Dance in the Classroom— Another Piece of the Logic Puzzle

by Evo Bluestein

Readers may remember an earlier article and photo essay about my dance residency program in California schools [issue 202, May/June 2008]. This is the story of Cherie Flint, a teacher who uses the program, daily, in her classroom. Although Cherie spent most of her career teaching sixth grade, she recently transferred to work as a kindergarten teacher at an elementary school* in Porterville, a rural town at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. Using my book and CD, plus what she remembered from my upper grade program, she introduced her kindergarten class to many of my K–4 level dances.

Recently, I completed a one week residency at her school. As I began to lead the kindergarten class through the dances, I was stunned! They were already dancing the Virginia Reel (complete with a "strip the willow" reeling of the set), Redwing square dance, and others that I rarely teach to very young children. As the week progressed, I could barely believe my eyes as these kindergarteners continued to astonish me with their abilities to execute complex movements and comprehend such advanced patterns. I asked Cherie what inspired her to dedicate time to dance in her classroom.

Cherie recalled that when she started teaching kindergarten, she was perplexed by the number of children who were not retaining what she considered simple information, such as the names of letters. Her colleagues reassured her that it was "developmental" and "would come in time."

"I was amazed by how many children had extreme difficulty carrying out two-step directions," she said. "I began reading about brain development to discern exactly what goes on in the mind of the very young child. I learned many things, but perhaps the single most important piece of information was very

simple and logical—the brain develops in response to need." Taking that bit of information and recalling her experiences with my program at other schools, she determined to use dance as a regular classroom activity.

"My reasons are both academic and social," she said. "Metacognition refers to the process of how children learn to pay attention—it's a learned skill that passes through developmental stages. Another essential skill that needs to be developed in young children is phonemic awareness, such as listening to multiple-step directions. Dance incorporates and requires such awareness. Further, it requires paying attention for extended periods of time, determining changes in the music and having the ability to integrate multiple sets of information, simultaneously. Overall, dance is a highly engaging format in which to address all of these developmental activities."

I was pleased to hear her articulate, so clearly, the reasons why teaching dance made sense in the academic environment. Her observations could not have been more right on target. I've known for years that dance accomplished a great deal more than improving one's motor coordination. Not only must students do what the caller says, they must be aware of what their partner is doing and how the other dancers are moving in relation to them, as a couple, and respond appropriately. Dance is an activity that emphasizes keeping time and rhythm, and rhythm and mathematical patterning go hand-in-hand. There is a huge body of research to support the idea that development in these areas has a significant positive effect on a child's ability to master mathematical concepts. With these thoughts in mind, coupled with her interest in fostering students' developmental processes, Cherie introduced her kindergarteners to dances that demanded increasingly complex levels of ability.

"Each dance in your program introduces a small piece of the puzzle," she explained. "The order of dances takes into account what movements the children have just learned and builds upon them in a way that holds their interest *and* is not overwhelming. Without your methods and expertise, they would not have come anywhere close to their current level of dancing, and I, certainly, would not have been able to teach these dances so efficiently."

Beyond the sound intellectual reasons for bringing dance into the classroom, Cherie recognized the social benefits and acknowledged that dance offers students a way of interacting with one another that they might, otherwise, never have. She was also tuned in to the idea that dance builds a sense of community and gives people a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves.

She recalled her own childhood of playing outdoor games with neighborhood kids, of parents coming together to troubleshoot their activities. The often idyllic-sounding childhood routines of the past stand in sharp contrast to the experiences of many children today.

"In our present world, the demands of making a living have taken many parents out of the home for the majority of the day," she said. "The world has become a more dangerous place and children play inside with technology replacing many of the games we once played. The consequences of this isolation are obvious in school where it is apparent that many children have not mastered basic social and motor skills previously considered 'normal' because they were incorporated into play. When you add in the social components of cooperation and learning to be courteous to one another, dance becomes an incredibly powerful tool to cover multiple areas in a small amount of time, and the kids love it. I get a better-than-average return on the time I dedicate to dance."

Although hard data is not available, Cherie has determined that dance contributes to an increased attention span, greater phonemic awareness, increased mathematical abilities, and greater ability to get along with one another. These are, however, intangibles.

As Cherie said, "Children are individuals, and

I have no effective way to measure these benefits. In our current climate, it seems all you hear about is test scores, but it is important that teachers, and all adults, remember it is our job to mentor youth. We do not have just one isolated goal of academic achievement. Yes, of course, we want our youth to gain academic proficiency, but, even more than that, we want people who will become contributing members of our community, who will be able to integrate information and problem solve. Dance is a very powerful tool to advance all of those goals.

"Until I started to try and teach the dance residency myself, I never appreciated how well designed it is. I do not have a dance or music background, so I do not have personal resources to pull from."

The irony of integrating dance into her classroom becomes even more poignant when one considers that Cherie has a physical disability that many adults would use as an excuse *not* to dance. As an above-knee amputee, she finds her disability to be a great asset in encouraging others to participate.

"Since it is obvious that I have physical limitations and, yet, I choose to dance, it gives others permission to get out there and not be perfect. This applies not only to students but to the adults in their lives—their parents, older siblings and teachers. It is especially rewarding to see everyone get out there, on the dance floor, during the Friday night barn dances that often follow a week long residency."

In Cherie's school, seventeen of the twenty teachers who participated in the dance program have expressed an interest in incorporating dance into their schedules on a regular basis. Cherie's teaching partner, Bob Loscotoff, has developed a plan to do this without it becoming an overwhelming undertaking for either the teachers or the students. Recently, their kindergarten class had its first joint session with a second grade class, for a Valentine's Day party.

Now, Cherie faces the challenge of finding new material.

"What good is there in only doing the things you have already mastered?" she asks. "We have just about mastered "Haste to the Wedding" and next will be "Lucky Seven." Evo, we need to learn the dances from your third-twefth grade book so I have something to teach them next year!"

* This elementary school has an enrollment of over seven hundred students, of which more than ninety percent are deemed "socio-economically disadvantaged." Thirty percent are "English learners," and four percent are "students with disabilities." The majority of the student body is Hispanic (sixty-three percent), followed by Native American (nineteen percent), with Caucasian, Black, Asian and Filipino making up the balance (2007-2008 stats).
~ *E.B.*

For information about Evo's school residency programs, see evobluestein.com; photos in this article courtesy the author.