Dancing in Public Education

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Likely for many of us, our experience of dancing as part of our public education was limited to middle school awkwardness of a day of square dancing in PE and prom events at which we stood around uncomfortably in formal clothing. As Sir Ken Robinson noted in a recent Ted lecture, dancing is rarely taught in public schools. I find his reasoning for the inclusion of dancing a bit strange. He says, "We all have bodies don't we?"

And he seems to feel that is adequate justification for the inclusion of dancing in public education. Surely a deeper richer understanding of dancing particularly as it is valuable to human development is necessary before we can begin to understand how to justify the inclusion of dancing in public education. This fuller appreciation of dancing is what I am interested in developing in this course. To avoid any misunderstanding, I believe that it is possible to argue that teaching dancing in public schools is fully on a par with teaching mathematics, language, and science.

While dancing is considered an art form (ballet and modern), while dancing is one of the most common social activities, while dancing is understood as self-expression, while dancing is considered exercise, while dancing is understood as an icon of culture and ethnicity, while dancing is understood as healing and therapeutic, and while dancing is in most cultures inseparable from religion, dancing plays almost no role in public education at any level.

In public education dancing is considered as part of the arts, yet in contrast with painting, music, creative writing (expression), all certainly under threat of reduction and elimination, dancing does not even exist. Dancing is understood as appropriate only in "performing arts" schools. We know these schools best from their being the subject of movies and television programs. The movie "Fame" for example, was made (1980) and remade (2009) and fostered a television series. The popularity of these films is fascinating because surely it indicates a widespread desire among young people to dance and play music as a central part of their education. I'm going to show you the final music/dance scene from the 2009 version of the movie "Fame." Notice that it incorporates just about everything we have talked about in the many ways we understand dancing. There is classical ballet. There is modern dance. There is modern ballet. There are even overhead camera shots. The camera is a dance partner in other ways such as slow motion and moving cameras. There is distinctively ethnic dancing, we suppose African. This is the graduation performance and there are scenes where the students are wearing graduation garb, yet these are the very same garments that are worn in Christian choirs and indeed they sing gospel style music. They process into the auditorium wearing these robes in a rhythmic walking that is reminiscent of Christian liturgical dancing. And in the end, the dancing has forged a community as shown when the dancers join hands. Let's take a look.

While these films and such wildly popular television programs as "So You Think You Can Dance" which features young dancers and show such amazing exuberance and joy, they have had precious little impact on public education. "So You Think You Can Dance" has a program to teach teachers particularly

in schools serving at risk kids some bits of dancing that they may introduce to their students, yet this program, in no way, begins to shift the understanding that dancing simply has nothing to contribute to an academic education. Dancing is, at best, understood as a way of helping kids engage one another.

There are other programs that, while requiring enormous effort to develop, have become at least established extracurricular programs in school. The Dancing Classrooms program created by Pierre Dulaine & Yvonne Marceau in New York City in 1994 has now emerged in other cities has proven valuable to the enhancement of the development of students in large numbers of schools. In 2009-2010 Dancing Classrooms served 50,000 students in grades 5 and 8 in 525 schools in a number of states across the USA, Switzerland, and Canada. This program gained widespread public awareness in the films "Mad Hot Ballroom" and "Take the Lead." This extracurricular program trains teachers to teach ballroom dancing to students directed toward the goal of competition first among one another in a school and then between schools leading to a city-wide competition. Here is the movie trailer for "Mad Hot Ballroom."

Now, let's take a look at a scene from "Take the Lead" staring Antonio Banderas. This tango dance scene is performed to interest the students in the school in taking dance lessons. Well, who wouldn't be? Notice that the cutting and the camera angles allow Banderas to appear to be an accomplished tango dancer when clearly it is his partner carrying him. Here's the dance.

While the Dancing Classrooms program has clearly been successful and is spreading to schools around the country and world, it is a very rare exception to be sure.

It is interesting, to me at least, that this form of social ballroom dancing tends to enculturated students in schools associated more with middle and lower classes with the same values of etiquette and gender roles as the cotillion dance schools that high social class wealthy families use to enculturated their children: the importance of the man taking the lead, the importance of grace and courtesy, and appropriate behavior. Yet, it also enculturates children to the importance of competition and being competitive.

So it seems that we wish we (our children) could dance in school; we love seeing a few who do; yet no one is taking it seriously as important to intellectual development, to human education in even minor ways. Those students who dance in school are clearly in "special ed."

Dancing also plays against many of the most fundamental bodily and postural and gestural associations we have with education. Ken Robinson made that clear in his Ted lecture. From earliest education we often tell our children to "sit down and be quiet" so they can learn. We make a major effort to have our children "keep their hands off one another" in service to education. In terms of body posture and gesture, we understand learning as bodily inactive, seated with attention directed fully to the teacher (who is allowed to stand and move about), and silence. Dancing is moving, active, noisy, musical, touching, and certainly not focused solely on the teacher. Perhaps these postural and gestural factors are as important as anything in making it nearly impossible to see that dancing might have anything to contribute to education and indeed to see it as having major potential to distract.

Touching is not always necessary to dancing, yet it is certainly common in social dance forms. Touching has become a major concern in recent years as schools have had to face situations of inappropriate touching both among students and between students and teachers. The result of this clearly legitimate concern to protect students from abuse and inappropriate behavior has often resulted in strict rules against any touching of any kind by anyone in the schools. The unfortunate aspect of this result is to overlook the essential importance of touching to human development and growth even in terms of intellect.

I want to end with a couple ideas that will begin to establish something of a foundation on which to suggest the necessary importance of dancing to human intellectual and social development, and this the reason for inclusion of dancing in school curricula. It was long held that human physical brain development was confined to the first seven or so years of human life. Basically it was believed that something on the order of gaining permanent teeth the brain was fully developed by a relatively young age and after that, rather like teeth, it is only subject to decay and decline. Our only seemingly saving grace was the belief that the brain is sufficiently complex and underused that it can suffer significantly without impairing our basic abilities. In this model, education of children under seven or so is focused on a rich array of actions and trainings that are positive and creative, filled with art and human movement. After this age there is a steady decline in the creative bodily active modes of education with the necessary increasing bodily restriction. Young children have recess and play times and creative art and music. By high school most kids have no physical activities, save the often disliked PE class, with physical activities shifted to the extra-curricular and to those who are competitive and accomplished. It is also interesting to me that there is a shift in attitude among educators and parents that has taken place towards teens. My quick survey of the literature on teen development and education is skewed heavily on seeing teen education in terms of understanding and resolving "problems." Teens are understood as not having comprehensible or responsible behavior. Thus the resources are directed toward control over risky behavior considered to be detrimental to their development and education.

However, neuroscience research in the last couple decades has revealed some surprising and astounding new insights on physical brain development. This research is nicely summarized in Barbara Strauch's book *The Primal Teen*. This research has revealed that the physical brain is not fully developed in the early years and, indeed, there are several periods of significant physical development of the brain, referred to as exuberance, that occur during the teen years and into the early twenties. While these findings are most commonly used by the grateful adult who may now comprehend teen behavior as the result of an "unfinished" brain, there is another side to it. And that is, what sorts of human activities are most important to take advantage of these periods of exuberance so that the brain develops to its fullest potential. Clearly apart from good nutrition and the avoidance of unhealthy factors like drug abuse, perhaps the most important thing is physical exercise and, as I will argue later, particular types of brain-engaging and demanding physical activities. And dancing is an activity that clearly fulfills this characteristic. Should we be able to demonstrate that dancing is an activity that is key, perhaps essential, to physical brain development, then it can be argued that it must be a part of public education.

For nearly a decade I have taught a form of salsa at a public, yet alternative, high school in Boulder. The form of salsa is called *rueda de casino* and it is danced a partners yet in a circle and involves frequent change of partners. I developed this dance, which arose in Cuba in the mid-twentieth century, so that all dancers both "lead" and "follow" so there are no gender associations with dance role. Since all students know both dance roles every dancer can dance with every other dancer so boys dance with boys and girls and so on. I also developed this form so that role changes occur during the dancing so that every dancer knows these "moves" and partnering relationships in a thoroughly ambidextrous way. I have written extensively on the results I have experienced in this teaching, and, while the results are not scientifically established by such things as periodic fMRIs, the anecdotal evidence is significant.

Yet a final point needs to be made there, since I am clearly advocating the importance of dancing to public education. It seems that the only convincing argument should be something on the order of the argument I have just made, which is, that dancing contributes to healthy brain development and thus intellectual acumen. However, were we to think of education as being comprised of rich human social, human developmental, cultural, and intellectual experience (and how could we not?), then certainly dancing should have a role in public education.