



DANCING ACROSS BORDERS

Perspectives on Dance, Young People and Change

Edited by Charlotte Svendler Nielsen and Stephanie Burridge
Foreword by Sir Ken Robinson

ROUTLEDGE



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FOREWORD



Sir Ken Robinson

In 2015, I wrote the foreword to a groundbreaking collection of papers called *Dance Education Around the World: Perspectives on Dance, Young People and Change*, edited by Charlotte Svendler Nielsen and Stephanie Burrige. It was a compelling anthology, and I wasn't alone in thinking so. The book was so well received that the publishers agreed to a series, with new volumes looking in more detail at specific issues. It's my pleasure to expand on that original foreword to introduce the series.

As a long-term advocate of dance education, it was a special pleasure to introduce the first book because it brought together such compelling evidence of the power and impact of dance in so many people's lives. More than that, the book was genuinely global in outlook, presenting powerful case studies of many forms of dance education in 22 countries in all parts of the world. It also explored the benefits of dance education from many perspectives: for single individuals and for the development of entire communities. In doing all of that, it flatly contradicted many of the assumptions that deny dance its proper place in the education of all young people.

One is that dance is a vaguely bourgeois luxury, enjoyable and engaging maybe but hardly essential to the rough business of living in a complex and difficult world. Chapter after chapter showed the transformative power of dance in the lives of people of all ages, often in the worst of circumstances, in war zones, in poverty and in adversity of every sort. Another misconception is that dance in schools is a distraction from, even an impediment to, conventional academic work. It showed to the contrary that a deeper understanding of dance challenges many dominant ideas about intelligence and achievement and that dance education, properly practised, enhances both.

The second volume in the series, *Dance, Access and Inclusion* was published in 2017 and focused on dance programs for people with many forms of special needs. It includes examples of best practice in schools, in specific cultural communities and with professional dance companies and choreographers who actively seek opportunities to cultivate the creative abilities of diverse groups. Access and inclusion are increasingly at the heart of many initiatives with disenfranchised and traumatised young people, many of whom find creative expression, freedom and hope through dance.

Volume three, *Dancing Across Borders*, explores interdisciplinary approaches to pedagogy and looks at examples of schools and communities coming together through dance, including work with refugee children. Like the first two volumes, the aim is always to look in detail at specific examples of practice in different cultures and circumstances from all over the world. The series as a whole now includes examples from Australia, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Syria, Taiwan, Timor-Leste, Uganda, United Kingdom and the United States.

This unique series of books proves, if proof were needed, that dance is everywhere and for everyone. Since time immemorial, people have understood the importance of dance as an essential part of life and education. Why then does dance have to be researched, explained and defended in education at all? First, let's go back a step, as it were. What is dance anyway?

I think of dance as the physical expression through movement and rhythm of relationships, feelings and ideas. It embraces multiple genres, styles and traditions and its purposes range from recreational to sacred. Yet many people still think of dance as a marginal activity in schools: discretionary at best, but certainly not essential like mathematics, science or technology. There are reasons for this view. Some are to do with the origins of mass education in the Industrial Revolution, which prioritised disciplines that seemed most relevant to work and the economy. For the architects of the system, dance didn't make the cut. Others are to do with the influence of universities on the academic culture of schools, which associates intelligence mainly with sedentary study. Again, dance wasn't on the list. These systems took shape in the 'developed' world and have been widely adopted in the emerging economies

too. A growing number of countries and international agencies are coming to see that the industrial model of education is no longer fit for purpose and that there is more to the mind than academic ability. This global shift in perspective is another reason why this series is both important and timely. As well as deepening our understanding of dance education in particular, the papers in this series contribute to a broader view of the overall purposes of education and to a richer conception of human intelligence and sensibility.

The world is changing faster than ever, driven in part by the transformative impact of digital technologies, by population growth and by the increasing strains on the earth's natural resources. Around the globe, we face social, economic and cultural challenges that could elevate or consume us. To enable young people to meet these challenges, it's vital for education to cultivate the essential human capabilities of compassion, collaboration, creativity, citizenship and critical thinking. Dance and the other arts have irreplaceable roles in all of this.

Especially in Western cultures, intelligence is often equated with certain sorts of verbal and mathematical reasoning. The arts in general, including dance, show that intelligence is inestimably more than that. It's commonly thought that the mind is confined to the brain in our skulls and that intelligence is only what happens between our ears. Dance especially shows that our intelligence is embodied: that the brain in our skull is enmeshed in every aspect of our physical being. So too is how we think, feel and relate to the world around us. Dance is the quintessential example of this holistic nature of human sensibility. The fact that it's long been neglected in systems of mass education doesn't negate the compelling evidence of its larger value in our lives and cultures.

The good news is that there is a long tradition of expert practitioners and dedicated advocates of dance education that dates back well before the emergence of mass schooling and far into antiquity. As this series shows, there is also a considerable body of contemporary research and scholarship on the power of dance to transform the lives of people everywhere. They add up to a compelling case to bring dance into the mainstream of education for all young people wherever they are for reasons that are personal, social and cultural.

As I wrote in the original foreword to (what is now) Volume One, this series is more than a catalogue of examples. Its intention is "not simply to declare the power of dance but to fathom it". It aims to deepen our understanding of the many roles of dance in shaping cultural identity, in expressing our deepest feelings, in embodying relationships and in giving form to ideas that cannot be rendered so aptly in any other way. More than this, it looks at the conditions that are needed, in education especially, for dance to fulfil these roles. Making it happen involves issues of curriculum, of pedagogy and of assessment. It has implications for the training and accreditation of teachers and of dancers too. It raises basic questions of social equity, of human rights and of political priorities in the re-shaping of public education. For those who take it on, the papers here are a rich repository of evidence, insight and inspiration.

I am privileged to be a patron of the London School of Contemporary Dance. In 2016, I gave a lecture there in honour of Robert Cohan, the founding Artistic Director. The lecture was entitled, "Why Dance Is as Important as Maths in Education". I argued that education has to cultivate the cognitive, affective, social and spiritual growth of young people and that different disciplines, including maths and dance, are equally important in different ways. They're not mutually exclusive in education or in life more generally. The evidence is mounting that as well as being important in its own right, dance education can have a direct impact on students' achievements in other areas of learning, including, as it happens, in maths.

In closing the Cohan lecture, I mentioned this aphorism, which is sometimes attributed to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “Those who were seen dancing were thought insane by those who could not hear the music”. When sceptics doubt the place of dance in education, I have to assume they can’t hear the music. The papers in this series make it hard to ignore. They show clearly that the music of dance is global, timeless and insistent, like the pulse of life itself.

Sir Ken Robinson
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