

Symposium on the Status of K-12 Dance Education: A National Perspective

By Susan W. Stinson

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Abstract:

Students spoke powerfully and passionately of enhanced understanding of self, perception of the world, and ability to respond to others.

Article:

In this issue of *Design for Arts in Education*, we examine the status of dance education from four perspectives: musician Liora Bresler, an "outsider," looks at dance programs in Illinois elementary schools; Susan Stinson presents the point of view of high school students regarding the value of their dance classes; Patricia Knowles and Rona Sande describe "model" dance programs in four different parts of the country; and Peggy Schwartz addresses the creation, growth, and demise of dance teacher certification in the state of Massachusetts, reflecting national trends in teacher education, certification requirements, and program implementation.

Patricia Knowles, coordinator

Since 1984, a multitude of reports published by various commissions and other bodies have discussed what is wrong with education and how to fix it. Many of the proposed remedies have called for more of what already exists—more homework, more testing, more time in the classroom. Some emphasize what is referred to as "cultural literacy." Others call for higher-order thinking skills. Most of the reports are motivated by concerns over America's competitiveness in the workplace and the desire to retain (or regain) supremacy in the international marketplace.

Arts educators have joined what has become known as the educational reform movement, bringing suggestions for reform of arts curricula. Ways in which the arts promote higher-order thinking skills and cultural literacy have been particularly noted.

In reading these reports and the many articles in response to them, I have been aware of those whose voices are taking part in the discourse about educational reform—political and business leaders, educational administrators, leaders of arts advocacy organizations, faculty in higher education (like me), and even a few artists and classroom teachers. Almost entirely missing from the discussion are the voices of students, the recipients of the reform. Even though some reports criticize students for their passivity in learning, minimal attempts have been made to involve students in dialogue about what is and what ought to be in schools.

As a dance educator and teacher educator, I realized that we know much more about what we think we are teaching students than we do about what students are taking from their dance experience in schools. Since my state, North Carolina, recently began to implement a mandate that dance should be offered in every school in the state (and required for every K-5 student), it seemed timely to try to enhance my own understanding of how students make sense of what goes on in the dance classroom.

I spent one class period per week as a participant observer in each of five different Dance I classes under three teachers at two high schools. (Dance I is the designation in my state for the first year of high school dance, an elective course; in the system in which I did my research, this is a semester-long course that meets for fifty-five minutes daily.) AH classes were small, with between eight and fourteen students in each. I used a qualitative methodology, and also conducted open-ended interviews, which were tape recorded and transcribed, with the three teachers and thirty-seven of the students. This included twelve African-American and eighteen white female students, with a sprinkling of white males and Asian-American and Hispanic females. Two of the teachers were white and one was African-American.[1]

The Voices of Students

Probably the word most frequently used by students to describe school was boring. Annika, for example, told me what she hated about school: "The work, and being bored all day.... Right now, I'm ... failing three of my academic subjects." However, Annika had A's and B's in her three arts classes. Francesca was another student who expressed strong dislike for school: "I just don't like it ... 'cause I'm really just not learning anything.... I used to skip school a lot.... When I... do come to school, I get A's in all my classes." Sky was particularly vivid, telling me that in her classes other than dance, "I feel like I'm dead." Madeline, one of the gifted students, said, "I'm just used to coasting through school ... in the limbo zone." Bridget's description of her history class was typical: "This man [doesn't] do [anything] but talk for fifty-five minutes.... And if you go to sleep, you get written up."

It is clear that school offers few opportunities, other than in arts and physical education classes, to move around and do things, to talk in a class discussion or in planning a project with a partner or group. When I asked Janet to respond to the idea of having only required subjects for school, with electives meeting after school, she responded in a way similar to many others: "If it's math, English, and social studies ... you don't want to go to school. It's boring, boring. So I don't think they should take those out. There'd be more dropouts and stuff."

Another point that these young students made is that many students in required classes do not wish to be there and disrupt the class for their fellow students. Michelle echoed several other respondents when she said that dance should not be a required subject

because some people would get in there and they'd just ... hate it.... And they'd probably mess around the whole time and ... make it bad for people that were trying to learn something. [Does that happen in other courses?] Yeah, most of them.

The students told me in a variety of ways that although dance existed in the larger school structure and had the same general rules, it did not seem like school. K. G. spoke clearly about this when he described dance as "a good way to get away from school.... Once you step into the auditorium, everything is kind of shattered.... It's almost like time has stood still outside of those doors." Kylie added to this when she said, "As soon as I go through that ... door, here's my other world. ... If it wasn't for that, I don't know what I'd do-just enter it when I went home." Sky spoke of freedom: "In this class ... you just learn some freedom.... You're freer to express yourself." Afrika agreed: "It's like an escape place, a place where I can just relax ... and be me and just express myself. I can be free again." When I asked if she had other places like this, she said, "There's always my home ... my family. I don't have to act or anything around them." A number of students, particularly in classes of two of the teachers, described dance as a home; for example, Britain said "[I'm] sort of myself at home in dance class." While the comparison of dance to home is positive in these statements, other things that they told me made clear that home was not a very happy place for a large number of the students. A large number were classified as "at risk."

Perhaps this is one reason why students found particular significance in a caring teacher. When I asked about similarities and differences between their dance teacher and other teachers, students spoke of the difference in caring and understanding. One way teachers demonstrate caring is by giving additional help during or after class when the students do not understand or have difficulty learning. Mercedes mentioned that the willingness

to give this help differentiated her dance teacher from others: "If there's something ... that someone doesn't understand how to do or doesn't understand why we're doing it, she explains it." Kristen told me that her dance teacher at school was different even from studio dance teachers she had had, but she acknowledged the significance of class size, a point mentioned by several other students: "She's wining to work with you more on a one-to-one basis ... 'cause the class is so small that she has time to do that." Monique added, "She's real understanding, she's real patient.... There's a lot of teachers here that don't care. And Ms. [name omitted] cares."

Students said that their dance teachers not only helped them with problems in the class, but helped with personal problems as well. As Janet commented:

She's different 'cause she's young. She knows the things we go through; ... so if we come in with an attitude, she'll say, "What's wrong?" She understands, not like other teachers ... well ... some teachers really care. But she asks us what's wrong with us.

Onan said, "I think she's one of my youngest teachers.... She likes to talk with us ... and listen to what we have to say." Students of all three teachers commented about the youth of their teachers, whose ages ranged from the mid-twenties to near forty.

Annika said, "I feel like I can talk to her a lot more about anything, not just dance." Annika also felt the weekly journal assignments gave her a chance to "talk" to her dance teacher: "She really reads it and takes time to try to understand what you're going through."

The students described a caring teacher not only as one who helps them with problems. Having high expectations for students was also valued; students of two of the teachers described their dance instructor in these terms. Said Francesca, "None of my other teachers really care. . . . But she makes you learn, she pushes you too . . . 'cause she knows you can do it." Madeline clarified differences by stating that her dance teacher "expects us to do it, where other teachers expect certain students not to."

Both Janet and Michelle described their dance teachers as "more of a friend than a teacher." Nevertheless, Michelle said, "She's stiff strict and that's good. . . . She takes charge of a class. She doesn't let them get out of hand." In other words, one way a teacher shows caring is by preventing students from disrupting the learning process.

Relationships with fellow students frequently offered another area of difference between dance and the rest of school. Kristen told me:

You don't have to worry about other people in other classes. In geometry, who cares what the guy next to you is doing? ... But in dance, you want to make sure that what they're doing is--good--help them out, if you can.

K. G. added, "In other classes I just kind of sit back and do my work. In dance, your work is to cooperate with other people, to work together in a group and to talk."

Kara told me about a specific activity that helped transcend boundaries:

The second day, everybody was very uncomfortable ... and nobody really knew anybody else, and there were all sorts of prejudices there. And [the teacher] got out the drum, and she started playing.... We did a human knot-and for a little while, all of those prejudices kind of went away, and we were just people, having fun together ... to the rhythm of the drum ... and it didn't matter what kind of classes you were taking; it just mattered that you were here now.

Brittany stated that one reason for the difference between dance and other classes was that there were not any "troublemakers" in the dance class. Certainly more of these students chose to be there than is true in a required

course. However, some students indicated that the choice had been minimal. This was particularly true for the second semester, when a number of the students told me they were in dance because they had failed a yearlong course, and dance was one of only two or three semester-long courses offered that period. Either they had already taken the other alternative(s), or dance seemed to them the least negative of the choices.

Mercedes brought the metaphor of family to her description of peer relationships:

When you start to know everybody, you're in an atmosphere where you feel safe-and secure. It's kind of like ... when you have a security blanket when you're little.... After a couple of years the blanket is part of you. And dance that's what it was like.... You get to feel like part of each other. So you feel like, when you dance in front of them, it's like dancing in front of your grandma or something.

The teacher, then, and in many cases, the students, helped to provide a caring, supportive group-even a "family" to some. In addition, dance itself helped some students tolerate the painful or difficult aspects of their lives. As Sandy told me, "Dance is just an ease to your problems." Others said that dance class offers a kind of release from tensions of home and school. Amanda commented, "It's a good way to express yourself and release energy. . . . You ... get to be a person there, more than anywhere else. Like, some classes you get to be yourself but there are so many other people there you don't get much of a chance." Monique added, "It allows me to search for different parts of Monique that I didn't know I had."

When they spoke of learning in dance, the students recalled some concepts or lessons related to the material of movement, the crafts of improvisation and choreography, and the history and styles of dance. A few particular vocabulary words came into the conversation: sustained, percussive, focus. Britain told me most about aspects of learning that might be referred to as "dance appreciation" or "dance criticism":

I used to think, you go see ballet, it's all boring and everything-[but] I liked it. I wanted t again. I've been learning ... about the different things in movement.... When we had our performance, if I had looked at it, maybe last year sometime, I wouldn't have known anything about focus, or ... extension or that kind of stuff. When I was watching, I was sort of criticizing in my head. [For example] "They're not holding that focus." I was thinking about all of those things I could see.

Kyteler spoke of learning dance theory. She had a much longer list, however, of what she was learning:

I've learned technique. And I've learned that I can do a lot more things than I give myself credit for. I've learned that I'm a lot more flexible than I thought I was. I've learned that I can take the lead in making things. I've learned that I like doing things like this. I've learned that I can take what I've learned in dance and apply it to other things-say, psychology. I've learned that I can work well with people that I don't know very well. I've learned that sweat won't kill you.... I've learned that I do live inside these bones and skin and I can make them work for me, and I can use them in various ways, and I'd like to explore these ways more thoroughly.

It was clear from observing the classes taught by two of the instructors that their students had developed skills in dance technique and choreography. But the students spoke primarily of aspects of their learning that went far beyond this:

Afrika: You're learning a lot about your body and a lot about your inner self, how you feel. ... You're learning to observe things more clearly, like maybe the pages of a book waving when the air is blowing on it. It gives you a whole 'nother way of mind, a whole 'nother way of thinking.

Kristen: She's teaching us how to be ourselves, how to ... give everything you've got, instead of keeping it all within yourself ... how to work with others ... and have patience ... and understanding, cooperation-things you can't get in world history.

Dionne: It kind of helps in everything 'cause I learn how to concentrate and focus-even like -focusing more in class.... I probably learn how to work with others too.... [Dance] kind of helps you find yourself.

Michelle: It makes you aware of different things, and it opens up your mind.

Annika: [We're learning] self-control, understanding of [our] bodies, understanding [our] selves.

Damien commented that he had learned that dance is "discipline, it's not just go crazy." He added, "I think it's more educational than any class you could ever take."

The students seemed to be telling me that some things had happened for them in dance class that, for the most part, were not happening elsewhere at school-things that sounded pretty important to me, even life-changing. But I was surprised to hear that they did not seem to value these things as highly as I would have expected. As they spoke to me of school, of their lives, and of their thoughts about the future, I began to realize how school fitted into their lives. With few exceptions, dance in school was assimilated into this view. Although, except for the contact with friends, students experienced school as boring and largely meaningless in their present lives, they believed it was essential to their future. As Kristen told me, "You have to go to school 'cause you want to be somebody." Bridget said she returned to school because she did not want to be flipping hamburgers for the rest of her life.

There seemed to be three ways that they believed school prepared them for the future. The first had to do with the most basic, functional life needs, which could probably be fulfilled by mathematics and English classes on a fairly low level. As John said,

English ... you need to know how to talk and read and stuff. Math ... when you get older you have to pay bills and stuff. You need to know how to add and subtract and divide and all that stuff. And when you start paying taxes, you have to know how to add up things and subtract stuff.

To college-bound students, courses that were required for college also held value, even if they were not appreciated or enjoyed. Janet indicated that mathematics is "like, in your future. Dance is not really in your future.... It's not like you're going to have to take it in college."

Courses were also valued if they were connected to a student's career plans. Toba, for example, commented that the arts are "not essential.... You're just taking them for your spare time ... unless you really want to be a dancer or a musician."

Students take most courses in school because they are required either for graduation or for college admission, although they do not think that all of these should be required; they had difficulty in understanding why they "needed" many of the courses they took in high school. Britain told me that many students "feel their time is wasted ... like taking math, when you don't want to have anything to do with it in your own profession."

Electives seemed to fill one of three roles: career exploration/preparation, personal interest, or fun and relaxation. When I asked Annika if taking the course would make any difference in her life, she said, "Who knows? I could grow up to be a famous actor or a dancer." To a similar question, Stephanie replied, "I'm not sure-can you get a dance degree?"

Personal interest was mentioned frequently as the major reason one should take dance, and lack of it cited as a reason not to require dance. A typical comment was heard from Sunshine: "Some students just aren't into dancing." Afrika said that the arts "are important to me. But then again, to others, they may not think so. [Other courses] are more basic." And Michelle concluded, "I think it just depends on what you're into."

Some students indicated that they took dance not only for personal interest, but because it gave them a chance to have fun and relax. As Sandy indicated, "You've got to have fun sometime." John gave a traditional explanation of fun in dance: "I talk more. And just act sillier than in a regular class. " For most students, however, when I probed what they meant by "fun," I received responses of more depth than one would ordinarily expect. Several students said that the fun was connected to learning. Others indicated that dance was fun because it was "new and different"; Stephanie commented, "I've never done a chair dance, and it's fun. But it's hard.... It was fun. It was different." K. G. said that what makes dance fun is

the people ... just to be able to be there and to be able to do the work together, as a group, and to be able to produce something from nothing, is, you know, really a lot of fun. To be able to choreograph your own thing and feel it-take ... nothing, and turn it into a performance. That's really fun.

Relaxation was particularly mentioned by students who were in higher-track academic classes. Afrika spoke of relaxation, but learning was not excluded: "Dance is a way for me to relax ... forget chemistry for a while, forget ... it's a learning process for me. I get to do something new, something different." Stephanie said that dance is "just a way for me to relax and calm down from the day." Without electives, she felt, "people would be so tensed up that they wouldn't be able to do really good in academic subjects."

I had expected to find that students might not value dance as highly as courses that they saw as more difficult. Most students told me that they worked as hard in dance as they did in other courses. Some, like Francesca, indicated that they worked harder in dance: "If you go into world geography ... you can get an A, but you have to work in dance." Only a few made an admission like Britain's: "Other subjects are a little harder . . . 'cause if you study, maybe it [doesn't] stick." They also did not seem to particularly value other courses that were harder, and most indicated that dance would be less appealing if it required more reading and writing. John revealed this clearly when he noted, "I don't think anybody would take it if they knew they were going to have to write a lot of papers and study a lot."

Only a few students indicated that they valued education in the broader sense of the liberal arts. Afrika said that dance classes would "broaden people's mind," and Alex noted that "just to learn anything cultural like that is going to make a difference." But a number of students indicated that dance would make or had made a difference in their lives in other ways. Amanda said, "I don't tend to get as embarrassed about things as I used to." Mercedes said, "I've learned to accept people for who they are and not what grade they're in. And I'm easier to work with now. I used to be ... real stubborn.... Taking dance, I think I grew up." Francesca thought dance would help her in her goal of being a lawyer: "It's shown me how to ... really get along with other people, and it takes more than one person to achieve a goal." She also stated that working hard in dance was good preparation: "I'm going to have to work the hardest that I can to defend them." Britain thought dance would help her be a better psychiatrist: "It may make me more sensitive, I think. You know, it just does that. It makes you more aware of feelings and emotions." Lynette saw a broader application: "You know more about yourself and the things that you can do.... The things you thought you could do, you can do if you put your mind to it." And Brittany added that dance had made a difference in

caring and how you feel about people.... My mom and my boyfriend ... have seen a difference in me since I was in dance, 'cause I'm more caring. I cared, but now I see how their feelings are, and I try to help them.

Reflections

As I read the words of the students again and again, I am struck by the reasonableness of what they are asking for:

- to be stimulated, to learn;
- to have a sense of meaning in what they are being taught;

- to be treated with understanding-to be cared for;
- and to be able to be themselves. This involves conditions of both security (being accepted as one ought to be in one's own family) and freedom (to express themselves).

It certainly is easy to be critical of adolescents who seem to want rewards without working for them or who want freedom without responsibility. It is also easy to be critical of young people who were raised on "Sesame Street" and seek to be constantly entertained. But in dance class, at least, most students found pleasure in working hard because the conditions listed above were largely met. And they claim to be bored only by the sort of teaching techniques that most of us would find soporific, or by not learning anything, or by not seeing any purpose in what they are being asked to learn.

The students' expectations seem reasonable unless, as some theorists point out,[2] schooling is designed to prepare them for a future world of work in which they will have to passively accept boring tasks and trivial rules for no purpose other than a paycheck. Although students did not indicate that they expect this kind of future, they did give evidence of a paradox in which experiences that they found personally meaningful and valuable were not necessarily what they saw as important in terms of their future. They seem to believe that school is a means to an end, something to be wearily tolerated for thirteen years in order to get a payoff. While they would like it to be more pleasant, they are, for the most part, not questioning their underlying belief about the purpose of schooling. When they have drastically different experiences, such as in dance class, they seem to separate the experience from the rest of school. Dance class and other personally meaningful activities become a temporary escape, allowing them to tolerate the rest of their hours in school. Several said that cutting out electives like dance would lead to more dropouts.

Much of the reform in arts education is directed at helping the arts become part of the core curriculum. Some arts education leaders have suggested that the arts still exist on the periphery of education because they are viewed as mostly affective, and that one way to bring them into the educational core is to focus more on the disciplines of art history, criticism, production, and aesthetics.[3] However, the students in my study spoke most powerfully and passionately when they spoke of learning which, while it took place in the context of dance education, went far beyond these disciplines. They spoke of enhanced understanding of self, perception of the world, and ability to respond to others-things that largely did not happen in more "academic" or discipline-based courses.

It seems clear to me that making the arts more like other academic subjects will not make them appear more valuable to students, and probably not to parents or teachers either. This is not only because of the way other subjects are taught, but because of the prevailing view that the major purposes for education are career preparation and so-called "basic skills." Students found little long-term value in other academic classes if they did not fit these purposes; for example, few saw the value of science courses unless one intended a career in science. Even if we make sure that students learn about dance-related careers, not very many students would find the pragmatic value that they think school is about. If dance became more like other subjects in terms of its content and its ambiance, and remained an elective, fewer students would be likely to select it; if it were required, it would probably function like other required courses, ineffectively serving large numbers of students.

Another choice open to dance educators is to continue on their present path, leaving their courses on the periphery, where they can try to make a difference in the lives of small numbers of students (even if most students do not recognize the long-term value of what they are learning). This choice makes several assumptions: (1) that dance courses will survive the budget cuts that so many states are having to make; (2) that classes will remain small enough that students can receive the personal attention so essential to their learning; and (3) that teachers will be not only caring but also competent enough that students can indeed learn. Admittedly, these are risky assumptions.

Ultimately I think that we as arts educators are misguided in trying to find a more secure place for ourselves and our subject matter within schooling as it presently exists. As long as education is viewed primarily as being

about competition for a top position in the workforce or a top ranking in the international marketplace, the arts are destined to remain on the periphery, and arts educators listen to their students will continue to feel that they are doing something important, but that no one seems to care.

When I attend to the voices of students, and reflect on their meaning in a personal-social context, I am convinced that we must go beyond our own self-interests in trying to assure our place in education. Instead, we must join with other educators in rethinking not only content and methodologies but also aims and purposes and structures of education. For example, while we cannot ignore the relationship between school and work, we might think about preparing students for work that is personally meaningful and satisfying; this implies changes not only in schools but in the work world as well.

I would suggest that we begin by asking ourselves two questions framed by curriculum theorist James B. Macdonald: What does it mean to be human? How shall we live together?[4] Focusing on such questions would allow us to go beyond the limits of vocational preparation, cultural literacy, and even higher-order thinking skills as primary goals for education and allow us to think about what matters most in our lives and those of our children. It would also allow us to see that, regardless of the subject, how we teach is also what we are teaching—about self, others, and the world we share. It would allow us to think about education in ways implied by the words of my respondents—as relationship, as wideawakeness, as liberation. I would hope that all educators, including dance educators, would have a voice in such discussion, thinking both critically and creatively about how we might reconstruct schooling. I would also hope that the voices of students would be brought into such discourse.

Notes:

1. Further information about the methodology and aspects of findings not reported here are available from the author: Susan W. Stinson, Associate Professor of Dance, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina 27412.
2. Svi Shapiro, *Between Capitalism and Democracy: Educational Policy and the Crisis of the Welfare State* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1990).
3. Elliott W. Eisner, *The Role of Discipline-Based Art Education in America's Schools* (Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1988); and *Getty Center for Education in the Arts, Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools* (Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1985).
4. James B. Macdonald, "Value Bases and Issues for Curriculum," in *Curriculum Theory: Proceedings*, ed. Alex Molnar and John A. Zahorek (Curriculum Theory Conference, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 11-14 November 1976) (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977).