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Flamenco Dance in Primary Education: A living theory approach to dance education

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Abstract

Linda Vargas is a flamenco performer and dance educator and Demi Fernandez is a flamenco guitarist and music educator. Working together for 25 years, we have conducted numerous flamenco dance workshops at schools in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. We became increasingly concerned with the challenges and constraints which seemed to be affecting dance in education. We began to reflect on the educational and social factors challenging dance education in these schools and decided to conduct a qualitative action research enquiry to explore our educational concern about how dance education was being implemented at schools. We used our knowledge of flamenco and dance education to devise a series of eight classes for primary school learners from diverse backgrounds. Our reflections on this process highlighted for us the potential of flamenco dance for personal and educational development as well as the opportunity it can provide for learners from diverse backgrounds to be able to come together in a way which is enjoyable and encourages cross-cultural socialisation.

Keywords: Dance Education; Diversity; Flamenco; Living Theory Action Research

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Introduction

As flamenco performers and dance/music educators we have been invited to give numerous dance/music workshops and performances at primary and high schools, primarily in KwaZulu-Natal. During these workshops and performances we became increasingly concerned with how dance education is in many instances being marginalised in the curriculum. Even though dance is a feature in the Arts and Culture curriculum (Department of Education, 2002), it appeared to us that the implementation thereof was challenging for the majority of teachers.

South Africa has emerged out of a divided past in which people were boxed and labelled according to race and gender and in which thinking and culture were colonised by the dominant regime. During the course of our work in schools, we observed how disrespect for diversity is still discernable in many individuals and social formations, a fact that negatively impacts on dance in the school curriculum. We observed many instances where students were reluctant to learn 'someone else's dance' or a dance form which was different from their inherited culture. This seemed to place constraints on teachers who were aware of this resistance. For example, when Indian dance was selected many learners from African or European cultures would show certain resistance and when classical ballet was selected many showed resistance due to negative cultural and gender perceptions of classical ballet. In short, we observed that many teachers, and therefore their learners, were approaching dance education in a way which still evidenced what we observed as 'boxed' thinking.

During our workshops, we encountered further evidence of this boxed thinking in the gender stereotypes that prevail in certain cultures. The perception was often that boys do not dance, that dance is effeminate, or that certain dances are restricted for males or females only. South African dance educator Liliene Loots (1995) has explored some of the gender gaps and stereotypes that came to be associated with dance in the past, and has found that many of these issues are still evident in South Africa (p. 175). She suggests that assumptions about what is appropriate feminine behaviour and what is not appropriate masculine behaviour are heavily embedded in the stereotyping involved with classical ballet training and appear to have infiltrated other dance forms as well. In our experience this is so. The teachers we interacted with mentioned that many boys were often reluctant to have their masculinity challenged by what they perceived to be a feminine activity.

There are those who believe dance education should aim for and achieve professional standards and there are those who believe it should mainly embrace educational values (Smith-Autard, 1994). We believe this division continues to incapacitate the progress and successful implementation of dance into the classroom and that dance can embrace both simultaneously. We concur with Smith-Autard (1994) who suggests that new models for dance education should be sought which encompass both the professional and educational aims.

We have observed how dance can also offer wonderful opportunities to explore the emotional worlds of different cultures or ways of being and provide opportunities for individuals to connect at a fundamental level. In many ways this is also true of sport but, unlike sport which often encourages a spirit of competitiveness, dance can penetrate to deeper levels where the emotions provide opportunities for connection (Belling, 2004; Friedman, 2006, 2008b; Jousse, 2005; Maqoma, 2001).

Soudien (2007) suggests that in addition to addressing its educational challenges, South Africa has the task of trying "to build the nation" (p. 8), a vital task for the growth and prosperity of a new democracy. In fact, one of the operational principles of the Arts and Culture curriculum in education is that of "nation-building" in which "mutual respect and tolerance ... facilitate the emergence of a shared cultural identity constituted by diversity" (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996, p. 7). Education which redresses the "past cultural biases and stereotypes" (Department of Arts, 1996, p. 11) is thus one of the goals of education in South Africa. "Dynamic interaction" of cultures is seen as possibly leading to "subtle cross pollination of ideas, words, customs, and art-forms, culinary and religious practices" (Department of Arts, 1996, p. 5). If movement is "common to all people, heedless of language and cultural barriers" (van Papendorp & Friedman, 1997, p. 5), we reasoned that perhaps dance is indeed highly suited to social interaction, healing and nation building. However, in the case of dance education we would suggest that it is not so much the curriculum that is failing, but rather that our teachers are ill-prepared for the standards they are expected to achieve.

Why flamenco in education?

You may ask ‘why flamenco?’ and why choose to dance in a way that is not related to one’s inherited culture? I, Linda, was introduced to flamenco when I attended a professional performance of flamenco at the age of fourteen. As a third-generation, white, South African girl of European descent, I gradually became aware of the fact that identity is complex and that my inherited culture did not fully resonate with my inner personal being. I felt compelled to study flamenco. Sen’s (2007) theory of what he calls “the illusion of a singular identity” (p. 8) highlights the importance of recognising the individual’s ability to reason and choose aspects of their identity, as opposed to “unquestioning acceptance of received beliefs” (p. 9). I felt fortunate that I happened across flamenco which has allowed me to express myself in a way that transcended my inherited culture.

Sen’s (2007) view of multiculturalism asks whether human beings,

should be categorised in terms of inherited traditions, particularly the inherited religion of the community in which they happen to be born, taking that un-chosen identity to have automatic priority over the affiliations involving politics profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements and many other connections? Or should they be understood as a person with many affiliations and associations the priorities over which they must themselves choose (p. 150).

Sen (2007) suggests that individual identity has many aspects which should not be regarded as fixed, but which can be chosen. The same person can be a South African citizen, of French origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a man, a dancer, a school teacher, a feminist, and a heterosexual, a supporter of gay rights, a tennis fan, a pianist, and an environmentalist. According to Sen, these sorts of affiliations may not all have equal priority for the individual, and in fact may also change in order of priority in different circumstances. He suggests that while some aspects of identity may not be changed, some affiliations are in fact a matter of choice.

Sen (2007) regards the neglect of the plurality of affiliations, and the lack of freedom of choice to decide on the priorities of these affiliations, as a main factor in sustaining the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity imprisoning people in inflexible categories. He suggests that an important goal of multiculturalism should be to “enhance the capabilities of children to live ‘examined lives’ as they grow up in an integrated country” (p. 160). To this end, he highlights the importance of providing children with opportunities to learn about the diversity of world cultures and to learn to reason about and understand the choices that human beings can and do make.

We believe that dance education provides unique opportunities to explore world culture, while simultaneously allowing children to discover their individual and social identity, or what ‘names’ them (Palmer, 1998a). It seems to us that Sen (2007) is suggesting that sharing is inherent to individual growth. We suggest that as we share who we are with another, both of us potentially become open to change and transformation as well as connection. We would argue that it is this mutual interchange which informs individual and collective learning and forms the foundation of an empathetic society.

I, Linda, am South African by birth, but flamenco, a dance originating in Spain, has encouraged me to embrace broader perspectives of other cultures which extend beyond my immediate culture and to shape an identity and a voice that I could not find in the culture into which I was born. In Palmer (1998a) Kaplan reflects that “speaking a foreign language ... is a chance for growth, for freedom, for liberation from the ugliness of our received ideas and mentalities” (p. 26). I realise this may not be true for everyone, but it has been true for me, and therefore may be so for others. We reasoned that those who felt that their inherited

culture did define them may still perhaps benefit from becoming aware of how others dance and of other ways of being. We reasoned further that if this was so, then flamenco in education may provide opportunities to explore plurality of identity in a way that helps to transcend cultural, racial and gender divisions and to break down the barriers created by boxed, restricted thinking.

Flamenco is concerned with individual emotional experience and this is intrinsically linked to the social experience. Flamenco developed out of a multicultural interchange (Edwards, 2000; Leblon, 1995; Mitchell, 1994; Pohren, 1980). The marginalised or excluded in Spanish society came together to express their individual emotional pain and joy in a community of empathetic sharing which evolved into an oral tradition of song and dance called flamenco. The multicultural origins of flamenco (Jewish, Islamic, Protestant, Gypsy, Catholic, Greek, Indian) suggested to us the possibility of shared experience among individuals who were different in a number of ways.

When I was introduced to flamenco it became the lens through which I viewed the world: an opportunity to experience life beyond the culture into which I was born. My exposure to flamenco has enriched my understanding of self and others which has extended beyond my given culture. Parker Palmer (1998a) suggests that we are “drawn to a body of knowledge because it sheds light on our identity as well as on the world ... we did not merely find a subject to teach – the subject also found us”(p. 25)

I, Linda, feel privileged to have benefitted from a dance education and have come to realise the educational and personal value of dance and flamenco. I was fortunate to have parents who could afford to pay for private dance tuition and therefore I was given the opportunity to explore more fully what ‘named’ or defined me. I am saddened by the fact that this opportunity is not available to all children. We suggest that all children can benefit from discovering what ‘names’ them, and that engaging in a flamenco dance class may be a suitable vehicle to help them do this.

Why the need for intervention?

During our work at various schools, we asked the teachers how they were including dance into their classes. We discovered that for many of them, dance education was more often than not approached in a tokenistic way. For example, we discovered that some of the teachers that we interacted with asked learners to teach one another, while others invited guest dance companies to perform or give a workshop. While these outside interventions are valuable, we would suggest that it does not provide the continuity that dance requires for it to be able to play a meaningful role in shaping and influencing individual growth. Few of the schools that we visited were able to employ specialist dance teachers and this resulted in the generalist school teachers either trying unsuccessfully to incorporate dance into extramural activities, such as school plays, or more usually, avoiding dance at school altogether. This suggested to us that dance as education was generally undervalued or misunderstood.

Furthermore, we observed that many teachers did not have the knowledge, time or inclination to study dance in order to teach it effectively at even a basic level. Many of the teachers we spoke to had limiting perceptions of their own dance ability –as suggested by statements similar to the following that we repeatedly heard from teachers:

I can't dance;

I am uncoordinated;

I am nervous to teach dance;

I don't know how to do those dances

Such beliefs tend to dissuade teachers from even trying to include dance in their classes, replacing it with other options such as music, drama and art in order to satisfy curriculum requirements.

The shortage of adequately qualified dance educators also concerns Sharon Friedman (2006), dance educator at the University of Cape Town. Her work identifies the need for dance educators who have been trained in all aspects of dance as well as child learning and development in education, and that this does not necessarily mean dance studio teachers. We have observed how many schools, in the absence of suitably qualified dance educationalists, seem to be left floundering and often resort to the local ballet or hip-hop studio teacher to fill the gap. While this may seem to satisfy an immediate need, we do not think this is sufficient to address the educational challenges facing teachers of dance in a diverse classroom. During our 25 years of teaching and performing flamenco, we have become aware of the extent to which dance can contribute to physical, emotional and psychological development of the child. (Boler, 1999; Jordan, 1966; Lussier-Ley, 2010; Murray, 1963; Sherborne, 1990; van Staden, Myburgh, & Poggenpoel, 2004) For this reason, we would suggest that dance education in the schools we have visited may need improved supervision and an overall vision to prepare teachers sufficiently to maximise the educational potential of dance in these schools (Levine, 2003; Maqoma, 2001).

Lynn Maree (2004), in her examination of dance education in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), also found that dance in primary education was characterised by random lessons with very little shape, context or connection to dance educational outcomes. Maree attributes this lack of teacher expertise to the fact that there is no guidance in dance education in teacher education programmes in KZN. From our experience we would suggest that ideally dance in education requires specialist technical expertise and that there are very few dancers or teachers who are able to master more than one or two dance styles to any degree of excellence. This led us to reason that perhaps this is where we could be of assistance and started us wondering how. Flamenco dance could be taught in an affordable way that is educationally relevant to a diverse body of learners and that, while not creating professional dancers, would have valuable educational benefits in terms of nation building, identity formation and the holistic development of the child.

The values which informed this research approach

We believe that dance in education, as a timetabled school activity, should not be approached in the same way that dance is taught to those who actively seek to learn it. Dance as a compulsory school lesson needs to engage many unwilling participants, often from diverse backgrounds and abilities. This requires modification of teaching and pedagogy to address the challenges of implementing dance as part of the curriculum.

One of the values that inform our teaching of dance in these schools is *inclusion*. For this reason we did not focus on training flamenco dancers in the traditional manner, in which the emphasis is on technical skill and style. In contrast, we focused on rhythmical accuracy, strength, identification with self, and integrity, since a focus on the technicalities can be very demanding and often exclusionary. We endeavoured to draw out the stylistic and personal individuality of each learner. This resulted in learners being able to interpret the steps in their own way which differed somewhat from traditional flamenco dance.

We also endeavoured to encourage a *loving* learning environment with *respect* for self and others. This was encouraged during all critical reflection when we encouraged the understanding and respect of difference. *Enjoyment* was also a priority and we observed how this had a positive effect on learning and participation. Our aim was also to encourage a love of self and the other, as well as a love of learning through the creative use and expression of the body. We also tried to encourage learners to appreciate the value of *hard work* and effort and the rewards which ensue from such effort.

These values of love, inclusion, respect, enjoyment and hard work then became our “living standards of judgement” (Whitehead, 1989, p. 4) to which we held ourselves accountable. We not only wish to live out these values in our own teaching, but also to influence the development of similar values in the learners, and thereby hopefully laying a foundation for improving social relationships between people of diverse cultures (Frege, 2004; Friedman, 2008a; Hargreaves, 1994; Ickstadt, 2004).

We knew that if we wished to embrace diversity, our teaching practice needed to transform. This transformation would require us to search for new vantage points from which to examine what was, what is, and what could be. In this we were mindful of Smuts’s (1927) statement: “I wish to emphasise how important it is, not merely to continue the acquisition of knowledge, but also to develop new view-points from which to envisage all our vast accumulated material of knowledge.” (p. 6)

Our research question of how to improve our practice as flamenco teachers became grounded in our desire to become more inclusive for a diversity of learners and abilities. We videotaped the classes we taught. On critically viewing the tapes, we witnessed how dancing together leads to a shared joy which can form the foundation of mutual respect and tolerance by finding common ground through shared experience. While sport is able to encourage the breaking down of barriers in similar ways, dance often penetrates to different and even deeper levels of identity and commonalities (Botha, 2008; J.L. Conolly, 1995; R. Fernandez, 2010; Friedman, 2008a), something that could be of benefit in South Africa, allowing a once divided people to connect.

We decided to design and teach a series of classes for primary education using flamenco dance as a framework to address some of our concerns and to answer our research question:

How do we improve our practice as traditional flamenco teachers in a way which respects and embraces classroom diversity and aligns with educational aims and outcomes?

Research methodology

A self-study approach was adopted to generate our own living theory out of our practice and lived experience (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff (2006) demonstrate how, within any lived experience, individuals may experience living contradictions, and how the resulting cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) can be used as a positive force to encourage deep reflection on how practice can be changed to be more in line with ontological and epistemological values. As practitioners reflect on their practice, using values as living standards of judgement against which to evaluate this practice, their learning forms the basis of their own ‘living theories’. Whitehead (2009b) explains that “A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work” (p. 104).

There are two important reasons why teachers should do action research: first, to improve practice and, second, to generate new theory (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). We concur with McNiff and Whitehead (2005) who suggest that teachers rather than external researchers are best placed to evaluate and improve their own work and that teachers should be able to improve practice as well as generate new theory and knowledge to be able to disseminate their learning and make it available in the public domain as a guide for other educators.

Our approach to action research is a “a form of self-reflective practice” (McNiff, 2002, p. 6). In the living theory genre of action research, the methodology of an individual emerges during the enquiry and its form is unique in accordance with the individual’s ability to be inventive (Whitehead, 2009a). In this way

descriptions of what was done and why it was done as well as the resultant learning became a reflection of our inventiveness and embodied values and beliefs in action. As Whitehead (2009) states,

In a living theory methodology the individual includes the unique constellation of values that are used to give meaning and purpose to their existence. In the course of the enquiry these values are expressed, clarified and evolved as explanatory principles in the explanations of educational influence in learning (Whitehead, 2009b, p. 112).

Our dissatisfaction with the way dance education was being enacted in schools led us to seek alternatives. Margaret Farren (2008) suggests that there is a need for individuals to have a space in education “to develop their own voices” (p. 65). And so began a process of reflexive critique in which our self-study became enriched by our interaction with others and resulted in concern about change transforming into social action.

Donald Schön (1983) explains the process of critical reflection *in* and *on* action in order to understand and improve practice (p. 55). We have come to realise that individual critical reflection is essential to refine and improve our practice. We reflected on our own actions and thoughts, observed our learners and our relationship to them, our relationship to flamenco, and the learners’ relationship to our understanding of flamenco as experienced in our classes (Ellis, 2004).

What did we do and why did we do it?

I, Linda, devised a course of eight one-hour lessons for a class of grade seven learners at a co-educational school in Durban. I tried to adapt my understanding of traditional flamenco to align it with the aims of the educational curriculum and other relevant theory so that it could be introduced to a diversity of learners (Department of Arts, Science and Technology, 1996; Department of Education, 2002). During this stage of the study, regular critical reflection and in-depth discussion with teachers and learners helped to modify pedagogy and teaching techniques in accordance with our stated aims and values.

I gave each class a basic structure (see Figure 1) and a specific educational focus (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Class structure

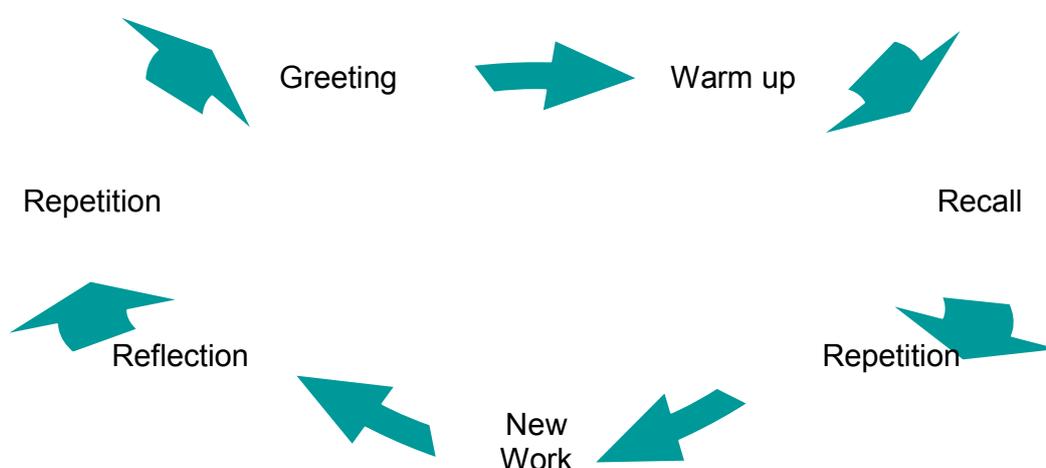
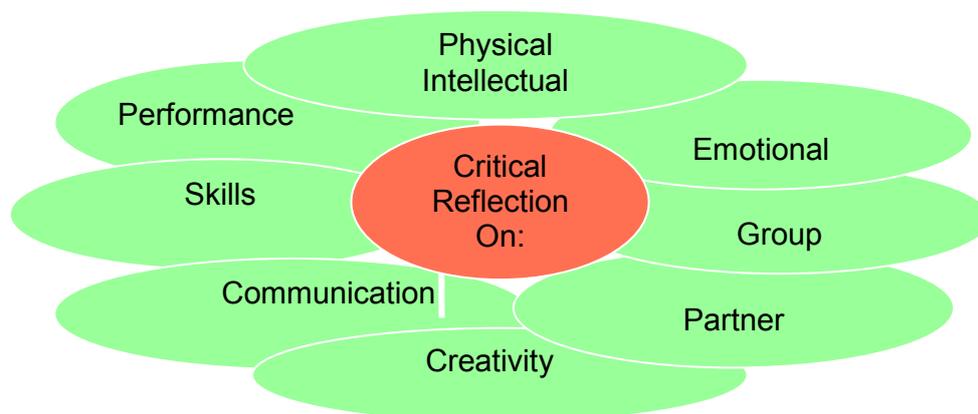


Figure 2: Educational focus

In each class I tried to encourage respect for individual difference as well as mutual collaboration to promote inclusion. I did this by dividing the class up into smaller groups to allow students to reflect on their own and others' progress. I encouraged them to clap the rhythm for one another and to develop sensitivity to each performer's needs and skills. I also encouraged them to give constructive critique rather than destructive criticism. I established a safe space by introducing my only class rule: no laughing *at*, only laughing *with* one another. In this way I tried to encourage maximum participation and reduce the fear of peer ridicule.

I linked the individual experience to the social experience in order to develop awareness of common ground and individuality. I did this by incorporating many 'times of reflection' when I stopped the class and we sat down as a group to reflect individually and collectively on the experience. I tried to make work fun wherever possible and to encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust especially when individual's performances and abilities were critiqued. Teachers were present at all times during the dance classes and were encouraged to join in to develop their own learning about how to teach dance.

Evaluation of the intervention

Just like Whitehead and McNiff, I believe my axiology (what I value), is influenced by who I am (ontology), which in turn is influenced by what I know (epistemology) in symbiotic relationship (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The analysis of data in this intervention was grounded in this understanding. The boundaries between personal validation and social validation became permeable as quotes from participants and observations from critical friends became interwoven with personal explanations of practice and our reflections on video evidence.

During the course of the programme, teachers as well as learners were asked for written and oral reflections on their experience. In a journal activity at the conclusion of the eight classes, learners were also asked to reflect on their experience. When we considered their written and oral reflections, we observed how reflection on practice (Schön, 1983) revealed transformed individual and collective perceptions and we discovered evidence that learning had been influenced and mediated by our values of *enjoyment, respect, hard work, love* and *inclusion* (Cho, 2005; Gardner, 1993; Palmer, 1998a). A circle of critical friends which met on a weekly basis also helped us to evaluate findings, observations and perceptions (Whitehead, 2004).

In their journals, learners commented on the values which were modelled and aspired to during the dance sessions and which then became the living standards of judgement in the analysis (Whitehead, 2009c).

The enjoyment of the dance sessions was clearly evident to us from the videos as well as written reflections. Learners comments included,

“We were always happy to come to dancing” and

“Flamenco was an amazing dance to learn ... I absolutely loved it ... never have I had so much fun.”

The importance of enjoyment in the learning environment is so intrinsically linked to motivation and good learning (Palmer, 1998a). The dance sessions helped learners to become aware of this. As one learner commented, “You made us have fun but at the same time we were learning.”

Inspiring motivation and effort in learning are fundamental to success (Aaronsohn, 2003; Palmer, 1998b). In this regard we noted that our interaction with learners promoted the value of hard work:

“You were always kind. If we got a move wrong you showed us again and again and again.”

“You inspired me to work hard and stay determined.”

The values of love, respect, empathy and inclusion were also evident in the feedback from learners. We observed how learners became aware of the learning environment as loving and how they in turn expressed loving thanks for the experience:

“Wow what an inspiration you are to me ... you haven’t only inspired me you inspired the whole of grade 7... keep touching hearts because you have touched mine.”

“Linda, you are loving, interesting, never give up, determined to do better, anxious to do everything you do fun, dedicated.”

Our value of love in the learning environment is not exclusive to us. Increasingly theorists are realising that love plays a fundamental role in meaningful learning (Cho, 2005). Our expression of love took various forms, one of which was to adopt an approach which attempted to include learners of all abilities. While watching the videos, we saw evidence that the choreography challenged and stimulated learners (including a learner who was dyslexic and one with hearing difficulties). We began to observe how, when given an environment which was inclusive of a range of abilities, all could potentially find their voice and ‘speak’. We observed how this ‘physical voice’ as opposed to the vocal or literal voice is intrinsically linked to the emotions expressed through body movement.

An extract from Demi’s reflection reads:

While watching the videos I observed how each child interpreted the movements so differently and how Linda had been able to encourage each learner to be able to dance in a way which expressed their understanding and individuality so powerfully. This inclusive approach also seemed to encourage individual and group empathy to develop when emotional experiences were shared.

This empathy (or love) being expressed by learners was confirmed by the headmaster who commented to the learners that he had observed an empathetic connection develop amongst them during the dance sessions: "That's a connection that you have developed over these weeks with the people who were dancing without even realising it. That's empathy."

Inclusion was evident from the responses of learners:

"I'm not the best dancer but flamenco really makes you special and comfortable to do"

"I really didn't think I would be able to cope with dancing and didn't think I could do it ...
I really had fun and couldn't wait for the next practise"

Another learner recognised the value of his experience and expressed the hope that others could be included: "Hope you teach others the dance and touch their heart and soul."

This aligns with Smith-Autard (1994) who suggests the need for a mid-way model of teaching dance: one which we interpreted as inclusive. Our inclusive approach extended into one which included the integration of the emotional, physical and mental capacities of the learners in the learning process.

At the commencement of the course the teacher commented on the lack of holistic learning opportunities for learners and the value of the intervention to encourage holistic learning (Jousse, Sienaert & Conolly, 1997):

This form of dancing for learners (flamenco) is such a good exercise/regime for the whole body. Physically – the movements can be quite demanding and tiring – and the sessions have shown that some of the children are not 'fit' and not so agile – this is quite scary for their age – they tend to lead such sedentary lives nowadays! –

It has been so apparent that some learners have seldom been involved in an exercise/routine where free movement of their bodies is encouraged, and therefore are very stiff in their execution of the dance steps.

We observed how the dance sessions provided opportunity for these concerns to be addressed as learners became more aware of the body as communicator. This confirmed our experience of the body as one of the most honest forms of communication and the importance of engaging the whole person in learning (Conolly, 1995). Learners were encouraged to engage their mental, physical and emotional abilities in the learning process thereby attempting to align our approach with holistic and inclusional theory (Smuts, 1927; Rayner, 2004). Our approach was therefore grounded in our love of meaningful holistic learning in an environment where all felt included to participate and where opportunities for empathetic resonance abounded.

Educational benefits of the dance experience

On analysis of the feedback and our observations, it became clear that there were many educational benefits that emanated from the dance experience. We now discuss these below.

Improved concentration

We found evidence that learners not only observed improved concentration in themselves, but they also observed it in others:

“You showed me how to focus and be more confident in myself.”

“The focus he putting into his dancing he’s also focusing in his class. So it’s kind of gone from the dancing to the classroom.”

Others concluded that their improved concentration was directly linked to the dance sessions. One student reported, “Your presence has improved my concentration and focus in many learning areas and I thank you for that.” The teacher also commented on this improvement: “I was also taken aback by the sheer concentration and focus of the children.”

Movement is intrinsic to meaningful memorisation (Conolly, 2002; Jousse, Sienaert & Conolly, 1997). Jousse, Sienaert & Conolly (1997) explain how memorisation is related to movement and the importance of engaging the mental, physical and emotional in the learning process. We observed evidence of this throughout the dance sessions.

Improved determination and perseverance

Self-esteem, determination and perseverance in the learning process are mutually influential and impact on learner performance (Hoppe; Lee, 1990). We observed evidence of improved perseverance and determination in learners as the dance sessions progressed and this was corroborated by learner feedback:

“I really didn’t think I would be able to cope with dancing ... I practiced so much at home even my mother and brother know the dance ...”

“I practiced and practiced. Like you say, Repetition.”

Learner awareness of the value of perseverance and effort extended into transformed perceptions of ability in general: “You inspired me to work hard and to stay determined ... you told us to be ourselves and we were ... none of us are useless.”

Changed teacher perceptions of learner ability and improved academic performance

There was evidence of learners becoming aware of their improved focus and how this transferred to the classroom: “When we were dancing we were concentrating carefully and we can use that in our class work ... thank you for teaching us the art of flamenco.”

A learner previously described by the teacher as ‘at risk’ discovered his incredible innate talent as a dancer, resulting in increased self-esteem, peer approval and transformation of his behaviour and academic performance in school. The teacher commented on this learner and how he did “not always feature academically and his physical build restricts his success on the sports field. He then tends to seek attention in other ways normally in a negative way and therefore is often in trouble ... During the free creative period, he focused and was doing some amazing rhythmic steps with arm movements as well. He has a natural way in his dancing. When asked to show his steps his grin stretched from ear to ear – what a positive boost to his self-esteem!”

The learner commented in his journal: “Before you came I was a very naughty boy always getting into trouble but when you taught us all those steps I started focusing on my school work and my behaviour and you made me realise that there is more to life than just being naughty. So the dance really changed me to be a better person and I love the dance thanks a lot.”

Providing opportunities for learning for multiple intelligences is of utmost importance in the classroom (Gardner, 1993). This boy was a perfect example of a learner with natural kinaesthetic intelligence which, to that point in his education, had not been given opportunity to be revealed. The boost to his self-esteem which resulted from this discovery then impacted on his performance in other learning areas. As the teacher said: “The focus he’s putting into his dancing he’s also focusing in his class. So it’s kind of gone from the dancing to the classroom.”

The relationship between the confidence of other learners and their learning was also apparent to the teacher. She also became aware of how certain learners who had previously experienced learning difficulties in the classroom seemed to excel in the dance class: “I am so amazed to see how some of the learners who have experienced learning a difficulty in class but here in dancing, have actually excelled! Wow what a boost to their self-esteem! ... Lovely to see that all are participating fully in the lessons even if they are battling to master some of the movements! Again – their self-confidence has grown!” The teacher seems to have become more aware of the relationship between self-esteem and success in learning (Palmer, 1998a; Van Staden, et al., 2004).

Confidence

We observed how the dance sessions not only gave the opportunity to discover the talent of learners with natural dance ability but also provided opportunity for others who were not previously inclined to dance, to shift perceptions of their ability to dance. We observed the correlation between this and improved confidence through effort, mastery and encouragement.

“I am really a shy person when it comes to dancing but I’m not anymore because you gave me confidence ... most of my friends don’t like dancing but they did and the reason is because you believed in us”

“The children were really excited to learn the new steps and clearly showed their joy and self-satisfaction when they had mastered them.”

The development of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is intrinsic to flamenco (Thiel-Cramer, 1990; Totton, 2003; Washabaugh, 1998). In its origins flamenco developed out of profound emotional suffering. It became cathartic by developing the individual’s confidence to overcome adversity and emotional overload. In the dance sessions we became aware of the potential of the physical mental and emotional power of flamenco to build confidence, knowledge and process emotions:

“By dancing I began to overcome my fear.”

“Linda you taught me to have confidence.”

Identity

Dance studies can provide the opportunity for an increased awareness of and control of the body as communicator of self (Belling, 2004; Botha, 2008; Ickstadt, 2004). In the videos we observed how children of diverse abilities and backgrounds can benefit from developing an understanding of their body as communicator of self and gaining more control and awareness of this ability. One student reported, “I’m happy because I have learnt that you can communicate through the dance.”

The lifelong scholarship of Marcel Jousse (1886-1961), focused on the “original language” of man being “corporeal” (Sienaert, 1990, p. 96). He identified the “corporeal – manual” expression of the body and

concluded that the whole body communicating the thoughts and emotions of the individual was “the most faithful form of human communication” (Conolly, 2002, p. 3).

The learners seemed to have discovered themselves through dance:

“(In the dance) We revealed our true selves.”

“The dancing really brought out the person in me.”

“You have given us a way to better understand ourselves.”

These comments suggested to us that opportunities to become more aware of self through dance can influence shifts in perceptions of identity. Opportunities to become aware of identity as multifaceted and continually evolving was fundamental to our approach (Sen, 2007). Learners became aware of this as well.

One learner’s awareness of continually evolving identity also included learning which they perceived of as having life-long significance: “All ... that you told us I’m sure to use in my whole life ... you inspired me and touched my heart.”

Learners used the dance sessions as opportunities to deepen awareness of self and identity and life in general (Levine, 2003; Lussier-Ley, 2010). One learner commented, “The dance ... it has brought more meaning and has broadened my knowledge and skills on life!” (Fernandez, 2010, p. 202)

Participation in dance sessions promoted acceptance of diversity

The challenges of polyculturalism in the classroom remain a reality for many teachers in South Africa (Friedman, 2008a). We observed in the dance sessions how flamenco can be experienced in a way that individuals do not have to conform to a physical, racial or gender ideal which may not be seen as achievable or desirable. “We put our differences aside and all worked together,” wrote one learner.

We also observed how learners who had previously been excluded due to dyslexia or hearing impediments, were able to participate in a meaningful way with the rest of the class. One young dyslexic girl, admitted after only one lesson that she had learnt to let go of her fear of dancing. She later commented in her journal, “At first I thought I could not dance but now I can ... I had a fantastic time and really enjoyed it ...”

The hearing-impaired learner who had previously been isolated from his peers showed the courage to dance silently in front of his peers. He later commented, “... you gave us a way to better understand each other it was fun and enjoyable and will be remembered for a very long time.” This boy danced in a way that was different from everyone else: he danced silently. His courage and our acceptance of his difference provided opportunity for his peers to accept his difference as well. Learners who had previously excluded him began to encourage him and to accept his unique expression of self. One learner commented on his difference, evidencing a shift in her perception of him and communication in general: “People who didn’t speak much spoke through their dance.” We regarded this comment as evidence of the capacity of this learner to be empathetic and embrace diversity in an inclusional way (Rayner, 2004).

Before the dance session the teacher described the class as ‘divided’. In the dance sessions we were able to observe the coming together of learners from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds in order to dance together. We observed the potential for aligning this with the aims of nation building (Department of Arts, Science and Technology, 1996; Friedman, 2008a; Soudien, 2007; van Papendorp, 2004). This is evidenced by the following comments from learners:

“We put our differences aside and we all worked together clapping and cheering for one another ... I’ve learnt to like some people in my class.”

“I began to overcome my fear and I learnt about other people’s differences.”

Gender stereotyping was reduced

When we watched the videos we observed evidence that the basic stamping and clapping actions were accessible to learners who had had little or no exposure to dance and found great appeal amongst the boys.

Video clip 1: http://youtu.be/Z_Ru_rCVsbA or [click here](#)



We observed how the dance sessions provided opportunity to break down gender stereotypes rather than re-enforcing them, as so often happens in a dance class (Loots, 1995).

Teamwork

We observed how the dance sessions used group work to allow qualities of leadership and teamwork to develop (Kelley, 1951). “You taught me how to work as a team,” responded one learner. The teacher confirmed this when she observed: “One good aspect that has definitely developed is the support for one another ... I was impressed at how keen and willing they were to volunteer to dance in the small groups and then how the ‘spectators’ encouraged and helped the dancers by giving hand signals – true teamwork.”

The following video clip gives evidence of how previously divided class members were able to dance together as one while still expressing and communicating their individuality.

Video clip 2: <http://youtu.be/qf4F-Hza9vk> or [click here](#)



An extract from Demi's reflection reads:

As a flamenco musician, I was struck by the accuracy of timing in the class group and how children from a diversity of backgrounds and abilities were able to dance with such unity after such a short time. I also became aware of how Linda had transformed her teaching approach of flamenco to become more inclusive which then allowed children to express their individuality with such confidence and enjoyment.

This sense of unity was commented on by learners: "The way we moved it made me feel as if we were one person when our peers supported us it felt GREAT. Linda thank you please carry on teaching it would be a shame not to spread the SPIRIT."

What are the broader implications of this research?

We suggest that the new knowledge which emerged from this intervention was an understanding of an approach to flamenco dance which is values-driven and educationally relevant. While it may not be possible to fully generalise such an approach, we do believe aspects may be transferable. While many elements of flamenco in its pure form were retained, traditional approaches were transformed into one which was values-driven. While many flamenco purists may reject this transformed approach, fearing the contamination of flamenco and its consequential transformation into something unrecognisable, we suggest that transformation is inevitable in any dance form whenever it interacts with new social influences. This is the organic nature of dance: it is continually influencing and being influenced. Flamenco is no exception.

This gave us a new perspective on the potential of flamenco in education which allowed us to envisage other dance styles also possibly being approached in similar ways. We are in no way suggesting that the purity of original forms be abandoned. There will always be those who will wish to study the dance style in its pure form and hopefully there will be those who wish to teach it that way. What we are suggesting is that perhaps a mid-way approach could assist the successful integration of dance into mainstream education, especially in the early years of education. Here skill and expertise, grounded in educational values, could be encouraged so that dance becomes a holistic experience and contributes to the well-being of individuals as well as society.

Currently as dance struggles to find purpose and place in education, the age-old adage of 'united we stand, divided we fall' seems to take on new relevance. If dance educationalists become exclusionary and box dance into traditional categories which impose traditional standards for exclusive use by a select few we suggest that they will continue to divide the world of dance from within. We believe the diversity within the field of dance should be embraced. From our experience we would suggest that continuing to fuel the debates of whose dance is more suitable or worthy of a place in mainstream education seems pointless. This results in a general stalemate as dance practitioners continue to place the various dance styles in hierarchical formation according to their own perceptions of educational or professional value. Until this division is addressed we believe the spirit of discontent and competitiveness will continue to paralyse the progress of dance in education. Dance experts and educationalists need to align their vision for dance: the challenge then becomes not which or whose dance should be taught but how. We suggest that this will then require dance experts to engage with educational theory and dance-educational theorists and teacher-educators to engage with dance specialists.

Focus on teacher training in dance will assist the challenge of how to broaden the definition of dance styles available in South Africa in a way that includes and transcends professional and educational values. Here learners can be encouraged to respect difference while simultaneously searching for common ground. We

suggest that the definition of dance needs careful examination and adaptation to suit a diversity of learners including the physically challenged (Samuel, 2008). This requires respect for such diversity and for the dance form being introduced. Dance has many flavours and we suggest that young learners should be encouraged to try as many as possible in the primary phase in order to decide if they would like to choose any as a main course. This introduction of the various dance styles to the unaccustomed palate is where we feel vision and skill are required.

We have come to realise that just as the human voice speaks in many languages so the human body uses many languages to communicate. Learning to speak or dance in different voices helps to break open fixed categories and reveal wonderful new opportunities for connection and intercultural awareness which may help to encourage respect for diversity. Perhaps young children in a diverse society should be introduced to a wide variety of dance styles in order to allow them to choose which, if any, they are drawn to and to provide them with enriching ways of sharing difference. Perhaps values-based flamenco could be used to introduce dance to a multicultural classroom where cultural boundaries seem to divide and thereafter other dance forms may receive less resistance. These are ideas upon which we continue to speculate.

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