

The balancing act of boys in dance

What keeps boys away from dance? What inspires them to stand up against the odds and accept the physical challenge? What issues specifically affect boys in dance? What strategies can we use to help overcome resistance that boys may have towards dance ?

Establishing a dance culture within the school

Students will always respect an existing tradition or culture within a school. If a school is known for its success in debating, the student body will value this recognition. Likewise, schools known to specialise in a particular sporting event often find no shortage of interested students on sign-up day, seeing it is *cool* to be 'in' rather than 'out'. This is the way many adolescent decisions are made. Establishing a cohesive culture becomes a challenge for both the school and the teacher.

Teachers in primary schools can teach dance as a whole-class activity. It can be incorporated as a way of exploring such themes as the solar system, investigating the properties of planets in terms of movement, the speed at which they move in relation to each other and the effect of the differing climates on life forms. This also presents a non-gender specific theme that starts to familiarise students with dance. Potentially this familiarity may break down some of the misconceptions that students have, or better still remove the possibility of their inception.

Selling the notion of dance is no different from selling the notion of sport, regardless of a few traditions including the inequity of media support and fewer public heroes. In all, students are less familiar with the culture and practice of dance. Teachers therefore need to identify males who are showing an interest in dance and develop their positive experiences in this art form.


Secondary schools have a different set of issues that affect their clientele. Adolescence is a very impressionable time when peer group acceptance is often paramount in the decisions that young male students make. At this point, if boys are involved in dance through curricular studies, it is essential they believe their masculinity is not being challenged. This does not mean that grunting indiscriminately and bouncing off each other's head is seen as body percussion and contact improvisation. Moreover, it is an issue of awareness that may need strategies to encourage softness and subtlety within the work they are attempting.

Encouraging boys can often be helped by the philosophy of taking students from what they know towards something new. If a group has a particular interest in sport, a starting point could be using sport shapes as a stimulus for developing movement. Eventually the group may be able to diversify into less obvious themes. Trying to encourage boys to have a go at dance is harder if the culture is not already in the school. Associated arts areas often provide a starting point: movement within drama, music visualisation in music classes, dance composition in PDHPE. Involvement in the school musical can often be a promotional strategy for dance. Once students are a captive audience, the wider range of dance experiences can be explored.

Boys in performance groups

It is important for males to be represented in dance performance. Their involvement is generated through identifying positive role models, allowing for a greater range of gender-specific themes.

I am reminded of a dance group that included two boys from a small primary school performing in a regional dance festival. The theme of the piece was non-gender-specific and presented the boys working as equal members of the ensemble, doing no more or less than their female partners. Another group, with only one male member, presented him front and centre with a 16 bar solo, regardless of his technical shortfalls compared with his female counterparts.



The flip side of the boys issue is the responsibility towards the many females who have been involved in dance for a long time and are at times more competent than their male colleagues, who at times are promoted for other reasons. Males in dance are seen by many as a novelty. They can be exploited to the point that their personal integrity is affected, destroying the very reasons for their inclusion in dance. As professional educators we have a responsibility to safeguard students against such exploitation.

Dancers study for years to attain a perfect sense of balance. Finding the balance between encouraging a student to be involved and yet still maintaining a realistic self-evaluation ...allowing males in the group to feel good about their involvement without compromising other students' self-esteem... recognising that a male has one voice within an ensemble...seem just an arduous challenge of attainment.

Without a sound educational rationale for the encouragement of boys in dance the outcomes may be seen as a token gesture. As dance educators we have the responsibility to administer 'a fair go for all', remembering that equal opportunities do not necessarily mean equal quality of outcomes. This begins to sound like an impossible task... but no more impossible than any other task which committed teachers undertake.

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