Movement and Dance in the Inclusive Classroom

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An Article Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 4, Issue 6, July 2008

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Abstract

Benefits to using creative movement and dance as teaching tools in the classroom include increased student understanding of content, improved classroom behavior, and the development of new forms of assessment. Integration of these activities within the instructional day will meet the needs of a variety of learners, especially kinesthetic learners, in a more meaningful manner. Based on research findings, Rudolf Laban's work on movement analysis, and anecdotal evidence; this article addresses the advantages for all students including those with learning disabilities, emotional disorders, attention deficit disorder, cognitive disabilities, and gifts and talents. Rudolf Laban's work in movement analysis provides a clear framework from which teachers can begin to introduce dance activities to their inclusive classrooms.

Keywords

inclusion, dance, kinesthetic, comprehension, behavior, assessment

Acknowledgment:

Thanks to Dr. Billie Jo Rylance for her editorial support.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Skoning, S. N. (2008). Movement in dance in the inclusive classroom. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus,* 4(6) Article 2. Retrieved [date] from http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol4/iss6/art2

Throughout history, educational philosophers from Aristotle through Dewey, Whitehead, and Montessori have all encouraged the use of movement to promote learning. More recently, much has been written about the benefits of using Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 1994; Armstrong, 2003; Campbell & Campbell, 1999), and the idea that students have differing learning styles (Tobias, 1994; Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2000). These studies, plus a developing body of research centering on how the brain works and the importance of brain-compatible teaching strategies (Jensen, 1998; Wolfe, 2001), indicate the complexity of the learning process that requires integration of many activities and experiences. Overby, Post, and Newman (2005) consider dance "uniquely suited to support conceptual learning" (xi) because dance's inherent interdisciplinarity helps to connect more abstract ideas to concrete and fundamental movement concepts.

To meet the needs of kinesthetic learners, teachers often add quick movement activities between lessons to allow children an opportunity for movement.

Many teachers remain focused on verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences and cater to auditory and visual learners, using inadequate methods to teach many children with disabilities (Manske, 2006). Students with special needs often do not have strengths in these areas. Students with learning disabilities, in particular, often receive their labels because of difficulty with linguistic or mathematical tasks. Carter, Richmond, and Bundschuh, as early as 1973, hypothesized that children with cognitive disabilities may have "abilities and interests not fully developed in a traditional academic program" (24). These researchers suggested the use of visual-motor and kinesthetic approaches to teach and encourage the creative development of children with cognitive disabilities. Since the skills of students with disabilities may reside in more creative tasks and cognitive areas, they may understand the larger picture and more abstract concepts, but struggle to memorize discrete facts. They may have stronger skills in musical, visual, or kinesthetic intelligences. Tortora (2006) spent years developing an early childhood program that combined what has been learned in the fields of dance therapy, psychology, and child development. In her program she worked with children with a variety of disabilities and communication disorders and found dance a powerful and successful treatment approach even with "the most difficult-to-reach children" (4).

While little research has explored the benefits of teaching older students with disabilities through more creative and less traditional approaches, many general education teachers now are integrating Gardner's intelligences into their classrooms in a variety of ways (Feinstein, 2006). This kind of support and teaching should be beneficial to ALL children. Of Gardner's nine intelligences, kinesthetic intelligence remains one of the most difficult for teachers to incorporate into the classroom (Pica, 2006). To meet the needs of kinesthetic learners, teachers often add quick movement activities between lessons to allow children an opportunity for movement. These activities generally fail to connect to the curriculum in meaningful ways or provide rich learning experiences for children (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006). As a result, teachers continue to search for better ways to help their students learn

through movement and better methods to evaluate that learning.

Dance Vignette 1

While formal research into the use of movement and dance to teach core content remains sparse, descriptions of several experiential anecdotes regarding its benefits follow. For example, I added creative movement to the literature instruction of my fourth and fifth grade multi-age classroom. Almost immediately, benefits became apparent for all of my students. As a special educator, I team taught in an inclusive classroom of 27 students, 9 of whom had disabilities. Children with learning and cognitive disabilities showed increased comprehension of character, plot, and overall comprehension of novels read. Students who had Attention Deficit Disorder became classroom leaders and head choreographers. They demonstrated the ability to organize groups of other children, to choreograph dances, and to think about ways that all of the other students could participate using their strengths. Students with emotional disabilities took risks and participated in movement activities as members of small groups which led to an increase in social skills. Children with gifts and talents discussed how movement aided their understanding of character development and their prediction of the future behaviors of characters in a novel.

Effect of Dance on Academic Learning

The available research literature documents additional benefits to using movement as a teaching tool. Werner (2001) revealed that integrating dance in math classes significantly increased positive attitudes toward math in students in second through fifth grades. Smith (2002) found benefits to students across many areas, but noted that the "creation of detail and nuance of movement [formed] a basis for developing written elaboration in their own stories" (92). Griss (1994) described teaching Dr. Seuss stories, the movement of sound waves, and the Underground Railroad. Grant's (1985) study of the use of kinesthetic approaches to teach young children at-risk also pointed to the benefits of incorporating movement for instructional purposes. While not using dance in particular, Grant used kinesthetic approaches with first-graders to teach reading and writing skills relying heavily on motor skills and the use of gestures in addition to auditory and visual stimuli. Grant stated that

> Not only did the kinesthetic method prove to be more effective, but much more enjoyable for the students as well. The physical movement of this method causes such a strong attraction for the young child. (461)

By the end of her study, the students in the experimental group met or surpassed the students in the control group in all five areas of language arts tested. Grant attributed the experimental group improvement to kinesthetic approaches.

Effect of Dance on Behavior

In addition to increased student knowledge about a topic, student behaviors also improved when dance experiences were added to the curriculum (Griss, 1994). Griss discussed the ability to take disruptive energy and make it creative. When creative energy is aligned with learning objectives, a positive environment is created. Many children who exhibit behaviors that challenge their teachers may be kinesthetic learners. These students have difficulty staying in their seats, facing the front of the classroom, and often need to

fidget with something during independent work times. Griss (1994) found that the ability to move while learning decreased the otherwise inappropriate behaviors of these students. It made their movement acceptable and a valuable part of the day.

Dance Vignette 2

As early as the late 1980s, I used dance to teach students to expand their movement repertoires as part of the Special Physical Education teaching and research Clinic (SPEC) at Northern Illinois University. Students who moved quickly from one thing to another (as is often seen in children with ADHD) were asked to move in the same manner as something that typically moved more slowly. They could explore these different movement qualities and train their bodies to respond and move in a wider variety of manners while they used their kinesthetic strengths in new ways. Additionally, my students with emotional disabilities used movement to explore emotions and determine how different kinds of movement made them feel. They also explained how feelings made them move differently.

Dance is beneficial for students who have difficulty expressing themselves orally or in writing.

Effect of Dance on Assessment

An additional benefit to adding movement and dance activities to the classroom involves the creation of alternate forms of assessment. Dance represents a very expressive form of communication between a dancer and an audience. As such, it is a useful tool to evaluate the expression of a student's understanding of class content. In 1994, Lee wrote about allowing a student to dance her understanding of class concepts. Lee's college student was able to use her strengths to demonstrate her understanding of the differences between consultation and collaboration. The student's performance proved to be a very powerful experience for all of the students in her class. Some of those watching her performance cried, others clapped and cheered at the completion of her performance. The class gave her "an ovation unlike any … had received" (p. 83). Everyone appeared to understand her points made through her dance. Teachers who have included multiple intelligence theory in their classrooms easily could add experiences such as these to allow their students new ways to demonstrate a clear understanding of their own learning. This is beneficial for students who have difficulty expressing themselves orally or in writing.

To use dance as a legitimate form of assessment, teachers need to develop appropriate scoring rubrics aligned to standards, benchmarks, and IEP goals. Teachers must purposefully and clearly state expected outcomes as they design rubrics so that they can objectively evaluate their students' performance. Rubrics for a performance are created in a manner similar to one for an essay. Ideas, organization, voice, and fluency can be scored as they would in a written essay. Clarity and expression of a central theme are equally important in dance as they are in writing and also can be scored through a rubric. If students are writing an essay about a character from a novel and are asked to include a physical description of the character; some of his/her feelings, emotions, or interests; something about his/her interaction with other characters; and something about important moments for the character in the story (Roser & Martinez, 2005), these same points would be expected to be demonstrated through

movement phrases and could be scored in a similar manner – are they present and to what degree are they explained? An example of a scoring rubric can be found in Table 1.

Teaching the Qualities of Movement

Griss (1994) pointed out that many teachers may feel "intimidated or overwhelmed" (p. 80) by the idea of using creative movement and dance concepts in their classrooms, especially if they are non-dancers. The transition to using dance in classrooms can be made more easily with the understanding that teachers do not have to dance. Instead, teachers need to set up the experience and ask questions that push students to create dances that demonstrate deep understandings of class concepts. Teachers also must have a clear framework for thinking about movement. Having a common movement vocabulary in the classroom benefits everyone because the common vocabulary makes it easier to discuss the movement phrases that are being created. Laban's (1974) analysis of movement provides a clear and easy to follow framework for thinking about movement in the classroom. Laban divided all human movement into three basic exertions (movement qualities) – weight, space, and time. Weight ranges from heavy to light. Use of space ranges from direct to indirect. Time ranges from fast to slow. By combining these three exertions, Laban's eight basic effort actions can be described (see Table 2). Combinations of these effort actions can be used as a basis for movement discussions and the creation of dances within the classroom.

Table 1: Character Analysis

3	External character traits (physical attributes & actions) and internal character traits (personality, motivation, & relationships) of the character are evident and clearly portrayed through the movement phrases performed
3	Primary complications/problems dealt with by the character are accurately portrayed through movement phrases
3	Organization is strong and contains well developed movement phrases and transitions; themes are clear and evident
3	Movements chosen match what they were supposed to portray
2	External character traits are evident in the movement phrases performed and some attention has peen paid to internal character traits, however the focus is on external traits
2	The main problem in the story is evident through the movements used, but other complications are not evident
2	Several important movement phrases are present and well sequenced, but transitions are needed
2	Some movement chosen match what they are supposed to represent, others seem very contrived or mismatched
1	Only external character traits are present in the movements used
1	Some aspects of the story are present in the movement phrases, but they did not contain the primary complication/problems faced by the character
1	Sequence of movement phrases is difficult to follow and lacks clear organization
1	Movements chosen often are not a good match for what they are supposed to represent

Teachers should begin by teaching the differences between heavy and light, direct and indirect, and fast and slow movements. Initially, these movement qualities can be used as transition activities between lessons, or explored more comprehensively as part of a physical education class. When students understand and can demonstrate these basic qualities of movement, they can begin to combine them to create the eight effort actions (punch, slash, dab, flick, press, wring, glide, and float). These actions can be combined in many ways to explain and demonstrate the movement of science concepts, social studies themes, and characters from novels. Then students are ready to create dances that demonstrate their understanding of a variety of subjects.

Davis (1995) reminds educators that movement involves more than using Laban's movement analysis and teaching the basic vocabulary of movement. Teachers also must ask questions that help students engage more fully in their own personal expressions of their understanding. Encouraging children to think more deeply about how something would move, or how a concept could be demonstrated or explained through movement, becomes an important part of fully developing their kinesthetic abilities.

Dance Vignette 3

A dance activity that follows an insect metamorphosis lesson and observations of caterpillars and butterflies can be done as a class, or in small groups that will perform for each other. A dance about metamorphosis may include an entrance to the "stage" area in the manner a caterpillar would move – heavy, indirect, slow – students can perform wringing movements with their whole bodies or parts of them as they meander across their leaves. The next section of the dance could include the forming of a chrysalis followed by stillness. The final phrase of their dance may end with a way to leave the stage the way a butterfly would move – light, indirect, fast – using flicking movements as they flit across, then off, the stage.

Dance Vignette 4

One of my student teachers, Michelle, created another movement example during a unit she taught her third graders on the water cycle. After conducting many experiments so that her students understood the properties of water and concepts related to the water cycle, she read a story to her class about oceans. When her class heard that the oceans were getting saltier all the time, they wanted to know why. Michelle decided to demonstrate this concept with a movement activity. She moved all of her students back to their desks, and had them move their desks into rows. Then she selected 4-5 students to come to the front of the classroom – the ocean. These students demonstrated evaporation, by moving to progressively higher levels and using floating movements. She then had them drift back to the rear of the classroom, where they condensed and rained (think dab here). As they returned to their liquid form and pooled on the ground, she had them move as run-off back down through the rows of other students (could be slashing if it was a big storm with a lot of violent run-off or glide if a slower river). As they moved down the aisles, each water molecule picked up another student from the bank of the river (these students represented the salt molecules). Once back in the ocean, the water molecules were able to evaporate, but had to leave the salt behind. When Michelle gave her end of the unit post-test, she found that every single student in her

class, regardless of his/her label (she had a few students with IEPs included in her general education classroom), was able to explain exactly why the ocean was salty and getting saltier. This was not the case for the many other wonderful hands-on lessons that she taught. Movement seemed to be the key to the understanding for many of her students who were struggling to learn new concepts.

Dance Vignette 5

Many educators assume that dance activities can be incorporated most easily at the elementary level. However, movement lessons can be implemented just as effectively at the secondary level. Students in a government class could create dances that explain the functions of each of the branches of our government. Since the legislative branch makes the laws, one group of students could include movements that represent debate, division, filibustering, and decision. Another group could create a dance explaining the executive branch and the enacting and enforcing of the laws. They could include movements that represent the role of commander in chief of the armed forces and other executive duties. A third group could create a dance that demonstrates their understanding of the judicial branch and their role in interpreting the laws, listening to debate, and determining constitutionality. Further dances could be created demonstrating the checks and balances between these groups as they interacted with each other.

Table 2: Movement Qualities of Laban's Effort Actions

	Exertions		
Effort Action	**Weight**	**Space**	**Time**
Punch	Heavy	Direct	Fast
Slash	Heavy	Indirect	Fast
Dab	Light	Direct	Fast
Flick	Light	Indirect	Fast
Press	Heavy	Direct	Slow
Wring	Heavy	Indirect	Slow
Glide	Light	Direct	Slow
Float	Light	Indirect	Slow

Conclusion

Many of my student teachers used movement activities as a way to successfully include students with a variety of disabilities in their regular education classrooms with outstanding results. Observing the progress their students made has led me to begin further research into the benefits of using movement to teach a variety of concepts at the elementary and secondary levels. While the preliminary data are promising, additional research needs to be completed to address the benefits of teaching content with creative movement and dance in a more comprehensive manner. The research and anecdotal evidence presented here demonstrates the potential positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities when adding dance and

movement activities to general education classrooms. The limited research into the benefits suggests the need for further investigation of kinesthetic teaching approaches in inclusive classrooms and the potential benefits to all students. We need to push ourselves further to think of creative ways to meet state and national learning standards and the many ways that children demonstrate their intelligence and understanding. Attention must be paid to all of the intelligences our children possess and to all of their learning styles. Dance is important to incorporate into our inclusive classrooms if we want to meet the needs of more diverse groups of students.

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