

Discussion / Débat

A Response to Colla J. MacDonald's "Creative Dance in Elementary Schools"

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In proposing a theoretical and practical justification for including creative dance in the elementary school curriculum, Colla MacDonald (*CJE/RCÉ*, vol. 16, no. 4; 1991) commits a number of fallacies and makes several assumptions requiring justification. I discuss these fallacies and assumptions, and point to what would provide a more thorough justification for including creative dance in elementary schools.

MacDonald (1991) defines creative dance as "bodily activities that express inner thoughts and feelings and enhance those thoughts and feelings" (p. 434). Her reasoning about the existence of this inner experience is circuitous: "Because these movements could not take place without inner experience, the inner experience cannot be denied" (p. 435). MacDonald also quotes several of the many writers who assume there is an inner life. When inner life is defined as the child's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and judgments (Miller, 1988, p. ix), it is easy to see this inner life as what is given expression in dance (as well as in other art forms). But when MacDonald quotes Eva Le Gallienne's elaboration of Isadora Duncan's ideas — "through the dance one became inseparably a part of the great rhythm of the Universe, and that the harmony between Self and centre of being resulted as a matter of course in harmonious living" (p. 436), one wonders if exaggerated claims are being made for creative dance.

MacDonald's claim that creative dance helps children explore their views on life issues and the human condition is also exaggerated. She quotes Best's view that serious involvement with the arts helps us to see the perplexity of life. Some art forms, though, seem better than others for inducing this realization. Literature, for example, has traditionally been the paradigm art form for exploring issues around the human condition. "One may say very roughly that visual art excels in its clarification of sensation; that music excels in the depiction of mood; that literature is unique in its capacity to anatomise judgment and decision" (Meynell, 1986, p. 29). To what extent can creative dance achieve this end? MacDonald shares a dance instructor's recollection of one child's explanation of his dance. The child states that his dance is about a marriage breakdown that worked out in the end. The instructor then asks if it always works out and the child says no. MacDonald infers from the child's conclusion that he has realized the futility of

the human condition. This conclusion was derived from a discussion, however, not from the dance, where things *had* all worked out. MacDonald thus has not demonstrated how the experience of creative dance led the child to this realization.

MacDonald makes another unjustified claim for creative dance, suggesting it can be integrated with other subjects because it uses a generalizable method of learning. The notion of a generalizable method of learning can itself be contested. Bailin (1988) suggests

that there is not one unique process which characterizes creating. . . . [D]ifferent types of creative activities may call forth to various extents different processes and so the nature of the individual endeavour is important in determining how creating happens. The specific discipline and the characteristics of the particular work impose constraints and we develop skills and judgment which relate to these constraints. (p. 76)

Although elements basic to dance (for instance, body awareness, levels, relationships) may also be components of other subject areas, integration of dance with other areas should not be forced, as it appears to have been by one teacher MacDonald worked with. This teacher integrated creative dance and math using cards that showed multiplication and subtraction.

The children were busy thinking. You could see them counting on their fingers to figure out the answer. . . . Wendy extended the math activity by encouraging the children to work in partners. . . . This challenged the children more physically, and they seemed to enjoy the social aspect. They laughed, smiled, and were enthusiastic about working with their friends. (MacDonald, 1991, pp. 439–440)

I do not deny the value of thinking through math problems or working with friends, but I question how these activities are relevant to creative dance.

I believe MacDonald's exaggerated and/or fallacious claims are largely the result of confusion about the concept of art. From the outset, MacDonald calls creative dance an art form. She suggests the arts should be integrated into all core subjects. One wonders what MacDonald means by art when she suggests "mathematical fractions might be taught by rhythmic chanting and movement . . . or the meaning of the planets, and their positions in the universe instilled by creating dances" (p. 436). Art is typically conceived of as having intrinsic value. Richmond (1989) defines the aesthetic "in its most widely accepted sense as a special kind of perceptual attitude or outlook that involves the apprehension of an object, natural or man-made *for its own sake*" (p. 1; italics added). Apprehension of an object (or activity, in the case of dance) for its own sake is clearly not a factor in MacDonald's art, which is used to teach fractions or to learn the planets' positions.

Not only is MacDonald's definition of art at odds with art for art's sake, it cannot be distinguished from art as therapy. When MacDonald discusses children

feeling good about their bodies and their movements and how this will affect *everything they do*, she again views art instrumentally. Clearly it is important to develop the whole child and help each attain her/his full potential, but I question whether activities with this aim are conducive to the creation of art. Dimondstein (1974) reiterates this point when she suggests that

If self-expression is seen as the aim, we are equating art with therapy and the focus is totally *child-centered*. In this case, only the child can judge the value of his products. But the relation of the arts to feeling is subtler than sheer catharsis. . . . Although feelings are subjective, in the arts they become objective in that they not only are aroused and emitted, but are transformed into images. . . . It is in this sense that the arts may also be considered as *content-centered*. This means that we can find value in a piece of artwork apart from the child who produces it. (p. 10)

In conclusion, MacDonald's misconception of the notion of art leads her to propose fallacies and make unjustified assumptions about creative dance. Some of her claims are valuable, but one must consider carefully the purpose of creative dance. If it is to be considered an art form, it must have features of other art forms, such as the capacity to induce aesthetic satisfaction (Meynell, 1986). Movement may make math more exciting, but I would be leery about calling such activity art. MacDonald must clarify what she views as the purpose of creative dance, and if this purpose is to create art, what she means by art, if she intends to provide a theoretical justification for the inclusion of creative dance in the elementary school curriculum.

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An Educator's Perspective on Creative Dance in Elementary Schools: A Response to Sheryle Bergmann

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Having read and considered Sheryle Bergmann's extremely negative comments on my article, I find that she does not understand my points. Further, Bergmann and I evidently disagree on the definition of art and on the role art should play in the elementary classroom.

Bergmann calls my claims for creative dance "exaggerated and/or fallacious." My 15-year involvement in creative dance has included conducting original research; teaching in elementary schools, colleges, and universities; and presenting workshops in physical education classes and pre-service and in-service settings. I have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from thousands of students and teachers, many of whom are now transferring my ideas and methods from courses and workshops into classes with children.

When I first taught creative dance in Inuvik in 1977, I was intrigued by the emotional expression, commitment, energy, and concentration that students showed while participating in creative dance. These responses challenged and excited me, and creative dance gradually became a very important part of my teaching. I believe that any teacher who has tried creative dance with children knows that my claims about its benefits are neither exaggerated nor unjustified (MacDonald, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1992). As I stated in my article, only those who have experienced creative dance can appreciate its physical, intellectual, and emotional impact (Best, 1985; Courtney, 1988; Gardner, 1985; Miller, 1988). My research, my experience, and the feedback I have received have further convinced me that creative dance is both theoretically and practically justified in the elementary school curriculum.

Bergmann goes on to say that the reason I make "fallacious and unjustified assumptions about creative dance" is that I have "misconceptions and [am] confused about the notion and conception of art." I have great difficulty with her idea that there is a rigid definition of art to which one must adhere when teaching creative dance to elementary school children. My view of art in the elementary school system is *very* different. As an educator, my role is to help people learn. As a university professor, my role is not only to impart knowledge but also to advance it. In a faculty of education, this involves developing new and alternative ways to motivate people to learn.

Because I had experienced such success teaching creative dance and had seen the benefits it could offer children and the elementary school curriculum, I wondered why more teachers weren't using creative dance. I wanted to understand, *from an educator's point of view*, what would encourage teachers to include creative dance in the curriculum. Could only art specialists teach creative dance effectively? Could it be used only in physical education? Or could creative dance integrate both product and process, and be taught by any teacher who appreciates its intrinsic, extrinsic, and aesthetic value?

Teachers in my research, in my university classes, and in my workshops expressed concern about time constraints in general and believed creative dance was most effective when *integrated* across the curriculum. Bergmann expresses concern about using creative dance as a method of teaching, asserting that integrating dance with math is not art. But only when I responded to teachers' expressed needs, and showed that creative dance can be used not only as a subject in its own right but also as a method of learning and integrating the curriculum did teachers become excited about using it in their classrooms.

My definition of creative dance, as presented in this *educational* journal, has an *educational* purpose—to make learning fun, to provide alternative methods of learning, and to develop the child intrinsically, extrinsically, and aesthetically. Bergmann is quick to criticize this definition of creative dance and my conception of art; she does not, however, define creative dance or art from her own perspective. I agree with her that art should involve “aesthetic satisfaction.” Moreover, I believe I repeatedly demonstrated the aesthetic value of creative dance throughout my article.

Underlying my belief in creative dance is a conceptual foundation emphasizing the development of the whole child: the child's inner world, outer world, and aesthetic expression. These three factors are so closely connected that they must be dealt with as a unit. For example, the dialectic created between the child's inner world (intrinsic) and the child's outer world (extrinsic) provides an opportunity to explore expression, feelings, the unconscious, beliefs, judgments, and (aesthetic) intuition (MacDonald, 1989). I wonder what Bergmann means by *aesthetic* when she questions the ability of creative dance to express inner thoughts and feelings and enhance those thoughts and feelings.

I agree with Bergmann that other art forms can meet the same ends. I think it is too simplistic, however, to say that some art forms are better than others for exploring life issues and the human condition. I know teachers as committed to other art forms as I am to creative dance, and who believe passionately in these art forms' benefits to children and the elementary school curriculum. I do not believe any art form is better than another or more justified in the elementary school curriculum.

As an educator, I believe Bergmann's purist attitude and narrow view of art will ensure that creative dance does not get adopted by teachers who lack an

extensive background in dance. I believe further that views such as hers will perpetuate the status quo, so that little or no creative dance is taught in elementary schools. My research findings changed my beliefs about how creative dance could be defined and implemented. My experience with it has convinced me that my theoretical and practical justifications of creative dance are educationally sound.

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