knowledge; it also involves discovering what is already there. Young children possess rich inner treasures, including the capacity to enter alternative realities—in which they may hear flowers growing, see spiders coming out of the sky, and become one with a small animal. Yet we all too often teach them that these treasures are mere childish things, to be tolerated and treated as cute, and only in those too young to do the real work that matters in the world. Then by the time children become adults, they no longer have access to their inner treasures, so they dismiss them by saying, "I'm just not very creative."

I think that reading and writing, critical thinking, and computers are all important, and I believe in the development of movement skills. But it is also important to find our own inner resources and dream of possibilities. As educators, we face increasing demands to spend more time helping children develop new skills that they will need in the future. We must recognize, though, that we really do not know what the future holds; much of today's reality was only science fiction twenty years ago. To live in the future, our children will need all of their human capacities—to move skillfully, to think critically, to play, explore, and transform. Dance for young children should both facilitate what they might become and cherish who they are.

Notes

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9. Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. J. and A. Tomlinson (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929).
10. Ibid., 130–31.
11. Ibid.
12. Hughes Mearns, *Creative Power* (New York: Dover, 1958), 65.
13. See Fritjof Capra, *Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1977) and Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wuli Masters* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

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The impact of arts education in the preschool years is becoming increasingly obvious through research and observation. As with other aspects of child development, experiences with the arts in the first few years can have an important effect on the child's later attitudes and abilities. The preceding articles examine the importance of music, art, drama, and dance in the preschool years. Not surprisingly, common threads appear. Each author suggests the importance of nurturing the wholeness of children where they are, rather than assuming that any age is incomplete and we should hasten development. Curricula need to emerge that are based on the developmental stages of the child and stimulate not only the development of skills but the development of artistic spirit.

Those advocating preschool arts experiences are no longer the stereotypical kindly, retired teachers who simply love little children (although this is not a bad quality). The authors of these articles also love little children and are well-educated scholars, practitioners, and researchers who have come to realize the benefits of the arts during the early years of our future citizens and who hope this symposium will help administrators to recognize the impact that early childhood education can have on the artistic potential of our newest colleagues.

John Feierabend, coordinator