Creative Dance in the Education Curriculum: Justifying the Unambiguous

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The inclusion of creative dance in the education curriculum has been variously justified in terms of its value as art, as movement, as therapy, and as a component of an integrated curriculum. Although creative dance is currently justified in different curricula for contradictory and ambivalent reasons, there is a need for an unambiguous inclusion of creative dance as a legitimate art form in the curriculum. I evaluate the various justifications for creative dance as movement, therapy, integration, and art and examine how these thwart or do not thwart the need for an unambiguous inclusion of creative dance as an art form.

Pour justifier l'intégration de la danse créative dans les programmes scolaires, on invoque sa valeur comme art, comme mouvement et comme thérapie, ou encore sa place au sein d'un programme intégré. Il faut que la danse créative soit incluse d'une manière non ambiguë dans les programmes scolaires en tant qu'expression artistique ayant droit de cité. Actuellement, on justifie l'intégration de la danse créative dans divers programmes scolaires en faisant appel à des raisons contradictoires et ambivalentes. L'auteure évalue les divers moyens de justifier la danse créative comme mouvement, thérapie, intégration et art, et analyse comment ces diverses justifications vont ou non à l'encontre du besoin d'inclure sans ambiguïté dans les programmes scolaires la danse créative comme expression artistique.

INTRODUCTION

Creative dance is perceived differently by different sectors of the education system. In many provinces, creative dance is part of the physical education curriculum. More recently, two provinces — British Columbia and Saskatchewan — have considered placing dance under the rubric of arts education. The aspect of creative dance that is emphasized reflects the position creative dance is assigned in the curriculum. When in the physical education curriculum, creative dance lessons typically focus on development of the motor skills involved, with little concern for the experience's aesthetic potential. In arts education, the primary focus is creative dance's aesthetic potential. Advocates view creative dance not only as having potential for developing motor skills or aesthetic sensibility, but as a means to improve students' self-concept and as a valuable component of an integrated curriculum. Upon closer scrutiny, however, these different ways of justifying creative dance may prove contradictory. For example, if creative dance is perceived as an art form and art is typically valued for its own sake, it may be inconsistent to view dance as a means to learning other subject areas or as a

means to developing a positive self-concept. There is a need for an unambiguous justification for including creative dance as a legitimate art form in the curriculum. I evaluate various ways of justifying creative dance as movement, therapy, integration, and art and examine how these justifications thwart or do not thwart the need for an unambiguous inclusion of creative dance as an art form.

What is Creative Dance?

"Creative dance" is a particular form of dance. This form is typically taught in elementary schools because unlike other dance forms, it does not require years of training. Basically, creative dance involves the use of movement elements to express thoughts and feelings. Dimondstein (1974) expands on this definition when she considers dance to be "the interpretation of a child's ideas, feelings, and sensory impressions expressed symbolically in movement forms through the unique use of his body" (p. 167). Creative dance teachers may suggest particular ideas or feelings they want their students to express through movement. Alternatively, they may provide a stimulus — for example, a piece of music, a poem, a painting — which they want students to interpret and express through the medium of movement.

The medium of movement can be further defined using the elements of movement. Rudolf Laban (1975) has comprehensively analyzed movement and its constituent elements. Examples of Laban's movement elements include body awareness; space awareness; the awareness of weight, time, and flow; and the adaptation to partners and groups. The movement themes developed from these elements have formed the basis of numerous handbooks on creative dance, among them Preston-Dunlop's (1980) *A Handbook for Dance in Education*, Joyce's (1980) *First Steps in Teaching Creative Dance to Children*, and Boorman's (1969) *Creative Dance in the First Three Grades.* Although Morin (1988) criticizes the curriculum content these writers propose as too myopic, I suggest that the development of an elemental movement vocabulary has a wider purpose, that being to express the inner self. In fact, Joyce (1980) states that the goal of creative dance is "to communicate through movement" (p. 1), and Preston-Dunlop's handbook (1980) includes a theme she refers to as "Meaning, Expression, Communication and Embodiment" (p. 168). Creative dance, then, is not simply what Morin (1988) refers to as "elemental dance" (dance whose content is based solely upon the use of movement elements) but includes aspects of what she refers to as "expressive dance" (dance dealing with aesthetic qualities and qualitative relationships). Whether the focus is on elemental or expressive aspects of creative dance is often a function of who is viewing the activity.

DANCE AS ART

I propose that although creative dance may take place in the physical education class, that although therapeutic benefits may result, and that although content

from other subject areas may be learned, creative dance should be viewed first and foremost as an art form. To support the view that creative dance should be considered an art form, one must consider how similar dance is to other art forms. Like other art forms, creative dance has aesthetic qualities. These include such formal qualities as line, design, shape, and so on, and the relationship between these, as well as the fittingness of the form to the content expressed. Reference to these aesthetic qualities distinguishes art from other subject areas. Richmond (1991) illuminates this point in his discussion of the educational value of the arts. He argues that

> if art is to be differentiated from purely conceptual matters, from the pragmatic communication of information in images, or from social studies, for example, then it must surely be by some reference to aesthetic intentions and qualities, i.e., to such things as style, character, design, skillful use of materials, originality, expressiveness, and the fittingness of form with content. (p. 5)

The claim that there are aesthetic qualities common to many art forms has not gone uncontested. Sheppard (1987) suggests that "we are immediately confronted by the problem that formal features in the different arts seem at first to be of very different kinds" (p. 50). In considering formal features of a work of art, however, we are considering relationships between features. Sheppard goes on to say that "In discussing painting we talk not just about the shapes and colours used but about the balance and the symmetry of the composition, that is, about the relationships between the shapes and colours" (p. 50). Talk of such relationships transcends different art forms. For example, balance and symmetry can be experienced within a painting as well as in a creative dance piece. A dance might be created which has an even number of dancers performing symmetrical movements on opposing sides of the stage. Likewise, a dance could convey imbalance and asymmetry by using an odd number of dancers performing movements at various levels with varying degrees of intensity. Talk of "aesthetic qualities," such as balance and symmetry, makes it possible to compare and contrast works of art in the same as well as different art forms. Dimondstein (1974) reiterates the notion that there are common elements underlying all art forms:

> Each art form has its own distinguishing characteristics, provides a unique image, and uses particular media. How, then, can we give the arts a sense of unity as well as recognize their distinctiveness? To do so is to consider them in their broadest context, as parameters of space-time-force through which the functions of the arts are expressed. As parameters, they may have various values, yet each in its own way is necessary in creating and determining the aesthetic effects of any particular form. They cannot, then, be conceived as technical elements, but as the connective tissue underlying the expression of ideas and feelings. (pp. 30–31)

Dimondstein (1974) gives examples of how the same element is expressed in different art forms: "When we speak of an energetic line or a strong color rela-

tionship in painting, of tension between the volumes or contours in a sculpture, of the power of a movement in dance or the intensity of an image in poetry, we are expressing a sense of vitality" (p. 32).

I argue that the similarity of creative dance to other art forms because of shared aesthetic qualities provides an unambiguous justification for the inclusion of creative dance as a legitimate art form in the education curriculum. This justification is sometimes at odds, however, with other reasons given for including creative dance in the curriculum, so I now examine how the unambiguous inclusion of creative dance as a legitimate art form is thwarted or not thwarted by the justification of creative dance in terms of physical education, therapy, and integration.

DANCE AS PHYSICAL EDUCATION

"Movement is not dance, but all dance involves movement" (Fleming, 1976, p. 8). A focus on the movement involved in creative dance has typically resulted in its inclusion in the physical education curriculum. Movement can, however, be viewed in more than one way. Stanley (1977) distinguishes between functional movement, which is movement geared toward accomplishing a practical task such as kicking a ball, and expressive movement, which involves movement expressing a thought or feeling. Dance is typically viewed as employing expressive movement, whereas most sports skills are considered functional. This dichotomy is not so obvious, however, when one considers "aesthetic" sports, for instance, synchronized swimming, gymnastics, and figure skating. With such sports, the purpose cannot be considered apart from the manner of achieving it. As Best (1978) points out: "it would make no sense to suggest to a figure skater that it did not matter how he performed his movements, as long as he achieved the purpose of the sport, since that purpose inevitably concerns the manner of performance" (p. 105). Although aesthetic sports appear to involve expressive movement, the functional nature of movement is also present. One objective of involvement in an aesthetic sport is to gain dominance over a competitor. Krohn (1991) reiterates this point:

> But sport is not dance, and dance is not sport. The objective of the two activities is different. In sport, the objective is to win the game or gain dominance over a competitor, and the opportunity to gain dominance over the opponent depends on the skill level. In dance, however, the goal is to communicate an idea or feeling, and therefore, the stress is on the quality of the movement, in order to make it more meaningful. (p. 48)

The suggestion that skill level is a determinant of a competitor's ability to gain dominance over another competitor ushers in another area in need of elucidation, that of skill acquisition. In dance, movement skills are the means by which individuals use the elements of dance to express thoughts and feelings. This

distinct purpose of acquiring skills for dance has implications for the creative dance teacher. Carr (1984) argues:

> that a behavioral objectives approach to the teaching of physical and practical pursuits in general, and to the activity of dance in particular, is cripplingly limited to the extent that it is dominated or constrained by a particular view of theoretical psychology that persists in an attempt to understand skill learning in terms of conditioning and reinforcement, associations between stimuli and responses or some elaboration of these notions in the guise of a "psychomotor" model of skill acquisition. (p. 68)

Although the "psychomotor" model of skill acquisition dominates the teaching of physical education, there is a significant problem in applying such a model to the teaching of creative dance. Creative dance skills are not the same as sports skills in their ability to be conditioned. There is a certain degree of autonomy involved in developing and using movement skills to express thoughts and feelings. If creative dance is being justified as a legitimate art form in the curriculum, it is important to consider the autonomy involved in creating works of art. Collingwood (1938) suggests that

> the artist has no idea what the experience is which demands expression until he has expressed it. What he wants to say is not present to him as an end towards which means have to be devised; it becomes clear to him only as the poem takes shape in his mind, or the clay in his fingers. (p. 29)

Collingwood goes on to say that works of art "are made deliberately and responsibly, by people who know what they are doing, even though they do not know in advance what is going to come of it" (p. 129). Howard (1982) calls this the paradox of creativity, "that the artist both knows and does not know what he is up to" (p. 118). It is important to note that although artistic creation involves a certain autonomy, knowledge of artistic elements and skill in using these elements are still involved. As Carr (1984) points out:

> To state that creative conduct cannot be conditioned, then, is to express a conceptual point rather than merely to comment on the limits of technical possibility. If it is creative or expressive dance that we are interested in, then, the job of the teacher is to acquaint pupils with dance skills and techniques, knowledge of dance-artistic conventions, and traditional forms and to equip them with a repertoire of abilities to perform particular movements, but always with a view to their being able eventually to act autonomously in the light of this knowledge, understanding, and skill. (p. 73)

If the outcome of creative conduct involves some autonomy, teaching of the skills needed will not necessarily fit the "psychomotor" model of skill acquisition. Since this model predominates in physical education classes, this argument necessitates either moving creative dance out of the realm of physical

education, or expanding our conception of physical education to include other models of skill acquisition.

As physical skills are a necessary component of creative dance, I see nothing wrong with including creative dance in the physical education curriculum. But not only do models of skill acquisition have to accommodate the conditions for creative conduct, teachers of creative dance have to be aware of the potential for aesthetic experience in dance. If creative dance involved nothing more than the development of physical skills, we would be hard pressed to justify the inclusion of dance over other activities whose focus is also on the development of motor skills. A prime example of such an activity is that of educational gymnastics. Both creative dance and educational gymnastics emphasize the development of basic motor skills. If creative dance did not offer anything beyond what is offered by educational gymnastics, there would be no reason (other than variety) to include creative dance in the curriculum.

Dance theoreticians have suggested that creative dance does offer something not offered by activities such as educational gymnastics: the potential for an aesthetic experience. McColl (1979) suggests that "what distinguishes the content of children's dance from movement education is its specific emphasis on the expressive and the aesthetic" (p. 44). Recognizing the aesthetic potential of creative dance has implications for the physical education teacher:

> Dance at the physical education level has often been taught as a series of movement skills with little thought given to its aesthetic and artistic side. No time has been given to areas such as history or dance appreciation, which are a very important part of dance education. Ensuring that physical educators who are going out to teach have some background in these areas is of the utmost importance. (Krohn, 1991, p. 49)

The suggestion that to recognize the aesthetic/artistic side of dance requires some background on the part of the teacher is a point well taken. Physical education teachers cannot acknowledge the aesthetic nature of creative dance without taking some necessary steps in that direction. In conclusion, recognizing the aesthetic potential of creative dance is an essential element in teaching this activity. Thus, dance can be viewed as a part of physical education only if the conception of physical education is expanded to include the aesthetic.

DANCE AS THERAPY

The expressive nature of creative dance has also resulted in many dance practitioners and theoreticians espousing the therapeutic potential of creative dance. This potential becomes obvious when creative dance is advocated as a means to help children develop positive self-concepts and self-acceptance. Murray (1973) credits creative dance with providing

> a primary medium for expression involving the total self (not just a part, like the voice) or totally separated from the physical self (like painting or sculpture). Dance and the movement that produces it is "me" and, as such, is the most intimate of expressive media. A child's self-concept, his own identity and self-esteem are improved in relation to such use of his body's movement. (p. 5)

Alter (1984) reiterates this emphasis on the "me" or the personal nature of creative dance when she states that "during a creative dance experience, children engage in problem-finding activity in which their own bodies provide the means of solution. This can enhance children's sense of bodily self and contribute to a positive self-concept" (p. 28).

If including creative dance in the education curriculum is being justified on the basis of its ability to develop a positive self-concept, the question must be asked whether such a justification is at odds with the need for an unambiguous inclusion of creative dance as a legitimate art form. I suggest that the answer is yes. If creative dance is being taught as an expressive activity with aesthetic value, its therapeutic benefits are side-effects, not the activity's main purpose. Of course, creative dance could be experienced in a therapeutic setting. For example, creative dance has been used with emotionally disturbed people as a way to express experiences they cannot recount verbally. But if creative dance is being conducted in a therapeutic as opposed to an educational setting, how it is taught will differ. This difference has important implications for the justification of creative dance in an *education* curriculum.

When dance is experienced as therapy, artistic form takes a back seat to the content of what is being expressed. Dimondstein (1974) differentiates between "self-expression," which she defines as giving *vent* to feelings that may be random or uncontrolled and reflect the way a person feels at the moment, and "artistic expression," which is giving *form* to feelings that are either evoked or controlled in relation to the sensuous qualities of a medium, the organization of materials, and response to the subject. In a therapeutic setting, where people physically express experiences they have been unable to vocalize, the movement involves "venting" as opposed to "giving form to" feelings. Once again, I do not deny the value of this sort of expression, but I suggest that it belongs in a therapeutic, not an educational setting.

DANCE AS INTEGRATION

The conflation of therapeutic with artistic objectives finds a parallel in the advocacy of the integration of dance into other subject areas. MacDonald (1991) advocates such an integration: "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" (p. 436). Shapiro (1978) cites the following example:

> In an algebra class a dancer helped conduct studies in time rates — the children did crabwalks and cartwheels across the room, and others timed and compared them. Elements of physics — gravity, action and reaction, the fulcrum — can be demonstrated vividly with movement. (p. 10)

I suggest that using dance/movement to teach the position of planets, or the elements of physics, may enhance the teaching of the lesson. I would hesitate, however, to denote such activity as art. If creative dance is to be considered an art form, it must share features characteristic of other art forms, that is, have a capacity to induce aesthetic satisfaction. Such satisfaction may not result if creative dance is used to teach mathematics, for example.

One issue regarding the focus of dance as an integratable subject concerns the relation of dance to other subjects. Dimondstein (1985) makes an important point when she notes that

> arbitrary attempts have been made to relate dance to other disciplines without considering organic connections between them in terms of content and methodology — that is, between what is to be learned and the means by which it is best communicated. Certain questions are raised, for example, when dance is related to math through the use of body shapes that are supposed to facilitate the understanding of a number. Is the focus on learning a quantitative symbol system of defined shapes and relationships or on a qualitative kinesthetic process of exploring body parts to symbolize numerical shapes? Furthermore, is such a learning experience designed to humanize math concepts, or is a conception of math intended to enhance the understanding of dance? (p. 82)

Dimondstein's questions about the purpose of integrating subject areas (whether the aim is to humanize mathematics concepts or to enhance the understanding of dance) should be considered seriously. Too often the zest to integrate subject areas results in a forced relationship. Although I do not deny the potential for a worthwhile integration of subject areas, I advocate a cautious selection of content from other subject areas along with an approach that does not do injustice to the teaching of creative dance as a legitimate art form. Hirst and Peters (1970) support a cautious approach toward integrating curriculum units, but suggest that such units have an important function when the objectives of the integration can be effectively reached by such means and when the links between the subjects are genuine and not artificial.

Although I advocate caution in integrating different subject areas, I propose that within the subject area of the arts there is a greater possibility for worthwhile integration that does justice to the dance experience as well as to the other art forms with which it is being integrated. The confidence with which I advocate the integration of various art forms is based on the interrelatedness of the arts, an interrelatedness based on aesthetic qualities shared by all art forms. Consideration of these aesthetic qualities reinforces the notion that dance should be viewed as an artistic activity.

IMPLICATIONS

Although I argue that creative dance should be viewed as an art form, this does not necessitate that it be moved out of the gymnasium or the classroom and into the art room. Rather, what is required is recognition of the aesthetic qualities of creative dance as well as its potential for developing movement, self-esteem, and knowledge of other subject areas. Achieving the aesthetic potential of creative dance requires taking certain steps. McColl (1979) suggests how it might be carried out:

> There are four steps inherent in making dance a viable part of arts experiences for children. It becomes important that teachers (1) recognize and understand dance for children as an art form, (2) be able to articulate the relationship of dance to the other arts and to the basic learning process, (3) approach dance as arts educators — not just as teachers of movement, and (4) accept the challenge of including aesthetic elements in the selection of lesson content and in the structure of the learning process. (p. 44)

Including aesthetic elements need not be as intimidating as it may first appear to the physical education specialist or the classroom teacher. Aesthetic elements include as qualities balance, contrast, symmetry, and harmony. These qualities are present in other art forms and can easily be applied to a movement performance. McColl (1979) offers a number of examples of how to apply aesthetic qualities to dance:

> For example, children can create kinetic sculpture as they move their shapes in and out of the negative space created by tubular jersey bags and strips of cloth, by making a series of symmetrical and asymmetrical designs. In this way, the qualities of one art form are being infused with qualities of another art form. Another kind of catalyst that can elicit new imaginative interpretations from children is exploring movement through images created by mixing up sensory language, as in questions, "What does blue feel like? What does blue sound like? What is the taste of blue?" (p. 44)

Acquiring knowledge of aesthetic qualities and their application to creative dance can be achieved within the time frame of teacher training programs. Thus, recognizing the aesthetic nature of creative dance does not require its removal from the gymnasium or classroom (which in today's education climate may result in its removal from the curriculum) but rather a different emphasis in teacher training programs. Creative dance could still be taught by physical education specialists or classroom teachers, but if their training would include some knowledge of aesthetic qualities and the application of these qualities to creative dance, then creative dance could take its rightful place as a legitimate art form in the education curriculum.

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