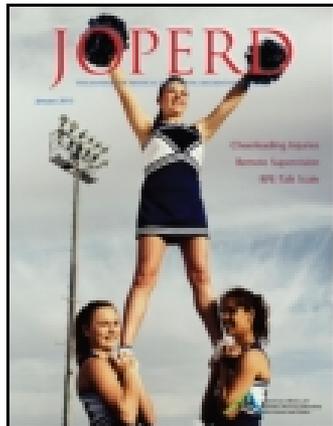


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Editor Ferman Konukman , Jennifer Battisti ^a & Pamela S. Haibach ^a

^a Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education , The College at Brockport , Brockport , NY 14420

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Progression Through Movement: Teaching Dance to Elementary Students

Jennifer Battisti Pamela Haibach

Dance is one of the four major art forms, which also includes theater, music, and visual art. Educating elementary-age students on the fine art of dance can be important in the advancement of their artistic, cognitive, social, and aesthetic and kinesthetic awareness (McCutchen, 2006). In addition to being one of the major art forms, dance is a physical activity that can provide physiological and psychological benefits, including muscular flexibility, aerobic capacity, self-esteem, and motivation (Quin, Frazer, & Redding, 2007).

Educators sometimes overlook dance while teaching physical education in schools, which can cause elementary students to be apprehensive to try dance at a later age. Early introduction to dance affords students the tools and confidence to progress and express themselves through creative movement. This article will provide helpful hints on class structure, leading the class, class activities, and student feedback to teach a successful dance unit.

Class Structure

Providing an organized, uniform class will give students a way to understand that dance is disciplined and controlled. Class structure will vary based on the age and developmental level of the students.

Ages 3 to 6 Years. Try to keep them engaged at all times and keep classes moving to prevent distraction and detachment. The form of dance most appropriate for this age group is known as creative movement or creative dance; it is an art form that follows natural movement patterns rather than a particular style such as ballet (Stinson, 1988). To be most effective,

teach at a beginning level and target the class as a whole.

Ages 7 to 10 Years. Expect more focus from this age group. This group should alternate between a group focus and an individual focus, depending on the maturity level of the students. Discuss appropriate dance etiquette with the class and progressively increase the difficulty of the lessons to further challenge the students.

Ages 10 and Above. These students should be able to maintain control and understand the etiquette expected within class. Targeting this group as individuals can help students progress and become confident in relying on their own talents and skills. Students should be able to handle more complex lessons and activities by this age.

Leading Class

As an educator, being confident in the topic can cultivate an interest in the activity. When class begins, address and counter some stereotypes of dance as well as discuss some of the benefits of dance. Ask students to name some of the different styles of dance and discuss how they differ. This discussion can focus on dances familiar to the local culture or may extend to dances across many cultures. Children may be surprised to discover the breadth and diversity of dance. If students are having difficulty thinking of styles of dance, you may want to prompt them by asking about dances from popular television shows or songs from their favorite artists.

Always begin class with a stretch and warm-up sequence. Dance is a full-body workout because legs, arms, and core work simultaneously to move the body

through sequences. Educate young dancers on the importance of stretching and warming-up before full dance movement by explaining to students that muscles need to be properly prepared for movement as a part of injury prevention. Begin with a dynamic stretch that encourages students to move and warm up the body using full range of motion of the limbs. Dynamic stretching can be any type of movement-based warm-up, such as light walking in place, aerobics, or smaller dance movements. After dynamic stretching, do some static stretching to increase flexibility in the legs by stretching the muscle to the tension point.

When stretching is finished, instruct students through a couple of core-strengthening exercises to improve the students' balance and posture. When adding a new core exercise, such as crunches or standing core exercises, begin by demonstrating and explaining the movement. This allows students to see a model of the form and learn how to perform it with proper technique to avoid injury and strain on the body.

Because the attention span is shorter for younger students, ages three to six years, stretching may follow a different sequence, such as beginning the class sitting in a circle (figure 1). Circle time allows students to see their classmates and have a social session with the teacher. Use static stretches during circle time to calm the students and increase their focus. Try to do a warm-up stretch while having a fun discussion on "how their day is going" or "what fun plans they have for the upcoming holiday." Giving young students a topic to focus

on allows the instructor to stretch and lead class without students detaching from the activity. Then instruct students to stand up and continue with dynamic stretching. Begin with simple movements such as moving the hips or marching in place.

An effective activity to introduce dance in the classroom is to play a game. Choose an upbeat song familiar to the age group you are instructing and encourage them to dance freely to the music. As the music progresses, randomly push the pause button throughout the song, instructing the children to sit down on the floor as quickly as possible when the music stops. The last child to sit down is out for the round; con-

tinue pausing till only one dancer is left. This game should warm the students up to dancing with the other children and help them to become comfortable with the open space.

After playing the activity, you can move younger students into the line formation to begin teaching dance sequences or to continue the standing stretches (figure 2). Give students a place on the floor in two or three lines, so that they are able to have space and can see the teacher. Setting place markers in front of each student prevents them from wandering closer to other classmates. Provide the students with an incentive for staying behind the marker or have them sit down on

the marker if they cannot properly stand behind it.

For older students, you do not need to give assigned spots unless you feel the class needs them to stay quiet and focused. Allow students to make lines themselves with their own area for movement space. If students cannot stay focused when near one another, do not hesitate to move their positions in the room.

Class Activities

When planning class activities, keep in mind the developmental and maturity level of the group, and be prepared for potential challenges that may arise. For the younger students, playing games or traveling across the room while taking part in basic dance movement will provide them with a better experience by allowing them to move while learning dance steps.

Ages 3 to 6 Years. Have students practice learning laterality (left and right) and body labeling by playing a game such as *Simon Says*. For example, the teacher could instruct students to “touch your right knee with their right hand” or “shake your left leg.” Next, divide the class into about three lines and instruct students to travel across the room, choosing fundamental locomotor skills such as walking, skipping, or galloping. If the movement seems easy, have them lead with the right foot first and then switch to the left foot.

Ages 7 to 10 Years. Instruct them to travel across the room with more complex movements such as jumping, hopping, or turning. Explain the movement patterns using simple terminology and try to avoid dance jargon when teaching students who are unfamiliar with dance. After traveling, teach easy, shorter durations of choreography using movements that are familiar to the students.

Ages 10 and Above. Progress to more challenging dance movements and incorporate longer combinations across the floor

Figure 1. Circle Time

First-grade children sit in a circle on markers during static-stretching exercises.



Figure 2. Line Formation

Students are placed in a three-line formation using markers to begin learning the choreography.



(figure 3). Allow students to do the combination more than once to get used to the movement and have more opportunities to learn the choreography. Be careful to teach sequences that are developmentally appropriate to the level of the class. If students are struggling with the choreography, break the sequence down into smaller portions and teach according to the capabilities of the class. Choreography that is too challenging can discourage the students and possibly compromise their technique.

Provision of Feedback

Providing individual feedback throughout the class is a way to guide movements and motivate students to improve. Progress will likely be delayed if feedback is not provided (Haibach, Reid, & Collier, 2011), because students are relying on themselves to achieve progress and may not know what they are doing incorrectly. Providing students with feedback is a way to increase progress and movement ability. Feedback should be given using simple terminology and should target one problem at a time to avoid overloading the student.

Ages 3 to 6 Years. Focus on positive feedback by encouraging them when they are doing something correctly. If the movement is incorrect, tell the students what components they did correctly and demonstrate again. During the demonstration, cue the students into the parts they need to improve. Try to keep their confidence level high while they are trying to learn the movement and avoid negative comments, such as "that was bad" or "why can't you get that?" Let the students know that it is okay to make mistakes and continue to encourage them throughout the learning process.

Ages 7 to 10 Years. Provide feedback on both the correct and incorrect aspects of their movement. Demonstrations with verbal

feedback and manual guidance can be very effective. Children in this age group should be able to understand corrections better than the younger students. Explain how the student performed and then explain how the movement should be performed, demonstrating the incorrect and correct movement so that the students can see the difference.

Ages 10 and Above. Continue these techniques and add peer feedback. Peer feedback is another positive way to increase correction retention. Peer teaching can maximize cooperation among students and can provide additional feedback to students beyond that of a single instructor (Boyce, Markos, Jenkins, & Loftus, 1996).

Conclusion

Dance education can improve physical development, emotional maturity, social awareness, and cognitive development. Incorporating dance in the physical education curriculum is a great way to offer variation and get students out of their typical comfort zone. Creating exciting and productive classes to inspire future artists is the first step to introducing dance education.

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Figure 3. Traveling

Sixth-grade physical education class travels across the floor.



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—Jennifer Battisti (jbatt6@brockport.edu) is a graduate student, and Pamela S. Haibach (phaibach@brockport.edu) is an associate professor, in the Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education at The College at Brockport, in Brockport, NY 14420.