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Social, Emotional and Cognitive Engagement in Dance for Children: An Examination Through the Lens of Equity and Racial Justice

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students everywhere are exhibiting gaps in their social-emotional development. Dance advocates propose the prioritization of dance classes as a way to facilitate social-emotional learning. This essay examines the logic behind these advocacy efforts, but also cautions readers that social-emotional learning, even in the arts, can be misused to promote racial injustice and inequity if not properly structured. In the social arena, the idea is examined that social learning

may be co-opted to reinforce obedience in children, and that “appropriate” social behaviors in a dance class may actually be the normalization of white middle class actions. In the emotional realm, the presumption that dance teaches emotional expression, must be linked to the awareness that the expression of emotion is a culturally contextual concept. Finally, from a perspective of cognition, dance can improve critical problem-solving skills, but only if the engagement is truly student centered.

Introduction

The challenges caused by the global pandemic provide the opportunity to reflect on what we value and how we want to structure the post pandemic world. With respect to dance education for children, many spent a year in social isolation, highlighting the value of embodied group social interaction through its absence. While many of us were able to dance alone in our homes in quarantine and those with access were able to connect via Zoom, or other electronic means, the world was generally stymied in its ability to truly move together as a group and experience the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of embodied group creative process. While dance educators around the world are anxious to advocate for dance as a remedy for this loss of embodied experience and argue that now is the time to include somatic practices of all kinds more robustly in school settings, it is equally important to remember that not all dance education practices truly promote equity and social-emotional learning. In this time of global social reckoning, it is vital to ensure that we examine our dance practices and take with us into the future only those elements of dance studio culture which allow for equitable, student-centered practices. This essay examines the social, emotional and cognitive benefits of embodied group creative process in dance and how these areas, when viewed from a lens of social justice, may promote inequity if not fully reexamined.

Dance as a Social Activity

Current educational practices in the US commonly link the terms social and emotional in what is referred to as SEL or Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020). It is interesting to note that the cognitive or intellectual dimensions are not included in this grouping. This speaks to the deeply ingrained dichotomy promulgated by traditional Western education that there is a discrete separation between the academic realm and the somatic realm; between knowledge and feeling; between so called “scientific” or evidence-based thinking and “artistic” or felt experience. This unspoken assumption, that thinking and feeling are highly differentiated, impacts dance as an element of curriculum in numerous ways. Dance is seen as either the development of a virtuosic, elite skill set or a means to support emotional well-being. While both can be important developmental goals, a public school system which describes its

primary mission to educate children to enter the workforce, may not prioritize either of these goals, relegating dance and the rest of the arts to a secondary position in funding, staffing and required content.

While my own research, alongside many others (e.g. Giguere, 2011; Henley, 2014; Warburton, 2011; Cefai et al., 2018) contradicts this dichotomy and posits dance as a mode of cognitive development as well, given the pervasiveness of this duality it is understandable that educators draw upon SEL to advocate for the dance and the arts more broadly. This is doubly true in the context of a global pandemic, where remote education has fostered developmental delays for millions of children (Xiang, Zhang, Kuwahara, 2020). New attention and funding have been focused on addressing the social-emotional-developmental gaps that are emerging as schools return to in-person education. Dance as an embodied mode of social interaction has a critical role to play in this effort. The use of dance as a methodology for re-entering social situations is not unique to the pandemic. Trauma informed pedagogy has been utilizing embodiment for some time. Trauma informed teaching is that which specifically “provide[s] students with access and opportunities that assist them to increase positive psychological resources” (Brunzell et al., 2016, p. 65) and acknowledges the impact of trauma on their cognitive, academic, social and emotional life (Shantel, 2015). As the world’s premier traumatologist Bessel Van Der Kolk explains, “traumatized people need to learn that they can tolerate their sensations, befriend their inner experiences and cultivate new action patterns” (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 275). The arts, especially dance, are particularly well suited to an examination of sensations and their relationship to inner experiences. In his pivotal book, *The Body Keeps Score* (2014) Van Der Kolk explains how the arts, especially embodied group activity, is needed as traumatized individuals “rely on interpersonal rhythms, visceral awareness, and vocal and facial communication, which help shift people out of their fight/flight [response and] reorganize their perception of danger, and increase their capacity to manage relationships” (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 88). It is related to this element of SEL development in which dance can play an integral part.

Dance is a predominantly social art form. The vast majority of dances are group dances. Even if there is one choreographer for the work, the dancers in the work itself must cooperate to an extent and form a group dynamic for the process to be successful. Solo dances are often created in collaboration with a composer, costumer, lighting designer or other artistic partnerships. Even solos in participatory dance settings, such as an improvisational solo during a Hip-hop cypher, for example, are done within the context of a group. The solo is contrasted against other soloists, and relies on the group to respond, thereby forming a social setting. Most educational settings for dance are group contexts too; even private lessons, it could be argued, at least involve interaction between two people. The use of dance to enhance social learning and to make children comfortable in social settings is not without its problems,

however. Even though it is possible to describe dance as an opportunity for free expression, we know that this is too often subverted by a tightly controlling teacher or choreographer. In these instances, dance actually teaches conformity, rather than individuality. There are those who maintain, arguably, that this is also a life skill (Ross, 2005) to conform to the needs to the group, but it is equally valid to say that this kind of acquiescence is not conforming to the needs to the group, so much as pleasing a representative of the majority patriarchy. In order for culturally relevant SEL skills to be developed, this adherence to pedagogical dogma warrants re-examination.

Many dance teachers have trouble with letting go of this teacher-centered model. There is a narrative of correct behavior that permeates the dance class and there are those who see classes without this behavioral rigidity as “not technique”. They falsely equate rigor with conformity. Traditional teacher-centric classes, admittedly, do not aim to develop social-emotional wellbeing, that is not their primary goal. The persistence of this hierarchical pedagogical model makes me wonder if there is a somewhat intentional, if perhaps subliminal, disempowerment of students in preparation for the disempowerment of dancers in a dance company. Does one need to be servile to the director or choreographer of a dance company in order to be employed in such contexts? Is there a subtext related to gender at play as well? Considering the preponderance of male artistic directors and female company members, it is certainly a dynamic worth examining. It is interesting to note that many dance educators tout the discipline learned in dance classes as a positive life skill, relating it to the need to do what is required of you even if it is not a career you choose to pursue. This is unarguably an element of human existence, but this kind of defense is reminiscent of political ideologies which attempt to elevate the role of the working class without concurrent acknowledgment of their rights to fairness and equal treatment. Have some dance teachers inadvertently taken a capitalist approach in which controlling social behaviors in a dance class may be unknowingly supporting a systemic promotion of compliance, related to the capitalist need for a robust working class? If dance does indeed model and teach social behaviors, and if public education does indeed prepare students for the workforce, then a closer look at how we view the independence of our students is vital for dance’s role in education.

Dance and Emotional Development

So what is it in dance that should be promoted relative to SEL, or social-emotional learning? To understand how dance can appropriately support these efforts, we need to first understand the context of the discussion of SEL in education. Although widely used, SEL has no consistent definition in educational or psychological literature. According to McKown (2017), while there is no consensus among researchers, practitioners and policymakers, most definitions include three areas: Thinking Skills (generally the ability to infer others’ thoughts and feelings), Behavioral Skills (ability to initiate positive interaction) and Self Control Skills

(ability to stay calm when upset). Much of the theoretical acceptance of SEL in education is based on a belief in Emotional Intelligence, which Salovey and Mayer (1990) define as the “ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” (As cited in Osher et al., 2016, p. 189). From this perspective, SEL can be seen as a set of behavioral skills which it is the job of the educator to develop. These take the form of both formal and informal programs. The more formal programs, of which it is estimated there are more than 200 types (Hoffman, 2009) aim to guide children to recognize behavioral cues in others (Thinking Skills) and shape an appropriate response, (Behavioral Skills) and choose that designated response when the circumstances dictate (Self Control Skills). On the surface this is a logical and desirable educational program, and would develop emotional intelligence as defined above. School experiences are a chance to shape social and civic values, helping children to understand and practice their relationship with others in the society in which they will live and work. Understanding how others feel, what feelings that triggers in you and choosing your response are all necessary to developing adult behavior in a civil society, and dance offers a unique and distinct way of engaging in this process.

Imagine a dance class where students are tasked with creating dances together. As with any group process, some social negotiation must take place. Students discuss their ideas and have to decide on which structures or movement make it into the final composition. Anyone who has worked with children knows this is inevitably an emotional process. Children can become attached to their ideas and suggestions and understandably distraught when they feel ignored or rejected. This creates an excellent teachable paradigm where a capable dance educator can point out the emotional responses of the students and challenge them to recognize the needs of others and how they are displaying their needs through their words and actions. The intertwining of the social and emotional in the creative process in dance make this such a rich opportunity for making transparent the SEL skills needed to work in a group, and the development of the individual’s SEL skill set. The critique process in dance also serves as a model situation for highlighting how we read the emotions of others and how we can shape our language to respond to their needs. Articulating emotional responses to a piece of choreography is great practice in describing emotions and helping students to recognize the range of reactions in people. While group process is applicable to nearly every subject in school, students working on a group math problem may not have the same clear opportunity to voice their emotional state, since it is less relevant to the content of the subject matter. Dance is about aesthetic and emotional experience. It naturally opens the door for conversation and education about the social and emotional realm. This is one of the most important functions that the arts fulfill as a cultural practice. Recognizing this in the educational setting, particularly with small children, is an important advocacy point for the inclusion and even centralization of the arts in primary curriculum. Indeed, the very subject

matter of the dance—whether improvisation/ creative movement or narrative repertory about classic fairy tales and folklore—codifies the importance of emotional learning. For centuries fairytales have shown characters who epitomize archetypal emotions and there is evidence that interaction with these archetypes is cathartic (e.g. Arthur, 1978). Curriculum founded in the industrial age often prioritizes quantitative learning. The necessity of including the arts in public education to provide opportunities to teach SEL is rising in recognition, particularly as a generation of children process their traumatic experiences of fear and isolation in a global pandemic (NAMI). Understanding the emotional journey of your classmates is not only a ripe possibility for teaching SEL skills, it is a necessary acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

What then is the problem with skills based SEL in education? As with all educational practices, it is in the details of the pedagogy where systemic assumptions of white supremacy lie waiting to taint the opportunity. In other words, when policies and programs are created, or when lesson plans are written, is there an assumption made that the “normal” student is white, and that students of color are an exception; something different in relation to the “typical”? The idea that white students are neutral and that anything else is a deviation from that norm is a blindspot in American education, a tenet of white supremacy (Wilkerson, 2020). The presumption that dance teaches emotional expression, must be linked to the awareness that the expression of emotion is a culturally contextual concept, and that the reinforcement of certain kinds of expression may actually be the promotion of white middle class actions as normative. (Hoffman, 2009) A simple mismatch between the cultural identity of the teacher and the student can be catastrophic for the emotional development of the child if the teacher is unaware of this factor of the educational encounter. As an example, take the simple behavior of eye contact between child and adult. In some families making eye contact is an act of rebellion, and respect is shown through a deferral of eye gaze to an adult. Now imagine the teacher who believes that not making eye contact is an indication of dishonesty and responds to an obedient and deferential student as one to be suspicious of. If the SEL skills-based teaching standardizes eye contact, or touch, or social distance, or verbal response during a performance, or any number of culturally variable practices, it is easy to see how students in a marginalized group could be made to feel that their emotional responses are somehow wrong or inferior. Extrapolate this to classroom management. Students are routinized to certain behaviors such as standing in lines (not practiced by all cultures in the same way) which presupposes there is a correct way to behave in the group. The danger is in teaching a singular *right* way to behave, rather than helping students to develop emotional intelligence which recognizes and celebrates the differences between us and recognizes that we have choices in how we behave based on our understanding of others. People naturally have a complex range of emotional responses and social preferences. To train students to prefer extroversion, for example, when this is against their nature is to deny the reality that we are all different and that it is precisely our differences which makes for the richness of the world and the arts

which represent it.

Dance as a Cognitive Practice

The concept that dance is a social-emotional activity because it falls in the category of artistic practice is a fairly easy idea for people to accept. The idea that the arts are also a critical part of cognitive or intellectual development is somewhat harder to understand for many people, including, unfortunately, many in the education community. Western academic culture is steeped in the tradition of the Cartesian duality: the separation of mind and body with the elevation of the mind (Robinson, 2020). The false dichotomy of “brain versus brawn” is so embedded in our consciousness that we can fail to recognize that physical activities can also engage our mind, and that dance can also be a social activity. Traditional western educational paradigms where children sit in desks for the stimulation of their minds and then leave the classroom to go to the gym or playground to stimulate their bodies continues to reinforce this artificial separation. Developmentally, we use our bodies as a vehicle for the formation of our minds. The infant and toddler experience the world through their senses, developing intellectually through touch, taste, and smell (Hobson, 2018). No one explains crawling to a child, who then attempts it. Natural curiosity, coupled with the innate motivation to locomote drive the developing child to use their body to explore the world and build a mental picture of their environment. Even once a child gains verbal capacity, they continue to understand the world through physical interactions with it. Why is movement, the main mode of intellectual engagement, curbed once a child is the age for primary education? There is no significant evidence that a child shifts to a completely verbal mode of learning once they are the age for school. The change in pedagogical method is for the convenience of the teacher. It is to facilitate a standardization of pedagogical practices, not because this is a match for the learning styles of the students. It is sad to think of the loss this causes for students who need to continue to use a physical modality to understand and explore new concepts. It is important to remember that despite the pedagogy, all learning comprises physical, social and intellectual characteristics. Cognitive activity is essentially social (Newen, et al., 2008) as it involves interacting with others and comprehending the difference between self and others, both of which require social interaction. Even subjects perceived as intellectual such as quantitative science inquiry still involves laboratory experimentation, which is in essence an embodied exploration of the world. The social, physical and intellectual are intertwined no matter how our public education system attempts to separate them. The advocacy for dance as a mode of learning is an argument for a more realistic and effective pedagogical practice which recognizes these interactions, rather than compartmentalizing them for the convenience of delivery.

What then is learned most effectively through physical interaction, specifically through dance? Dance educators have made a wide variety of claims as to the academic benefits of

dance study (Hanna, 2008) but for the purposes of this article, which maintains a focus on social justice, I choose to focus on critical problem-solving skills, such as identifying, analyzing and evaluating information (Leicester, M. 2010) learned through the embodied group creative process. Initially the process of creating dances affords students the opportunity to practice problem finding, a desired skill in many disciplines (Lee and Cho, 2007). What is the dance going to be about? Selecting a subject worthy of investigation through movement is the first step in the creative process. When a group undertakes this activity, the conditions are created for productive shared conversation about values, interests and aesthetics. If this is facilitated with awareness by the dance educator, an environment for understanding and valuing our different cultural preferences becomes a natural part of the school environment. Once a shared problem is identified, the creation of movement and structures for the dance begins. This process allows students to contribute ideas, negotiate for inclusion and learn from each other, all vital skills in developing a collaborative and just classroom. This natural practice in exchanging ideas with each other builds trust between students and facilitates respect for differences. Even more critically, it de-centers the teacher in the educational paradigm. In looking at the learning environment in dance more closely, I posit that there are five central practices which facilitate cognitive engagement in dance during the embodied group creative process: problem finding, valuing divergent answers, collaborative social engagement, iterative process, and student centric practices. (Giguere, 2021). Each of these can be seen as a way to promote equity and social justice. As previously identified, problem finding, one of the initial steps in the choreographic process in dance, provides opportunity to share ideas and learn what other members of your community consider issues or ideas worthy of investigation. This dovetails with the second practice of valuing divergent answers. Dance educators facilitating the creative process with children need to ensure that students don't come to a premature closure on a concept, accepting the first idea that is presented. Valuing the divergence of answers is a key skill that can be learned from dance. There is no one right way to dance, a principle which must be clearly reinforced for a just classroom. Deeply embedded biases in dance toward Western classical technique need to be exposed for students. Some may not realize they are reinforcing white supremacy with these assumptions, others may not feel comfortable suggesting a non-Western solution as they pre-suppose that is how they are expected to answer, particularly in classroom led by a white dance artist.

The importance of these opportunities for the dance educator to point out the presumed bias which may be present in students cannot be overstated. This is a significant teachable moment where the systemic normalization of white values is easily visible. What dance is elevated in our society, and therefore presumed acceptable in school and what dance is similarly invisibilized and deemed inappropriate? Collaborative dance making provides an important occasion for bringing this realization to students of all ages. The fact that dance making is an

iterative process, also supports a social justice agenda. We all need practice in questioning our assumptions and understanding our preferences and biases. Iteration and making mistakes are how we grow. The fact that there are chances to revise dances means there are chances to learn and re-think our actions. Perhaps the most important of the five practices, when considering equity and social justice education, is the creation of a student-centered classroom. When it comes time to critique the dance work created, if the teacher becomes the single arbiter of success, then the previous opportunities for understanding and respecting others are devalued. Students must be actively involved in the assessment of their work and their judgements accepted if a truly just atmosphere is to be established. Students should be involved in creating the rubric from which their work will be evaluated and have clear guidelines on how to critique work. Many examples exist for fair language in critical analysis (e.g. Cheney and Lavender, 1997; Lerman, 2002). Fluency in this kind of critique in the dance classroom can lead to the skill of giving feedback in many other realms of our lives, where tolerance and sensitivity to others is required. The dance educator, as with any teacher, holds an elevated position in the classroom hierarchy. Equity is not achieved until those with power acknowledge the inequity of their role and elevate the position of others in the community. This is not to suggest that the teacher abdicates his or her responsibilities for structuring and guiding learning; rather this is to suggest that the teacher's responsibility is to value that students are individuals who have much to contribute to their own learning and growth. The dance classroom can be a model for evolving the larger society by making visible the mechanisms by which decisions are made, whose experiences and aesthetic principles are valued and recognizing that we all come to group process with certain biases and presumptions. It can also be the place where students and teachers grow by acknowledging that they are still in the process of becoming aware of their own biases and working to make room for new understandings.

Final Reflections

Dance involves the intermingling of the physical, social and cognitive. It is a complex activity that cannot be simplified to a physical practice, nor a method exclusively for the promotion of social-emotional learning. It is a microcosm of our larger society, where these three aspects of our existence are intertwined. Because of this correlation, dance can be a model for teaching the values of living in an anti-racist culture by teaching tolerance, understanding and empathy through questioning assumptions, valuing divergence in answers, and allowing a truly social and non-hierarchical process for dance creation and critique. Not all dance classrooms will foster these values. If we do not consciously structure our dance classrooms as student-centered and maintain an awareness of the biases prevalent in this artform, dance creation cannot accomplish our anti-racist goals. One note of caution should be heeded in focusing on student-centered classrooms and learning situations. This approach, which can be a way to inculcate just practices, does draw the focus of our anti-racist work on the individual student

and his or her interaction with others in their classroom setting. While I believe this is the place where change begins-- at the level of the individual student in an individual dance encounter—it is vital not to forget that these are complex systemic problems. Racism does not only happen between people in a classroom, it is systemically present in the educational system itself. The preference of Western classical practices when dance is present in schools, must also be addressed. Defining the canon of dance as performance practices at the exclusion of participatory ones, must be reexamined as well as exposing unfair, overly hierarchical relationships between choreographers and dancers which must also be reassessed. As novelist Arundhati Roy explains in her moving 2020 article, *The Pandemic is a Portal*:

We can choose to walk through it, [the COVID-19 pandemic] dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (n.p.)

It is up to dance teaching artists and educators to bring with us practices which further the use of dance as a way of teaching and learning equity and social justice and to recognize how dance can be a way to support social-emotional and academic learning without inadvertently reinforcing white middle class values and systemic racism.

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