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Dance and Play: Paradox or Partnership?

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In the 1980's dance educator and author Diane Lynch-Fraser wrote Danceplay (1982) which was followed by PlayDancing (1991). These two titles on, 'play' and 'dance' reveal the paradox of dance, seen as an area that requires discipline and play that is time to 'muck about' and have fun. How can these two ways of being or behaving complement each other?

The idea of dance as fun, as opposed to a discipline, reflects the perceived marginalized status dance has in education. Having fun can be dismissed by educators to ensure that dance is viewed as a bona fide area of learning. I believe however that dance and play can make complementary partners, especially during the early years. The question is: how can these two disparate entities achieve a partnership and why should such a relationship be important? This article addresses the connection between dance and play, while noting the challenges this presents for early childhood educators.

Introduction

In early childhood education, play is deemed to be valued as a worthy conduit for learning, as well as important in the holistic development of the young child (Ministry of Education, 1996; Rinaldi, 2006; Wood, 2009). The value of play in a young child's life can be found in many texts, especially those pertaining to the early years. As introduced by Wood (2009, p. 27) "One of the fundamental principles in early childhood education is the importance of play to children's learning and development". It is apparent from this statement that for Wood teaching and learning in multiple areas can be enhanced through play.

The truism 'play is a child's work' connects to a statement made by Paley (2004, p. 1), who remarks: "play is the work of children", which is the first line that captures the reader in her book, *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. Play, however, goes beyond simply being a child's work. Play is at the heart of what children do with great intensity and integrity as they commit themselves to a process of experimentation, investigation, make-believe and developing relationships with others. Paley, forewarns however that play is in danger of disappearing if teachers are not prepared to enter this world alongside the children. As Paley (2004, p. 8) states, "play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits . . . a nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative, and social connectivity in young children". Wood (2009) endorses this perspective, that while play should be part of pedagogical approaches with young children, achieving good quality play in practice presents a challenge to educators who either view play as less important than other areas of learning or find it difficult to support children's play as a reciprocal or interactive partner.

Arts educators and authors Bresler & Thompson (2002) postulate that play is inseparable from the child's life and the social and cultural conditions under which it is generated and experienced. Play contributes to the young child's construction of the self, socially and creatively as well as physically, emotionally and mentally. Martin Buber (1965, p. 106) wisely observed



everything children encounter educates: “nature and the social context, the house and the street, language and custom . . . music and science, play and dream-everything together”. Swedish dance educator Lindqvist (2001) adds that the act of playing is a form of meaning-making for the child.

Finnish dance educator Anttila (2007) refers to play as part of the child’s culture and views child culture as something quite different from the culture created by adults. Crain (2003) suggests that considerable research shows children between the ages of three and eight years are highly motivated to develop their bodies and senses, and, thus, their artistic selves. Crain (2003, p. 4) goes on to say that “young children love to sing, dance, draw, make up poems and engage in dramatic play...” and that it is during this time that creativity and imagination blossoms. Egan (1999) supports this view pointing out that the ability to imagine is strongly evident in a young child’s formative years and deployed with strong urges of creative energy often found in play. A strong proponent of the value of imagination and creativity, and thus play, in early childhood education can be found in the Reggio Emilia approach. Malaguzzi (the founder of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy) claims that when it comes to the genesis and meaning of creativity: “children . . . are the best evaluators and the most sensitive judges of the values and usefulness of creativity” (in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 75). Children, Malaguzzi continues, are less attached to their ideas and are capable of exploring, discovering, constructing and re-constructing on a continuous basis. Within this process children create new meanings and a willingness to venture beyond the known, allowing creativity to emerge from imaginative play.

As Malaguzzi suggests, creativity becomes a holistic experience brought about through ways of thinking, knowing, and making choices: aspects which are found in play (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Creativity, Malaguzzi proposes, can be hard to notice when it is dressed up in the everyday clothing of children and can appear and disappear. There is no magic spell, but a belief in the capabilities of the child, where playfulness and thoughtfulness are seen as complementary partners in the creative spirit. In the Reggio Emilia centres generous time is devoted to children’s free and symbolic play (Gandini & Edwards, 2001), so that children are able to be self-directed, enriching their lives and sense of autonomy. Reggio Emilia teachers act as attentive responders to children’s intellectual and expressive capacities during these playful exchanges, becoming observers and interpreters, rather than directors (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Problematizing notions of play

From a developmental point of view, play has been regarded as a tenet of a child-centered pedagogy. Play (especially symbolic play) has become a conduit for learning through self-direction. However, as Cannella (1997) contends, a child-centered approach based on the concept of readiness, privileges developmental psychology and masks the control adults have in ascertaining the type of play children engage in. Play, appropriated and sanitized by adults can be seen as acceptable ‘curriculum’ within early childhood settings. Constructing environments and provision of certain play materials can effectively dictate play as beneficial to children’s lives or it can become an illusionary concept (Cannella, 1997).

Brooker (2008) prompts us to think about a multiplicity of views from a cultural perspective, where play is not viewed as conducive to learning. Not everyone is convinced about the effectiveness of play as a tool for learning, as they believe it is better to spend time working rather than ‘wasting time’ in



play. These views of play are often ingrained in the lives of those who already feel they are disadvantaged within a particular culture or society and who reify the notion of play as an all-encompassing Eurocentric construction (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

Under some circumstances play can act as a site of resistance where children assert their power over adult control (Grace & Tobin, 1997). In situations where play is sanctioned by teachers and, thereby, shrouded as 'work', children can find pleasure in subversive ways by employing strategies in their play that transgress what is 'appropriate.' For example, children's play often draws on popular culture encompassing hero figures to explore the combative nature of good versus evil. Through the process of play-fighting the lines between fantasy and reality can become blurred, thus pushing the boundaries between rules and freedom. Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence (2007), in an account about children's fascination with 'He-Man' figures and other commercialized play items, show how children embody the contemporary world and all that it entails. Whilst children are acted upon by that world they also act on it and make meaning by using whatever resources are at hand including super-heroes and characters drawn from fantasy.

When viewed from this sociocultural-historical perspective, play, as for other experiences in children's lives, requires a paradigmatic shift from prior constructivist developmental practices (Fleer, Anning, & Cullen, 2009). Accordingly, learning and pedagogy is shaped by institutional, social, cultural and historical influences, which necessitates an increased emphasis on understanding cultural beliefs inherent in homes and communities. Consequently, early childhood educators need to adopt a critical role in discerning between 'teacher directed' and 'child initiated' approaches to address who is privileged and has access to the necessary cultural capital and who is disadvantaged. Such a view challenges the discourse surrounding play as a modality of learning or fun for all children.

Dance and play

Both play and dance, although supported by substantive academic research and theoretical knowledge, can be seen as frivolous areas within learning environments, and thus, excess to requirements within a curriculum program already overcrowded with other demands related to teaching and learning (Koff, 2000; Wood, 2009; Wright, 2003). As reminded by Egan (1999, p. 88) education has "largely ignored those things that children do best intellectually . . . those imaginative skills attached to metaphor and image generation" that often arise in the arts and children's play. Anttila (2003) also questions the status of play in teaching where play or playfulness is not viewed as true education.

When it comes to dance, the concept of playing, or having fun can have a compounded negativity. In her address to the National Dance Education Organization, dance educator and researcher Stinson (2005) talked about the reasons why we dance. These reasons included aspects such as feeling good, bringing joy, and experiencing satisfaction. Stinson also referred to the advocacy that teachers engage in to justify why dance should exist in education. Some of the reasons she gave related to being well adjusted, healthier, better at problem-solving, enhancing creativity, appreciative of diversity, as well as improving levels of academic achievement.

Schools, nevertheless, as Stinson opines, focus on economic sustainability and providing children with opportunities to do well financially. As a



consequence, play, the arts (dance), and creativity become secondary to those designated skills that are of practical value for future society. Whereas, Stinson (2005) considers what schools could be where one major purpose of schools “might be, *should be*, learning how to live a meaningful, satisfying human life – what some people might call happiness.” As Stinson (2005, p. 83) continues to point out: “Isn’t this what we have been trying to get away from, in order to show everyone that dance education is about *important* things, not fun and games”?

These thoughts coincide with my own views about the reasons why dance tends not to be seen as a component of play. As a consequence, dance can be found to be less prevalent in many educational settings, especially during the early years. While there has been widespread growth in early childhood education, a recognition of the importance of the formative years of life, parents, and some educators, often seek and secure a certain type of education for their children. Through increased pressures in society parents see success in life as learning applicable skills that will help create career opportunities. Notably absent from these aspirations are play and the arts; specifically dance. Consequently, the roles of play and dance in a young child’s life can become truncated, with less opportunity provided for either of these areas to exist, let alone come together.

Lynch-Fraser (1982; 1991) noted that movement or dance has immense meaning in young children’s lives, and play, as an outlet for children’s thinking and feelings, reinforces what she defines as the magical link between movement and creativity. Drawing on the work of Liljan Espenak, Lynch-Fraser aims at nurturing the whole child enabling dance like play, to arise and be recognized as spontaneous and in the moment as otherwise, if these dancing moments go unnoticed and are not reciprocated, the dance dissolves. Play also deserves recognition as a relevant form of expression about the child’s world and if not responded to or validated, can become relegated to minimal moments in a young child’s life or dismissed entirely. Hence, both dance and play require some serious re-consideration, especially within early childhood educational settings. If the connections between dance and play are not recognized, dance and play will continue to be viewed as separate entities.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable odds, the idea of play and dance, and specifically play in relation to dance education, has been given special attention by a number of dance educators and researchers interested in the correlation between these two areas (see, Anttila, 2007; Bond & Stinson, 2001; 2007; Hanna, 1982; 1986; 1988; 2006; Lindqvist, 2001; Schiller & Meiners, 2003; Stinson, 1997; 2005; Wu, 2005). For Bond & Stinson (2001; 2007) the concept of play became a source of in-depth examination when the word fun was aligned with dance. In a study of dance with adolescents, Bond & Stinson (2001; 2007) discovered that a highly motivating factor for engagement in dance was having fun. At first, this finding does not appear to be surprising given that dance in schools could offer an alternative approach to learning for some children. However, the question arose that if dance was only seen as ‘fun’ there was also the concern that dance, as an area of learning, becomes devalued. Herein lies the dilemma, because when ‘fun’ is aligned with dance, but tends to threaten the status of dance, it is possible that the concept of play can also be seen as less noteworthy. Whilst the study conducted by Bond & Stinson (2001; 2007) was with an older age group, the significance of having fun was still important and indicated that having fun, or being playful, provided a well-needed injection of motivation. Such a finding offers promise for both the status of dance and play, not just in the young child’s life, but also throughout our lives.



Other correlations were discovered that support the union of dance and play as discussed further by Stinson (2005). Stinson noted that when fun becomes an outcome of dance, a connection to the idea of happiness can be made. Stinson (2005, p. 84) referring to the work of Edward Hallowell (2002), defined two sources of happiness: “the ability to create and sustain joy, and the ability to overcome adversity”. To achieve these abilities Hallowell outlines five steps: “connection, play, practice, mastery, and recognition”. Play was seen as an opportunity to learn and to sustain joy, taking risks and learning to accept failure, co-operating, as well as building imagination and confidence (Stinson, 2005).

Elsewhere, Stinson captured the young child’s world of play and connected this world to dance. In her groundbreaking book *Dance for Young Children: Finding the Magic in Movement* Stinson (1988) reminds us of the young child’s interest in the world, where children seem to have, what she terms, special access to another reality. This other reality is something I would call the imagined world often found during moments of play. When children are engaged in their own play or things that are of interest to them, children can sustain prolonged periods of involvement. For this reason, Stinson (2002, p. 159) believed that in order to provide appropriate and meaningful dance experiences for young children, it is useful to connect to the “real or imaginary world of young children”. In other words, dance must have significance for children and relate to their ideas and concrete experiences, experiences found in daily life and play (Stinson, 1988; 2002). Equally, children need time and space to develop and sustain their own interests in dance and play (Purcell Cone, 2009; Stinson, 2002).

Schiller & Meiners (2003) agree with these ideas when referring to dance for young children. They suggest that because the body is a sensory site for learning during the early years, young children learn about themselves, others and the world in which they live through the kinesthetic acquisition of knowledge, values and attitudes. This early awareness of the moving body reflects the things children encounter during exploration and play. When stimulated by the world around them, young children “are inspired to make movement responses” as well as responding to the inner world of thought, imagination and feeling (Schiller & Meiners, 2003, p. 92). It is salient to remember however, as the authors identify, that pleasurable or disagreeable engagement with dance, shapes our attitude and the value we attach to both dance and associated stimuli, such as play.

Anttila (2003; 2007), alluding to the links between play and dance, notes that when aligned with pedagogical approaches found in dance, there is often a disconnect between dance and play. Anttila adds: “Lindqvist asserts that dance and play should be linked together and that dance education for young children should originate in children’s play” (2007, p. 870). From her observations Antilla sees that the emphasis on Laban’s (1976) abstract movement vocabulary, used as a dominant language in dance education, can be seen as far removed from the concrete reality of children’s lives. When dance is connected to children’s play the expressive content is unquestionably different (Anttila, 2007).

Hanna (1982; 1986; 1988; 2006) refers to the concept of play in relation to dance and addresses the culture of play as part of the social construction of the child’s world. Hanna (1988; 2006) sees dance as a form of play. Just as in young children’s dramatic play, the creative ideas expressed in dance, and the opportunity to try things out, have no impact on real life and the possibility of failure, because if things do not work out another dance work



can be created. Hanna perceives that these attributes of play can benefit our lives, where dance as an activity of creation can contribute to the alleviation or even prevention of stress. Opportunities to 'play' with ideas in dance can "contribute to positive self-perception, body image, and esteem" (Hanna, 1988, p. 19), as well as enhancing health and holistic well-being.

The early childhood curriculum

For those involved in early childhood education the concept of the young child's holistic well-being and notions of having fun or enjoying learning should be paramount. Play or playing provides that foundation. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is founded upon the principles of the competent and confident child, something that, no doubt, has its genesis in the belief that feeling good about oneself is worthwhile cherishing.

Nestled within the framework of *Te Whāriki*, play, the arts, and creativity become embedded among a myriad of experiences, which occur in the early childhood environment. Such examples of the attributes of play, involvement in the arts and being creative can be found in the strand of well-being, where: "children develop an increasing ability to determine their own actions and make their own choices" or "a growing capacity to tolerate and enjoy a moderate degree of change, surprises, uncertainty, and puzzling events" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 50). On some occasions there are more specific correlations made to play and the arts such as in the strand of exploration, where children develop "increasing confidence and a repertoire for symbolic, pretend, or dramatic play" and "the knowledge that playing with ideas and materials, with no objective in mind, can be an enjoyable, creative, and valid approach to learning" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 84).

The most obvious link to dance in the curriculum is also located in the strand of exploration where it is stated that "children develop increasing control over their bodies, including development of locomotor skills, non-locomotor skills, manipulative skills and increasing agility, co-ordination, and balance" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 86). It is noted here that playing is a factor when it states that children develop "strategies for actively exploring and making sense of the world by using their bodies . . . confidence with moving in space, moving to rhythm, and playing near and with others" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 86). Having said this however, creative opportunities that could be found in dance may might be found in awareness of play as an initiator of dance is not entertained in the interpretation of these learning outcomes.

Conversely, if the principles and beliefs that underpin *Te Whāriki* are upheld, and the vision of the child is one that encompasses a capable and affirming image, dance in conjunction with play should exist together with all other areas of learning and experiencing. In other words, an empowering curriculum that offers choice based on children's interests will enable children to experience dance that originates from their play. The view of the competent child provides a new platform for understanding the place of play in the child's world and changes the perception of the child from a passive receptor of adult oriented learning into an active agent of his/her own learning (Anttila, 2007). As a result, children's self-initiated play can become a vital source for dance.

In accordance with the studies undertaken by Bond and Stinson (2001; 2007), Lindqvist (2001), Stinson (1997), and Wu (2005), Anttila (2007, p. 876) posits "that dance education could be more closely connected to play",



which she sees aligned to dialogue by the very nature of play as being essentially dialogical. Anttila (2007) suggests that in order to elevate the significance of play in dance education, the children's participation is fundamental, which, in turn, is dependent on the child's background, culture and his/her opportunities to take part in play. In other words, play is seen in the same way that dance can be seen as significant in and of itself (Stinson, 1988; 2002). As Anttila (2007, p. 876) further elucidates: "This kind of reasoning could perhaps help dance educators [*or early childhood educators*] in their efforts to appreciate the child as a subject; reversing the rationale of dance education from predefined aims and contents to something that Bond & Deans (1997) refer to as emergent curriculum".

Apropos of this substantiated belief however, finding the link between dance and play may be an elusive exercise for some early childhood educators if their own experiences of dance have been limited or, even more so, shaped by a more authoritarian or disciplinarian approach to learning dance. Whilst the notion of the child as subject, and thereby being seen an active agent in making decisions about learning, may be embraced by many early childhood educators, the concepts of play and dance can still appear to be unequivocally separate. Prior experiences in the arenas of both dance and play feed into these perceptions and impact future directions of practice.

My early ventures into dance

My own ventures into dance with young children came about through an array of incidences where I discovered 'how to teach' dance as a burgeoning early childhood educator. I believed my approach was essentially playful as I connected to the children's interests. On looking back this may have been an illusion as teachers and authors of dance guided my work with young children. In effect, this eliminated the genesis of dance arising from the children's interests. Admittedly, these authors' ideas appeared to stem from play, or provided a playful atmosphere for exploring the designated dance elements. Nevertheless, the children I worked with did not initiate the content of the experiences although their ideas contributed to the dance activities.

One of the first known aficionados of dance for young children that came into my life during my very early years of teaching, was the work done by Mary Joyce. In her book *First Steps in Teaching Creative Dance to Children* (Joyce, 1980) the author puts forth reasons why we dance. She states that dance "can be a leap for joy . . . or a work of art" but the aim is "to communicate through movement" (p. 1). In Joyce's eyes the individual is the originator of the dance, the composer or creator, rather than interpreter or performer. As Joyce (1980) evinces, creative dance evolves from the "craft of self-expression" and as the "expression of the inner being" (p. 2). Such a statement affirms the child as an active participator and creator, the subject, rather than a passive object, who connects to the positive attributes of play. Joyce (1980, p. 5) continues that dance: "plays an important part in life, building self-image, self-awareness, and self-direction. This *self* is not only the body, not only the mind, not only the feelings – it is *all* of the child". Clearly, the same can be said of play where the ideas, expression and experimentation come from the very core of the child.

Joyce's work influenced much of my practice in teaching dance to young children, although this was prefaced by some earlier discoveries about teaching dance to children drawn from my own experiences as a dancer and an emerging early childhood educator. Perhaps the book that supported me during my most neophyte stage of learning to teach dance, as well as



learning to teach, was *The Art of Learning through Movement* by Anne & Paul Barlin (1971). The photographic depictions of children's dancing in the book were a readily accessible avenue to grasp the concept being shared. I was guided by imagery in the same way the children were being facilitated in their dance by the authors. A poignant message in this book was the idea of listening to stories, which "is a child's way of learning" (Barlin & Barlin 1971, p. 9). Using my own interpretive lens, I saw this as listening to the stories of the child, which aligns with children's dramatic play. In yet another book by Anne Barlin (1989), co-authored by Nurit Kalev, Barlin develops her approach to dance for children through playing and inventing games. She saw enthusiasm and excitement as ingredients in dance. The idea being to have fun, explore new experiences, stretch the imagination, keep curiosity alive, and exercise creativity.

I soon discovered as I explored and experimented in dance with young children that when given the opportunity, much of the dance that arose was from the children's own ideas originating from playful experimentation. From this perspective, dance that arises within an early childhood emergent curriculum (Bond & Deans, 1997) is not always dance that has been prearranged or planned for by the teacher. Dance, in this sense, is part of the child's culture and play, and is, in fact, what can make dance enticing and fun (Anttila, 2007; Stinson, 1997). For this kind of emergent dance to happen, children need to have access to the cultural capital to ensure their agency can be exercised. Not to honour the child in her/his playful and creative endeavours in dance is negating the powerful and competent image of the child. Hence, there is a pressing need to ensure those who work with young children have sufficient knowledge about dance in education as well as a critical understanding of the meaning of play. Teachers who understand the affordances play offers, as well as knowing what dance is, can assure more enriched learning opportunities occur through the transference of knowledge across different contexts.

A focus on integrating children's interests as a catalyst for learning is a high priority for early childhood curriculum programs. Play and its interrelationship with what children are learning and doing enables teachers to connect to children's interests in and through dance experiences. Play, which is constructed and socially mediated through participation in shared practices, becomes a conduit between the 'real world' of children's lives and the imagined worlds of 'what could or might be', worlds that can be manifested through dance.

Concluding thoughts

Dance and play creates a paradoxical position, for the perceptions of both dance and play can be in conflict with the social and educational ideologies demanded of teachers. Concomitantly, both dance and play can also be in conflict with each other. In the interface between these tensions new ways of envisaging the interconnections between dance and play can emerge. It is the task of educators, and more specifically, early childhood educators, to recognize the coalition between dance and play and provide opportunities for these interrelationships to occur. Whilst existing paradoxically, dance and play can cross the divide and become complementary partners during the early years of education.

It is apparent that having fun and learning are not exclusive of each other and that when facilitating dance experiences, teachers need to consider how children make choices about what they do when they dance as well as why they dance. I believe that the connection between dance and play offers not



only the opportunity to make the experience enjoyable or fun, but also meaningful, whilst enhancing self-understanding, our relationships with others and the world. For this reason the child's world and the culture of play are integral to the creation of children's dance. When children are afforded the opportunity to make decisions and have control of how their dance experiences evolve, there is a deeper sense of authenticity because the process has arisen from children's lives, which reflects their world.

At the same time, adult sensibilities may be challenged when children's choices encompass aspects of play which are deemed outside the parameters of appropriateness, especially when built upon in dance. Despite the reservations teachers may have about the play choices children make and incorporate into their dance creations, it is imperative that the control children assume in such a process is honoured. Such an undertaking, which incorporates both risk and trust, is an empowering experience for all parties.

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