Teaching Dance to Kindergarten Children through School Concert Dance Performance: A Self-Review

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Abstract

This paper examines the dance pedagogy for children in six kindergartens from 2005 to 2015 by using the approach of auto-ethnography. It analyses the design of dance activities in two stages: the early stage, which emphasises learning outcomes, and the later stage, which emphasises the needs of children from the affective and cognitive aspects. It also discusses the challenges of developing a child-centred approach while fulfilling the expectations of parents and kindergarten principals, ultimately arriving at a balance between product- and process-based approaches. Finally, this pioneering study provides suggestions for ways to improve dance education for children in Malaysian kindergartens.

Keywords: Dance pedagogy, Dance education, Child-centred, Creative Dance, School concerts, Kindergarten

Introduction

In Malaysia, there are three types of agencies registered under the Ministry of Education to run kindergartens for children between four and six years of age. These agencies are government agencies, private bodies, and voluntary organisations. There is no standardised syllabus for these kindergartens, but all of them have to follow the curriculum guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education. In spite of these guidelines, the curriculums of these kindergartens vary and are largely determined by each kindergarten's educational vision and mission.

Dance is not a compulsory subject for kindergarten in Malaysia. There are kindergartens that provide music and dance class as physical activity. Most of these

classes are conducted by preschool teachers. There are also kindergartens that provide dance classes for dance performance in annual school concerts.

Annual school concerts are an important event for kindergartens. On the day of the concert, the graduation ceremony for six-year-olds is held. Through this performance platform, parents look forward to witnessing their children improve their dance skills. Hence, the student performance is vital and is seen as a learning outcome. Polished performances give a good impression to the parents about the quality of the kindergarten. Dance is the main program in school concerts. To ensure the success of the performance, many kindergartens are willing to hire experienced dancers from outside to produce a well-trained dance performance. For this reason, starting in 2005, I[1] was hired as a part-time dance teacher by six kindergartens in the Klang Valley. All of these kindergartens were private bodies. Five of the kindergartens were branches of a franchise and one was an independent body.

My responsibility as a dance teacher was to teach and choreograph dances to be performed at annual school concerts. In the early stage, the product-oriented approach was my main teaching method. Here, I primarily focused on the output or product in the form of dance presentation of students onstage rather than the process of how and what they learned. Later, I began to consider the importance of subjective expressiveness of children[2] in dance and adopted child-centred strategies in developing dance activities. Hence, I use this paper as a critical platform to reflect on and examine the teaching methods that I practiced in these two stages from 2005 to 2015. In doing so, I employ the brain-compatible dance education theory.

This study is a critical self-reflection. There are three aims in this self-review. The primary aim is to demonstrate that dance education in kindergarten in Malaysia has not gone through many changes since I was a child. From my experience as a child to my experience as a dance teacher, the teaching model is still product-based, where the dance activities are mainly for the purpose of performance in annual school concerts. It is to meet the expectations of principals and parents.[3] This product-based teaching model poses many disadvantages. To meet the expectations of principals and parents, the teaching method is teacher-centred. Most of the time, the creative needs of children are ignored in this pedagogical approach. It is mere rote learning. Sometimes, it inflicts damage on children's creative growth and fails to deliver the essence of dance to children. The second aim is to point out the challenges in implementing the child-centred approach because the expectations of kindergarten are still product-based. The kindergarten community does not see the needs of children, such as expressiveness and creativity, as important. The experience of dance teaching in some kindergartens is reflected in this paper through self-narrative. All names in the stories are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the subjects of study. My third aim is to suggest ways to overcome the challenges of the current dance practice in kindergarten, by applying child-centred strategies such as providing the children opportunities to express themselves and giving them a lasting and an enjoyable dance experience. Finally, I propose creative dance as the "midway model", as suggested by Smith-Autard (1997), to encourage more preschool or dance teachers to adopt a child-centred approach in improving dance education for children. The midway model emphasises the process and product of learning dance. Through the midway model, the teacher-centred approach, which emphasises dance skills, is not replaced by the child-centred

approach, but balanced with it to empower student learning in psychomotor, affective and cognitive aspects.

A child-centred approach is one of the teaching and learning strategies suggested by the Ministry of Education in National Preschool Curriculum Standard of Preschool Education 2017. According to the standard, child-centred teaching and learning strategies are the learning activities that involve "pupils' active participation in the learning activity, and pupils are responsible for their own learning. Pupils take on an important role in the learning process as learning is driven by their interest, encouragement and needs" (*Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum*, 2017, p. 9). Child-centred learning, also known as student-centred learning (SCL), provides many benefits for students including enhancing students' knowledge retention and motivation to learn, equipping students with transferrable and lifelong learning skills, and improving learning outcomes (Melissa Ng Lee Yen Abdullah, Shuki Osman, Mohd Ali Shamsuddin, Mohd Saiful Bahari Yusoff & Hairul Nizam Ismail, 2012). Although the child-centred approach has many benefits, research has shown that it is lacking in Malaysian preschool classrooms and teacher-centred is still the main practice (Mardziah Abdullah, Mariani Md Nor, Damaety, & Chee, 2017; Aliza Ali., Zahara Aziz, & Rohaty Majzub, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on current teaching practices and challenges in implementing a child-centred approach in our education system.

The theory of brain-compatible dance education is developed by Anne Green Gilbert to provide the most beneficial dance learning environments for learners. Gilbert (2006)'s formulation of brain-compatible education is based on her research on the brain-body connection. According to her study, the three main parts of the human brain: lower brain, midbrain, and upper brain, must operate intricately and together for the brain and body to function optimally. Gilbert (2019) used Zull (2002)'s deep learning and balanced brain ideas to support her theory of brain-compatible dance education in providing holistic dance education for all ages. Zull (2002) discussed the process of creating knowledge based on brain structure and function. He utilised the learning cycle from Kolb (1984)'s experiential learning theory and explained them from the biological perspective. I will employ Gilbert's brain-compatible dance education theory to evaluate and discuss my teaching practice in the two stages of my teaching journey, the early stage, where teacher-centred strategies were the dominance practice, emphasised the learning outcomes, while the later stage emphasised the needs of children by adopting the child-centred approach.

This paper employs autoethnography as the research methodology. I borrow the idea of autoethnography, as mentioned by Ellis (2004), to review my learning and teaching experiences in dance as well as my interactions with children and kindergarten principals. Autoethnography, according to Ellis (2004), refers to "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (p. 37). The researcher's personal experiences are considered valid contributions to existing knowledge around issues of study because, as Chavez (2012) noted, "we are all in a relationship with existing social, political, and economic conditions that are structured hierarchically to one another" (p. 338). This relationship needs to be constantly negotiated to preserve the critical distance of the study. I position my past learning and teaching experiences

as the subject of study and my current self as the researcher. The substance of the study is thus the researcher examining the subject of study with a theoretical lens.

Autoethnography has been widely used in the field of education as a methodological tool when a researcher needs to connect the writing with his or her own voice to reflect on a situation in a wider context. Hayler (2011) used the autoethnographic approach to explore how educators of teachers express themselves through self-narrative and how it affects "the construction and re-construction" of their "professional identities" (p. 1). Granger (2011) discussed how individual silence moments (moments when an individual is in one sense or another silent: freezes, gets stuck or becomes paralysed) relate to larger institutional and cultural silence moments. Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington (2008) believed that addressing the self through autoethnography in research can contribute to our understanding of teaching and teacher's education. Through this autoethnographic study, I intend to provide a deeper understanding of the topic of teaching dance to children by illuminating how my formative experiences in dance learning influenced my pedagogical practice when I became a teacher, as well as to speak on the importance of integrating a child-centred approach into the process of producing a preschool dance performance. By studying my experiences through self-narrative, I hope to contribute to the literature of preschool dance education in Malaysia.

Product- to process-oriented learning

While teachers who value dance technique will use product-oriented teaching, teachers who value creativity and imagination will use process-oriented teaching. What a teacher chooses to value will be based on their learning experience. A teacher's learning experience will directly affect his or her teaching methods in two ways. First, "I will teach my students based on how I was taught". Second, "I will not teach my students in the ways I was taught that I disagree with". Due to a lack of pedagogical knowledge and ignorance of the potential drawbacks in my acquired learning model at the beginning of my teaching career, I was more inclined to the former, which I advocated as "My teaching model is an imitation of my learning model."

My dance learning experiences were mainly for the purpose of performance. When I was in kindergarten, I first experienced dance through participation in school concert performances. In my high school days, I experienced dance through participation in Chinese dance competitions. After high school, I did not pursue my first degree in dance. Instead, I studied technology management. After graduation, I continued to learn dance by performing with leading dance companies such as P'nang Dance Station, Kwang Tung Dance Troupe and Dua Space Dance Theatre. Meanwhile, I took a few RAD ballet examination certificates. Throughout these experiences, dance repertoires were choreographed by teachers or choreographers and movements were taught through demonstration.

Since performance was the key element of the learning process, meeting the expectations of the spectators (such as parents, kindergarten principals, and judges as well as fellow choreographers and the general audience) had become my goal. As a result, my learning process became product oriented, where the purpose of learning is

driven by the artistic mission. Through this model of learning, I gained technical knowledge of dance which emphasised the mastery of dance skills. The cognitive and affective aspects of dance knowledge were seldomly engaged. Worst of all, the pedagogical aspect of dance was hardly engaged. If I am to become an educator based on these experiences, I will have many blind spots.

What was not given attention, but I regard as a very important element in my learning experience is the non-product-oriented experience. This experience took place outside the rehearsal room without the guidance of teachers or choreographers. It was a freer and more pleasant dancing experience where I had the chance to create dance movement through self-exploration. When I was in Form Two,[41] my friend and I watched a modern dance performance by Charlie Tan Dance Theatre named "Chuang Wai You Lan Tian" (literally translated, "There is blue sky outside the window"). We were inspired and fascinated by the performance. After watching the show, we wanted to dance like them. However, there was no internet at that time, hence, we had no access to modern dance. Despite that, we would stay at school after school hours and create our own movement by responding to selected songs. We enjoyed exploring and creating our own movements. I gained satisfaction and found an inner connection between emotion and movement. This was the precious dance experience that drove me to become a dancer. There was freedom and joy. I wanted to re-create this experience for my students, whom I noticed did not enjoy dance sessions taught at the kindergartens. I wanted to bring about a change.

Critiquing the product-oriented model and teacher-centred approach

When my role switched from a learner and artist to an educator, I relied on the oral traditions and memories of what my teachers taught me. Hence, my early teaching model was an imitation of this product-oriented model. It is similar to the "professional model" mentioned by Smith-Autard (1997). With reference to Smith-Autard (1997), the professional model emphasises "the product; knowledge of theatre dance as the model towards which to aspire; objective ends—e.g. trained bodies for performance of dances; stylistically-defined dance techniques as content; and directed teaching— teacher as expert, pupil as apprentice" (p. 6).

The lack of meaningful dance content for children in the product-oriented model

In the early stage of my dance teaching, the design of my dance content and teaching method was driven by the purpose to teach the students to perform a polished dance for the school concert. In this "professional model" that emphasised the end-product, the needs of the children were neglected. The content of dance activities was not planned based on the interests of the children, but to meet the expectations of the principal. The decision about the dance program for the annual concert was made by the principal based on my suggestions. Generally, the dances that I choreographed were divided into two categories: First, ethnic dances such as Malay Dance, Chinese Dance and Indian Dance. These were choreographed based on pop or ethnic songs with some basic elements of traditional dance movement gestures (such as *Inang, Joget*) and props (such as fans or handkerchiefs in Chinese Dance). Second, dances that contain choreography based on a theme, such as animals, insects or props. Sometimes, principals would have special requests based on popular trends. For example, when the

Korean drama serial, *Dae Jang Geum*, was very popular in Malaysia, Korean dance was requested in the programs. This dance content was not meaningful for the children because it was not relevant to their daily lives.

The ignorance of movement meaning and expression in the teacher-centred approach

My teaching method was driven by the artistic mission. The main objective was to produce a well-rehearsed dance performance on the day of the school concert. The expectations of the principals and parents for the dance performance were based on expectations of adult dance. They were benchmarking the performance of children with the performance of adults seen on television, online media, or in theatre performance. The dance movements should be complex and polished. A "good dancer" should be able to master the dance skills in terms of physical ability, accuracy of timing and clarity in performing dance movements. To meet these expectations, I employed a teacher-centred approach in teaching dance, where I demonstrated the dance movements while my students learned through imitation. I focused on the execution and performance of dance movement. The meaning and expression of the dance movement was not emphasised.

To choreograph a dance, I started with composing the dance set works. Normally, each set of movements consisted of 2-4 sets of 8 counts. I taught these movements through demonstration. Counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8 was the base rhythm for the movements. The students counted out loud when they were dancing, even when they were dancing with the music. Students were told the meaning of the movement, but the expression of the movement was not emphasised until they had mastered the technique. Normally, students could only memorise the dance movements, sequences, and formations when they were close to the performance date.

Through the process of participation in rehearsal and performance in school concerts, children build their muscular strength and endurance progressively. Compared to the first day of dance training, they became stronger and more agile on the day of the concert. Since dance involves every body part to move and synchronise fluidly with the beat of the music, improvement was seen in the children's coordination, spatial awareness, and agility in movement. However, the ignorance of meaning and expression in dance caused the students to look like "dancing machines". They looked like a team of disciplined soldiers who executed dance movements well to the count of eight. They were not connected to the rhythm of the music. They did not know why they wanted to move, nor did they have any expression of their own emotions. I did not know if the children were happy when they were dancing. Even though they were smiling, it was because they were told to do so. There was no soul in the dance.

When the children were unmotivated to dance, some of the principals would use extrinsic rewards to motivate the children. On a day close to the concert date, after a full run-through, Mrs. Y said, "Children, the concert is coming. Daddy and Mummy are coming to watch you perform. Please do very well in your dance. If you are good, I am going to give you present! Do you want present?"

"Y...es," some children replied while some were just too tired and unfocused.

Mrs. Y raised her voice and repeated her question, "Children, do you want present?!"

"Yes!" all the children replied together.

Finally, Mrs. Y was satisfied because she received the reaction she wanted.

The unsatisfactory outcomes from product-oriented teaching and negative manifestations of children' performances have raised a few questions for me: What is the teaching method that can provide holistic dance learning experiences to children? What is the essence of dance? What made me want to dance and grow up to be a dancer? The essence of dance, I came to realise, is pleasure, that joy I felt when I was dancing myself. Hence, my teaching should be tailored to sharing this essence with my students, instead of just demonstrating dance steps through rote learning. Through such a realisation, I decided that my teaching method needed to be revised.

*The incompleteness of learning in the product-oriented model*

From the perspective of brain-based education, such direct teaching through imitation, where only certain parts of the brain are engaged, does not provide holistic learning experiences to children. For further clarification, I will explain the process of learning dance in a professional model through Zull (2002)'s brain cycle model. He formed the brain cycle model through the connection of brain structure and function with the four processes of the learning cycle proposed by Kolb (1984). For deep learning to occur, an individual will first encounter a concrete learning experience that engages with the sensory cortex in the first process. Through a process called reflection observation, the information from the sensory cortex is then processed by engaging with the back integrative cortex through remembering that is related to words, images, or ideas. Next, new ideas are generated through the process called abstraction hypothesis, which involves reasoning and problem solving, by engaging the frontal integrative cortex, which is responsible for problem solving and decision making. Lastly, actions will be produced through the process called active testing by engaging with the motor cortex. These actions will become the concrete experience for the next learning cycle (Zull, 2002, pp. 3-18)

Examining the product-oriented model through this lens, one finds that when children learn dance movements through imitation, they are passive learners and do not engage their higher order thinking skills. They watch, learn, remember, and reproduce dance movements without engaging the frontal integrative cortex. As a result, the abstraction hypothesis does not occur. Students merely engage lower-order thinking skills. I posit that if they engaged higher-order thinking skills, the process could have developed their learning autonomy.

Lack of emphasis in the understanding of spatial concepts

Most of the kindergartens are in the corner lot of a double-story house. The rehearsals took place in an outdoor space where the floor was cement. A grid, where the rows corresponded to coloured lines and the columns corresponded to numbers and letters, was drawn on the floor to mark the students' position (see Figure 1). These marks were efficient in managing the formation of students. They were very crucial in ensuring the

formations were still in place when the students moved from the school to the performance venue. Most of the time, students were able to memorise their positions accurately even though they did not have the chance to rehearse in the new space.
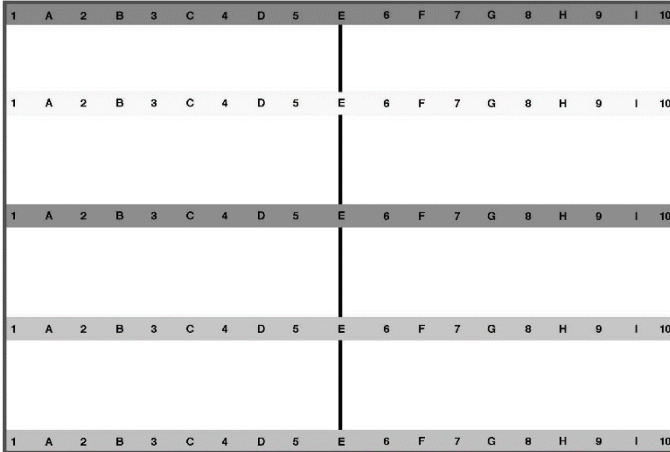
Figure 1. Grid for the positioning of students in the rehearsal and performance space

Although the use of the grid (see Figure 1) was a good method to ensure that the students were in the right position when they were performing on stage, I realised that this was not an effective idea for the teaching of children. Instead of letting students move based on their understanding of the concept of space and their spatial relationship with others, this kind of rote learning only trained them to remember their numbers and to look for the marking to stand on when they performed. The intended learning outcome was not achieved.

The impact of the negative discipline method

Dance performance in kindergarten school concerts is a group activity. Setting ground rules for the class was an efficient way to cultivate discipline and team spirit. Ground rules such as 'be attentive,' 'be quiet,' 'be together' and 'do not play with friends' were set as the model for behaviour. By obeying these rules, students learned how to control their behaviour as team members.

Through this process, children learned how to work as a team to perform a dance. They were aware of their responsibilities as performers and learned to be disciplined. However, excessive disciplinary measures can lead to students losing their active and playful nature. When students were not allowed to talk, laugh or be playful, they lost their enjoyment in learning. The situation worsened when negative disciplinary methods, such as the use of threats or punishment, were imposed on the students who failed to follow the rules.

In one school, when the children were very naughty in the dance class, the principal Mrs. X stepped in and warned the children: "Children, please be quiet, concentrate and do well in your dance. If not, I am going to invite you to my office. Abigail! Brandon! Claire! Do you want to come to my office?" They shook their heads strongly. I remembered seeing fear in their eyes. I never witnessed what happened in Mrs. X's office, but it could not have been a pleasant experience. As a result of Mrs. X's interference, the children behaved well.

Although the negative discipline methods applied by some principals were effective in the short term, such practices, according to UNICEF Malaysia Communications (2008), cause "physical and psychological pain to the child on the receiving end, as well as other children who witness it [....] Hitting, shouting at and humiliating children hurts them, damages their self-esteem, reduces their ability to learn and teaches them the wrong values [….] Hitting a child teaches that violence is a solution to problems, shouting at a child teaches that it is acceptable to be rude, humiliating a child teaches that might is right." Negative discipline has a wide scope. In addition to beating, hitting, slapping or whipping, UNICEF Malaysia Communications (2008) also lists types that

> can be inflicted as indirect assaults (pinching, twisting ears, pulling hair or dragging a child against his or her will); forced acts[…]; deliberate neglect of a child's physical needs[…]; external substances to inflict pain, fear, harm, disgust or loss of dignity; hazardous tasks that are dangerous or beyond a child's strength; confinement[…]; threats of physical punishment; verbal assaults, humiliation, ridicule and assaults on dignity, intended to reduce a child's confidence, self-esteem or dignity. (p. 1)

Negative reinforcement not only adversely affects children both physically and psychologically, it also impairs students' learning progress. The front brain, cerebrum, which performs higher functions such as language, reasoning and learning will shut down its normal processing mode (Hart, 1981). It could lead to unfavourable repercussions in the long run. Hence, all forms of harmful acts should be avoided at any cost in either dance teaching or any kind of education for children.

Critical Analysis of the Child-Centred Approach

I made several changes to my teaching style and tailored it to a child-centred approach by adopting creative dance and brain-compatible principles. Creative dance is a dance teaching method that allows the students to create their own movements and express themselves through the guidance of teachers. According to Lloyd (2014), it is "a unique self-expressive art form which blends rhythmic movement and aesthetic expression that is selected by participants to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 1). Brain-compatible principles were developed based on a "balanced brain" concept, where the learning process engages with all parts of the brain for deep learning to take place (Gilbert, 2019). Creative dance is a child-centred approach that allows learners to express their thoughts and feelings through active participation in movement exploration and creation activities. Meanwhile, the application of brain-

compatible principles in dance teaching will ensure that deep learning occurs in the process of learning dance. By applying the child-centred approach and addressing the brain compatible dance principles, I made four changes to my teaching practice. First, I began to explore movement and expression through story-based activities. Second, I started to teach an appreciation of music. Third, I integrated more games into my teaching. Fourth, I chose to increase the minimum age of students who could perform onstage.

Exploration of movement and expression through story-based activities

Dance or movement as a means of expression, as mentioned by Ozturk (2011), is for the purpose of "pleasure, satisfaction, exchange of opinions and fellowship or for mutual advantages" (p. 543). Movement is "not only physical motion but also intellectual, emotional and intuitional aspects of the person" (p. 545). According to Gilbert (2019), presenting a meaningful dance curriculum through movement exploration based on dance concepts and themes that connect with a person's life will help the brain and body to gain and retain knowledge. Hence, when teaching dance, movement and expression should not be separated. In fact, students should create and perform dance movement based on their own meaning. When children understand what they want to perform and what they are expressing through movement, that sense of understanding and enjoyment will come through in the dance.

By considering the essence of dance, I started to design class content based on an inspirational and imaginary story. A theme was developed for each dance to form a dance drama. For example, in the story of Dandelion's Journey of Life, the scenes were structured based on the journey of growth surrounding the main character. The creatures that she met on this journey, such as ants, bees, butterflies, flowers, caterpillars, and seeds, became the dance theme for each class.

Although most dance movements were choreographed by me, students explored their own meaning and expressiveness through dance activities. For instance, in the 'Dance of Growth', the process of how a seed grows into a tree was explored through the body. Children imagined they were seeds sleeping in the soil. Another remarkable sequence started with them crouching on the floor for water and slowly reaching out for sunshine. Students were allowed to use their individuality and creativity in executing these sequences.

Brand & Donato (2001) stressed that "storytelling and its related activities succinctly integrate the various brain-based learning theories, effectively bridging the gap between concept and meaning to instill comprehension and enhance learning" (p. 21). Besides that, such activities also promote children's self-motivation and extend their attention span. In my dance class, with story and exploration activities, dance movements became meaningful to them. Students related the dance with the roles they were playing in the story. Besides that, exploration through story also made the learning process interesting and rich in expanding movement vocabulary. They learned how a seed grew into a tree. Also, instead of being taught how to express themselves, students were allowed to do it freely. When they noticed what they were doing, they could enjoy the dance. The joy of dancing had turned into an intrinsic motivation. They smiled and felt happy without any extrinsic reward. This was a positive transformation. This was a breakthrough.

This transformation proves that the child-centred approach (exploration of movement and expression through story-based activities) is an effective approach because it conforms with two of the brain-based learning principles as stated by Caine & Caine (1990), "the search for meaning is innate" and "the brain is a parallel processor" (pp. 66-67). The natural function of our brain is to look for experiences that make sense and the brain functions of thinking, memory, imagination, and emotion must operate intricately and together for the brain and body to function at its best. Hence, exploring and creating movements in expressing thoughts and feelings not only satisfied the needs of the brain in searching for meaning, it also connected the cognition, emotion and motor skills. The satisfaction that the children gained from this process boosted their self-esteem. Besides that, children also successfully completed the deep learning cycle by creating dance movements to express themselves. First, the story and music stimulated the children through experience. Second, the back integrative cortex reflected and observed the sensory input data by remembering related words, images and ideas. Third, new ideas about what movements to do were produced through the process of abstraction in the frontal integrative cortex. Finally, the motor cortex instructed the body to do the movements. This process gave a deep impact on children's cognitive learning, where they learned how to solve problems and made meaning through physical expression.

Appreciation of music

Rhythm is what movement and music have in common. Instead of letting students count to eight, I allowed students to listen to the music to help them recognise the rhythmic pattern of each phrase. When they were dancing, they sang the rhythm or melody of the music. Sometimes, effective language similar to the energy of the movement and music was added to the singing to make the effort clearer. For example, when doing the movement of pushing on the accent of the beat, the word "ha" would be said. The use of singing in relation to movement helped the students understand the connection between music, emotion, energy and movement. I refer to Hallam (2010), who stated that rhythmic accompaniment supports physical education programmes in improving student's physical performance. With the accompaniment of music, different parts of the brains of children were engaged through "hear, see, say, do".

Integrating games into dance teaching

As Gilbert (2006) mentioned, dance education should "include opportunities for emotional engagement" where "dance class needs to be positive and joyful as well as meaningful and challenging. Joyful movement causes the secretion of serotonin, a feel-good chemical that boosts self-esteem" (p. 12). To provide a pleasant learning experience for children, I integrated games into my dance teaching.

Children like to play games. Games normally have a goal with a set of rules. To accomplish the goal without breaking the rules makes the activity challenging and fun. Whenever I introduced a game, children were excited and looked forward to participating in the activity. Hence, integrating games with dance activities was an effective way to deliver the class content. Besides that, the rules of class were adapted as the rules of games. For example, in the "Game of Teacher Says", the students would only do whatever instructions that start with the phrase "Teacher says." When they play

the game, instructions such as "teacher says walk, teacher says run, teacher says raise your hands" were given. When the class was very noisy and out of control, I would say: "teacher says everyone freeze and sit down quietly." This was to ensure students complied with the class rules in a pleasant way. Integrating playing games and learning dance helps children to control their behaviour and stay focused. They were willing to interact and move together with their peers in games. This is consistent with the findings of a study by Aliza Ali, Zahara Aziz, & Rohaty Majzub (2011), where children were more willing to interact with peers, express their thoughts and stay focused during the play-based activities because they enjoyed playing.

Increasing the minimum student age of for performing on stage

I observed that three- to four-year-old students were too young and immature to perform onstage. Normally, the school concert will not be held in the kindergarten. It is held in an auditorium or assembly hall. The change of venue and the presence of an audience would worry some of the students, especially those who were much younger. Some of the students cried to their parents on the concert day. Most of them tended to be dazed and confused when they were on stage facing the audience.

The development of children in each learning domain is different based on their age group, and teachers should "present developmentally appropriate curriculum" for children (Gilbert, 2019, pp. 26-27). I realised that when young students are not ready to perform, they should not be forced to go onstage because it causes more damage to the learning process. The decision should not be top-down and authoritative. Participation in performances should be a natural process, should come willingly from students. With this in mind, I proposed to the principals to exclude three- and four-year-old students from the school concert. In response, most of them insisted that all children should go onstage. The reason was that parents were looking forward to seeing their little ones perform.

The challenges of developing and implementing a child-centred approach

Although Niland (2009), Ray, Blanco, Sullivan & Holliman (2009), and Power, Rhys, Taylor & Waldron (2019) proved that the child-centred approach benefits student learning, we still encounter many issues when it comes to implementing the approach. Umi Radzali, Khairiyah Mohd-Yusof, & Fatin Phang (2018) reported that an intervention course and positive learning outcomes for students encourage teachers to adopt a student-centred approach in their classrooms. However, lack of support from the school community will discourage teachers from adoption. Thanh-Pham (2011) claimed that there were many failures in Asian universities in implementing a student-centred approach because the approach is western-based and thus inappropriate with the socio-cultural context in Asian classrooms. He remarked that to ensure the success of the implementation of a student-centred approach, educators must carefully study the Asian context and modify the principles of the approach accordingly. Without in-depth study of the cultural context and proper planning, the implementation would fail.

All kindergartens did not fully accept my proposed changes. My proposals were rejected by the principals and parents because a child-centred approach emphasised the

learning process. It did not meet the expectations of most principals and parents, which was product-based.

The first proposal for implementing a child-centred approach received poor feedback for two reasons. First, dance drama needed more time to prepare. The exploration activity through story-based dance consumed time at the beginning of rehearsal. Before I managed to lead the students to create obvious learning outcomes from the exploration activities, some of the principals intervened and questioned my teaching method. As I recall, after a few exploration activities, a principal texted me, expressing concern that she could not see any progress yet. She could not see the point of making children move and feel like flying birds or jumping frogs, wasting class time. After a few classes, she expected to see students learn certain kinds of dance forms. Second, the language of the story was in English. Most of the parents were Chinese educated and could not understand what the story was about.

At this juncture, it must be stressed that changing the method of teaching dance means changing the ethos and culture of a kindergarten community as well. Thus, it is not an easy task. From these experiences, I discovered that principals and parents could not embrace the child-centred approach because it did not fit with their expectations of dance. They expected students to demonstrate polished dance movements in a short time but overlooked the benefits of dance for children in other aspects of the process. I posit that in order to make the changes successful in the future, the advantages of the child-centred approach should be communicated to the principals and parents in advance.

Product-oriented or process-oriented?

My earlier teaching method, under the product-oriented model, failed to benefit the children in terms of expression and creativity. Was the solution to shift towards a process-oriented one? According to Smith-Autard (1997), methods that emphasise the process belong to the "educational model". The model also contains emphasis on " development of creativity, imagination and individuality; on feeling – subjectivity of experience; on a set of principles as a source of content; on a problem-solving approach to teaching – teacher as guide, pupil as agent in own learning" (p. 6). Full focus on the educational model has its disadvantages, Smith-Autard (1997) said, where attention is paid more to personal gains. Best (1985) stated that it is "impossible to assess and educate" the student when the process of creating and performing dance is totally subjective (as cited in Smith-Autard, 1997, p. 6). Hence, Smith-Autard (1997) advocated that "the quality of the process then should be reflected in the quality of the product" (p. 7). She proposes a "midway model" which contains elements of both professional and educational models (see Figure 2).
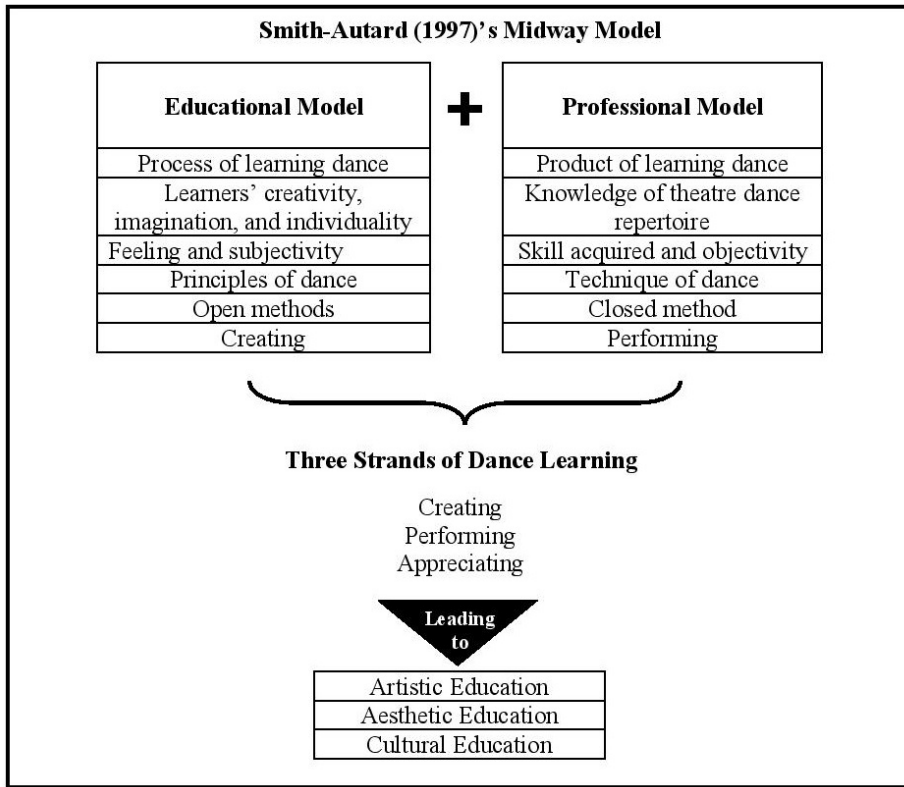
Smith-Autard (1997)'s Midway Model

Educational Model	**➕**	**Professional Model**
Process of learning dance		Product of learning dance
Learners' creativity, imagination, and individuality		Knowledge of theatre dance repertoire
Feeling and subjectivity		Skill acquired and objectivity
Principles of dance		Technique of dance
Open methods		Closed method
Creating		Performing

Three Strands of Dance Learning

Creating
Performing
Appreciating

Leading to

Artistic Education
Aesthetic Education
Cultural Education

Figure 2. Smith-Autard (1997, p. 26)'s Midway model, recreated by the authors

The midway model consists of three strands of learning: creating, performing and appreciating. Creating and performing are self-evident. Appreciating, as defined by Smith-Autard (1997), is "an ability to perceive and value the qualities in an object" (pp. 26-27). She proposed that "appreciation is the term to use when the perceiver comes to value an artwork for its artistic, aesthetic and/or cultural qualities and the meanings it has for him or her [.…] Appreciation will emerge as a result of much experience in creating, performing and viewing dances" (p. 27).

Smith-Autard (1997)'s midway model is similar to the educational dance model by McCutchen (2006). The educational dance model envisions dance education from an arts education perspective, expecting critical thinking in the three artistic processes. The three artistic processes, creating, performing, and responding, resonate with the three strands of learning in the midway model. Both models employ a student-centred approach to emphasise student development in artistic, cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Nevertheless, the vision of the educational dance model is comprehensive and inclusive, and its purpose is to "broadly educate all students in dance as an art form in all its facets" (p. 5). The vision is distinct from other models, such as the gifted education model, which only serves those who are talented in dance, the private studio model, which provides specialisation in particular dance styles, and

the physical education model, whose goals relate to fitness and skill development. Based on my experience and observation, I suggest that preschool educators in Malaysia adopt the vision of the educational dance model so that children, regardless of ability, will have the chance to experience a holistic dance education.

The midway model resonates with Gilbert (2019)'s brain-compatible dance education principles, such as "alternate teacher-directed and student-centred activities", and " provide both novel and repetitious experience" (pp. 27-28). By going through each process of learning dance in the midway model, students are engaging with all parts of the brain, which results in deep learning. To suggest a better teaching approach for kindergarten dance programs, the one that best fits Smith-Autard's midway model is creative dance.

Creative dance provides children the chance to experience and appreciate dance through the process of creating, performing and viewing dance. These activities are developed based on a set of objectives to guide teachers to assess the product, the students' achievements in dance. For example, the outline of a lesson plan suggested by Lloyd (2014) includes student objectives, assessments, and activities consisting of warm-ups, movement exploration activities, gathering activities/show and share, relaxation (cool down). Besides Lloyd (2014), many creative dance experts and pioneers have suggested many good examples in developing a good creative dance lesson, such as Carline (2011), Gilbert (2015), and Payne (2020). In short, creative dance can complete the deep learning cycle and the benefits of process- and product-oriented learning can be accessed. Students can get the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the product-oriented teaching only benefits children in terms of certain physical aspects such as muscular strength, endurance, and agility, but it does not provide a holistic learning experience where students attain freedom to express themselves and enjoy the essence of dance. Moreover, it does not offer a deep learning experience. It fails to benefit the children from cognitive, affective, and emotional aspects. Besides that, excessive disciplinary measures make students lose their enjoyment and interest in learning dance. Based on years of experience and observation, I suggest that a mid-way approach that empowers child-centred teaching gives children the freedom to express themselves and the space to explore meaning. This can lead to students feeling the pleasure and gaining intrinsic motivation in learning dance. Integrating games into dance teaching creates a fun and pleasant learning experience for the students while ensuring that they comply with the class rules.

However, the majority of kindergarten communities have not nurtured the child-centred approach thus far. As such, dialogues must be initiated within those communities to create awareness and highlight the importance of this approach in children's dance education. I posit that creative dance is a useful tool to embark on a child-centred approach as it emphasises the process and the product. It provides children a chance to express their feelings and thoughts through the exploration and creation of movement. At the same time, the product of learning, the dance composition itself, can be evaluated with the guidance of objectives and assessments.

Endnotes

[1] All first-person references in this paper refer to the first author.

[2] Subjective expressiveness of children refers to the expression of feeling and thoughts of children from their own perspective.

[3] There are kindergartens that provide child-centred or child-friendly dance programs in Malaysia. This paper does not intend to represent them or kindergartens in Malaysia as a whole. Its intention is to reflect on current dance practice and its blind spots in some kindergartens in order to create awareness of the needs of children in dance education.

[4] Form Two is the second year in Malaysian lower secondary education, corresponding to Grade 8 in international school.

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