Thinking, Feeling and Relating: Young Children Learning Through Dance

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has investigated the legitimacy of dance as a way of connecting body, mind, spirit and environment (Bresler, 2007) with scholarly discourse also addressing the cognitive, social and emotional benefits of learning through dance (Wright, 2003, Pugh Mc Cutchen, 2002, Bond, 1992, Stinson, 1988, 2004). Framed within the arts education and cognitive theory discourses, this qualitative study aims to investigate the lived experience of a group of four and five year old children participating in a preschool dance program designed to promote active thinking, social engagement and expressive learning. It specifically examines the role of dance as a form of human agency (Fraleigh, 1999) or a 'practice of participation', which supports the communication of the young child's voice as expressed through their intentional, purposeful and aesthetic explorations of their natural movement vocabularies. Data was collected in the form of photographs, digital video, program plans and teacher journals with particular emphasis placed on children's drawing/tellings and 'eye for dance' photographs and individual child and focus group interviews that enabled the children's voices to become visible (Samuelsson, 2004) within the research process. It is anticipated that this multi-layered investigation will shed light on the cognitive, social and emotional learning that can be attributed to a systematic program of teaching dance that places the child participants centrally within the teaching and learning paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

This study has grown out of a fundamental belief in the value of arts-based learning, specifically an understanding that educational dance is of vital importance for young children and should be included within the mainstream curriculum. As Hanna (1970) states 'to dance is human' and in many ways expressive movement can be viewed as a universal language of children who use it to discover and learn about their world, make meaning of experience and to express reactions and ideas to others and situations. An extensive body of literature has examined the role of educational dance within the preschool (Lowden, 1989, Bond, 1997, Graham, 2002, Greenland, 2001, Stinson, Smith- Autard, 2002, Wright, 2003, Lobo & Winsler, 2006) and despite the scope of this review it appears that there is no recent research that has comprehensively investigated the preschool child's personalized perceptions of learning in dance. This paper presents an overview of PhD research being conducted at The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Australia and includes a research project rationale, a theoretical framework supported by the literature, a description of the dance classes and an overview of the methodology that will guide the research.

THE RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

Eisner (2002) highlights the general ambivalence that currently exits in school systems towards learning in the arts, pointing out that 'privilege of place' in curriculum is generally granted to what he terms the 'hard' subjects such as mathematics and science which are considered primary resources for the development of the intellect. It is clear that in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, that despite dance education being represented in government curriculum documents (Costantoura, 2000, Board of Studies, New South Wales, 2000, Cultural Ministers Council & Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2007 Fleming, 2008, Young & Powers, 2008, Fiske, 2000) research clearly indicates that it is in fact a marginalized art form that is struggling to maintain its position as a rigorous study that challenges children's thinking (Bresler, 2004, Stinson, 2004). Also, it could be said that the current global educational climate is experiencing a return to 'back to basics' with emphasis being placed on targets, outcomes and assessment; an approach which has created a narrow focus on academic achievement and resulted in a neglect of arts-based curriculum which is known for its capacity through affective experience to develop creative thinking.

At a time when government rhetoric is expounding the need for the development of individuals who demonstrate resilience, flexibility and innovative creative problem solving it would appear that research into arts-based teaching and learning is warranted. To this end there has been recent renewed vigour around the arts in education, with recognition that linear approaches to teaching and learning that focus primarily on repetitive skill development, generally produce poor educational outcomes. A number of government policy documents (Costantoura, 2000, Cultural Ministers Council & Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2007, Hunter, 2005) acknowledge the important role that the arts play in supporting more holistic learning with many prominent scholars within the constructivist and reflective practice tradition having long agued for a well rounded or holistic education; one that fosters academic, creative and imaginative learning. It is also clear that there is currently a move towards the recognition of children as active participants in their own learning. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advocates for the notion of 'children as citizens' who take a full and active role in all matters that impact on their lives. It is the intention of the research to adopt a qualitative 'rights-based' research framework one which honours the voices of the participating children

and in doing so, provide new understandings of how children view their physical, intellectual and social-emotional learning in dance.

Recently Gilbert (2005) published around the status of dance education in a wide variety of countries and presents evidence that uncovers common barriers throughout the world about who should teach dance, what should be taught, and who should teach the teachers. It is also of interest to note that whilst there is a growing body of research in dance education that presents a range of theoretical frameworks (Mcphee, 1994, Lord, 1997, Chen, 2001, Buck, 2001) a gap has been identified by Lord (1997) who suggests there is a need for research which addresses "knowledge of dance education's practical realm"; focusing on the "observance and perception of the intricacies of teaching through practical experience" (p.202).

Finally, although it is clear that there is no shortage of support for the inclusion of learning in dance for young children there is unfortunately a shortage of empirical evidence to support these claims. To date, as Lobo and Winsler (2006, p. 504) point out most of the work cited "is based on personal observations, anecdotes or limited evidence, and has typically appeared in practitioner-oriented or popular books rather than peer reviewed, scholarly journals." To my knowledge, this study will be the first of its kind to use child participatory research methodology to gain insight into the efficacy of an early childhood dance program in regard to cognitive, social and emotional learning.

TAKING AN ARTS EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE–PRODUCTION, PERCEPTION AND REFLECTION

The arts provide humanity with a unique way of 'knowing' or experiencing the world and in all cultures, they provide important ways of expressing and representing ideas, emotions, values and spiritual beliefs and as such are legitimately grouped as a key area of human learning and activity. Within educational settings the arts are recognised as 'symbol systems' or modes of communication that are used in organized ways through cultural practice to express and communicate meanings. From this perspective a number of eminent scholars (Cassirer, 1953, Gardner, 1994, Eisner, 2002) have investigated symbol systems as a distinctive feature of human cognition offering an insight into the link between the biological, namely "the nervous system with its structures and functions and the culture with its roles and activities" (Gardner, 1983 p. 301). Thus, for the young child, symbolization or artistic expression is a form of knowing about the world; the child draws on the information coming in through the senses, as well as the capacity to think, feel and imagine. It is clear that this holistic process of 'giving form to feeling' (Langer, 1953) intertwines cognition and affect and for the purposes of this study it is valuable to keep in mind Langer's idea that there is no real distinction between thought and feeling; they actually exist on the same continuum.

Any investigation of the arts requires an understanding of thinking, namely how does the mind create? Eisner (2002, p 2) acknowledges that humans are "sentient creatures born into a qualitative environment in and through which they live" and hence he places great emphasis on the relationship between sensory or perceptual experience and thinking, citing the senses as the "first avenues to consciousness ". He sees cognition as a generic process of coming to know the world through the senses and he identifies the arts as playing an important role in refining the sensory system and cultivating imaginative capabilities. The learning process for the child is dependent on sensory input and involves perceptual activity followed by the abstraction of a wide range of sensory concepts that are made available from the environment. It is through the abstraction of each of the sensory modalities that concepts are formed; a process that depends upon a 'constructive' use of cognition

where concepts are formed and then joined with other concepts which leads to the child being able to make meaning of the environment, predict probability patterns and regulate interactions with it. Eisner believes that it is this process of construction and abstraction that is at the root of art and forms the basis of thinking and knowing, but he points out that "the sensory system does not work alone; it requires for its development the tools of culture: language, the arts, science, values and the like. With the aid of culture we learn to create ourselves" (p.2).

The work of Howard Gardner (1983) further extends understandings of the relationship between the arts and cognition. In addition to the Multiple Intelligence Theory, Gardner (1994) has made a significant contribution to theoretical understandings of artistic thinking by identifying three elements of artistic thought namely:

- *production* which involves the making or doing or expression of art;
- *perception* which involves looking at one's own work or the work of others and discriminating elements of quality; and
- *reflection* which involves looking at one's own work or the work of others and over time becoming aware of the artistic processes – choices, decision making and goals in relation to the discipline.

This thinking framework has provided a platform for the development of the dance classes with children having opportunities for creating their own dances, watching the dances of others and critically reflecting on their learning through dance.

CORRELATING DANCE TO THEORIES OF THINKING AND LEARNING

Theories of learning developed by a number of notable scholars Gesell, (1880-1961) Erikson, (1902-1994) Bruner, 1966 & Piaget, 1969) have located the importance of movement centrally in the construction of knowledge and since these publications dance educators around the world have called on this work in support of the valuing of dance education. Gardner's (1983) identification of bodily kinaesthetic intelligence as one of the multiple intelligences drew attention to the existence of bodily thinking and to the inherent wisdom of the body (Lazear, 1994) and as Wright (2003) points out learning in dance can also be attributed to each of Gardner's intelligences. Bloom's Taxonomy of Thinking (1956) with its 6 levels of complexity namely, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation has been sited by Pugh-McCutchen (2006) as another valuable teaching framework that supports learning from basic to higher order thought; an approach that teaches children how to "think, problem solve and make well informed decisions - all of which are useful in life as well as in dance" (Pugh-McCutchen, 2006 p. 82). A number of contemporary theorists (Perkins, 1997, 2001, Richhart, 2002) have also analysed thinking in light of knowledge acquisition and have developed a range of meta-cognitive thinking strategies such as 'look, look, look again' and 'I see', 'I think', 'I wonder'. Strategies of this kind provide support for this research specifically in relation to helping children to describe what they are seeing and thinking and in doing so enable the recording of first hand, rich narrative descriptions.

Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural mediation, Dewey's emphasis on situated learning and Bruner's theory of discovery learning, highlight the significance of dance as a' cultural tool' for supporting learning. Vygotsky said that, "art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 249). In his idea of the 'zone of proximal development' he highlights the importance of inter-subjective understanding and social interaction. Vygotsky maintains that problem solving in a social context compels children to formulate their ideas verbally and this process enables

them to begin the act of self-directed monitoring. He highlights the important role that adults or more capable peers play in the learning process and this study will regard the zone of proximal development as an inter-subjective zone where in the context of a supportive, experiential, empathetic educational relationship the children will feel safe to discover create and explore meaning making through dance. Research (Farrell et al, 2002) indicates that learning is a social process where young children are actively engaged in learning about their worlds with adults and friends. Through ongoing dynamic interchanges children and adults are involved in a process of co-construction of knowledge with learning shaped by the context within which the child operates. It is clear that children are strong and capable participants in their own learning and within the context of interdependent and reciprocal relationships they develop a number of important life skills including the value of sharing ideas and feelings and acknowledging the contributions of others.

PSYCHOLOGICAL-SOCIAL LEARNING IN DANCE

It is widely understood that it is during the preschool period that young children begin to understand who they are in relation to others. It is at this time that they move away from their parents expanding social relationships and taking on the developmental task of building friendships with peers. Research (Azmita & Montgomery, 1993) indicates that interactions between children of this age promote a range of cognitive and learning skills with children becoming increasingly competent in cooperative play, taking turns, sharing and understanding the perspective of others. A recent study undertaken by Lobo and Winsler (2006) has provided strong empirical evidence for the effectiveness of dance in supporting the development of both self-confidence and social competence, with the study highlighting the reduction in behaviour problems of participating children over the course of the eight-week program.

Within the psycho-social domain, the work of Carr and Claxton (2002, 2004) is influential for this study both theoretically and methodologically. Their identification of 'dispositions for learning' specifically resilience, playfulness and reciprocity provides a way of assessing children's earning in dance. Laevers (1994) interest in understanding the learning process through unpacking observable behaviours is also helpful. He defines 'involvement' through the identification of certain characteristics such as intensity of physical and cognitive experience as well as a deep sense of satisfaction with a strong flow of energy. Such a descriptor has relevance for a study of dance as it acknowledges the physical, cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

Alongside the psychological-social domain of learning sits aesthetic perception, which is defined by Pugh McCutchen (20005.p 257) as "seeing with the eyes of the heart". Dewey (1934) reminds us that "all thinking and thoughtful action, as experienced moment-to-moment, are emotionally qualified" and this idea is exemplified in children's learning in dance where dance as art can inspire because it speaks to the body-mind-sprit of the doer and viewer. Theorists (Redfern, 1982, Lavender & Predcock-Linnell, (2001) agree that engaging the aesthetic self calls on the highest order of critical thinking that bringing together perceptual information from the senses, physical refinement in motion in the form of kinaesthetic understandings and the complete use of psychological skills while incorporating ways of knowing or 'multiple intelligences'.

EDUCATIONAL DANCE – CREATING PERFORMING AND APPRECIATING

'Modern Educational Dance' was first published in the UK by the 'father of modern dance theory', Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) who was particularly interested in the relationship between the body, movement and the human mind, expounding the idea of 'movement consciousness' which resulted in dance being understood from the viewpoint of its affective contribution to the development of the moving/feeling/being individual (Smith- Autard, 2004). Laban's influence has been extensive, with many prominent early dance educators (Russel 1965, Boorman, 1969, 1973, Exiner & Lloyd, 1973, 1981, Stinson, 1988) being influenced by and adopting his ideas for the teaching of dance. These trailblazing educators believed passionately in the value of dance as an art form that provided children with the opportunity to express their inner selves and as an important area of study that should be taught to all children. Outcomes attributed to dance were identified and these included critical thinking, social skill development and increased understanding and sensitivity to feeling states. Most importantly these dance educators identified the value of dance as a vehicle for personal expression that could be made available to all and not just a talented few. The underlying belief was that every person is unique having the ability for expressive communication and for those teachers working within the discipline the "fixing and retaining of movement patterns had no special value" (Exiner & Lloyd p 3.) but rather the everyday movement vocabulary of the individual became the material for dance improvisation. For the purposes this study the term educational dance refers to creative dance that is taught as part of the arts education program; specifically to effect learning in and about dance. As Pugh (2008, p.5) states "educational dance is for all children: it broadly educates, it embraces all aspects of dance that have educational value, it increases aesthetic education and it affects the total education of the child. Educational dance is dance that educates and inspires the young. It stretches the body and the mind". Broadly speaking and for the purpose of this study, creative educational dance can be defined as the interpretation and expression of a child's ideas, feelings and sensory impressions expressed symbolically through natural, spontaneous and individual movement forms.

Drawing on wide ranging influences, creative educational dance has at its core 'dance as art', with the major concern being the production of formed and performed objects for aesthetic enjoyment. It brings into focus a framework that includes 'creating, performing and appreciating' that provides opportunities for children to explore and communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings and at the same time involve themselves in creative thinking including imagining, improvising, problem-solving, developing a movement vocabulary, decision making, selecting, sequencing, refining and appreciating (Wright, 2003, Smith-Autard, 2004). In relation to children viewing the dance of others, such an experience allows for the development of more sophisticated sensory awareness and encourages meta-cognition through an analytical process that involves the use of descriptive language, interpretation and critical judgements that fosters reflection upon personal creations and those of others.

It is at this point that it is clear that learning in dance is a holistic and integrated experience where children's cognitive, social and emotional learning is closely linked to aesthetic experience. By grounding the research in the voices and the lived experience of the participating children the main aim of the study is to answer the following overarching questions, namely: how do young children make meaning through dance and what is the role of the teacher in supporting meaning making through dance?

THE STUDY

The participants and setting

The participants were 20 four to five year old children attending a research and demonstration long day kindergarten program at an early childhood centre attached to a prominent University. The children attended three days per week between 8.30 and 5.30 pm during which time they experience both a generalist 'Home Room' program designed to meet their developmental and individual needs and a number of 'Specialist Programs' that included dance (the research program under investigation), music, visual arts and Italian language. 'Specialist Teachers', who had extensive knowledge and experience, in their particular disciplines, offered these programs. The data collection period was undertaken over twenty- four weeks with the dance classes being offered one morning per week for approximately one to one and a half hour hours.

Participatory Consent

In support of the principles and the powerful ideas emerging from the new sociology of childhood that recognize 'children's agency and competency and the primacy of children's lived experience' (Smith, 2007, p1.), prior to the commencement of the study the teacher/researcher met with the children in their Home Room to undertake introductions and to describe the intended dance program and research process. At this time the children were offered the choice to participate or not to participate by completing "I want to dance" permission form. Such an approach at the outset of the research process, makes it clear to the children that they are placed centrally in the research and at the same time they are empowered to ask questions about the research and their role in it. Throughout the duration of the research the children were:

- offered the choice to participate or not to participate in the dance classes;
- given the opportunity to make personal choices throughout the program to influence the content of the learning during the class,
- provided with an opportunity each week to have their ideas as expressed through their 'drawing/tellings' listened to and affirmed by the teacher/researcher, and
- invited to record aspects of the dance program by taking photographs of their peers dancing.

The adoption of such strategies ensured a 'rights-based' (Mayall, 2000a) research ethos where the participating children were actively involved in shaping and re-shaping the research.

To ensure that parents and teachers were kept informed about the content of the dance program, a weekly parent communication sheet along with individual child dance drawing/telling portfolios were produced. The latter contained copies of the children's weekly visual representations and verbatim verbal statements. These strategies were designed to ensure that a 'culture of communication' (Christenson, 1999) was established and maintained for the duration of the program and to more importantly honour the children's voices and their ongoing personal contributions.

The Dance classes

The dance classes were held in a carpeted multi-purpose open space at the early learning centre. The room was light and airy and had a welcoming aesthetically pleasing atmosphere as it was not only a space for a range of child centred activities but a children's art gallery where many beautiful examples of child art were displayed.

Using the framework of creating, performing and appreciating (Jobbins & Smith-Autard, 1993) the classes were structured as follows (Bond & Deans, 1997):

Welcome - the children entered the space and gathered together on a burnt orange heavy piece of material for sharing of news and introduction to the content of the class. This space became the meeting point where children gathered at the beginning of the class and regularly returned to during the session. It was also the 'audience space' where the children sat to enjoy, appreciate and reflect on the dances of their friends.

Warm Up – the children were invited into the space to make a 'starting body shape'. During this part of the class children are encouraged to 'sense' their bodies in movement and stillness, in parts and as a whole and also to look and listen to ambient environmental stimuli and to particular sounds either in the recorded music or in the percussion instruments used.

Whole group movement exploration and practice of skills – pre-planned content based on children's interests or movement material developed during the previous class was included. Using a guided improvisation approach children explored a wide range of skills with engagement facilitated through questioning, verbal; and physical suggestions, teacher modelling and social contagion. The dance content was influenced by Laban's (1971) three qualities of bodily movement, namely, space, time, effort and flow. These qualities are considered foundational components of an early childhood dance program with the infinite combinations of each of these qualities allowing for the expression of different feelings and expressions (Stinson, 2003).

Solo and small group improvisations – all children had the opportunity to perform their personal responses to the class material that had been explored as a group, with the thinking strategy 'I see, I think, I wonder' being used to guide both teacher and child audience feedback. Providing multiple opportunities for improvisation ensured the ongoing exploration of actions and reactions both individually and as a group.

Solo and small group 'free dance' – the children were invited to perform through improvisation 'any dance they liked' with verbal input kept to a minimum and 'respectful' audience behaviours creating a focused ambience. Performers were invited to talk about their dances with the 'I see, I think, I wonder' thinking routine being used again to structure the verbal feedback. Audience members were encouraged to describe what they had observed. Solo and small group presentations ranged in duration from 1-4 minutes with children being encouraged to begin and end dances in still shapes.

Relaxation – At the conclusion of each dance class all children were asked to find a space in the room in which to lie with the purpose being to allow children a chance to unwind. Quiet, relaxing music allowed for the establishment of a quiet reflective ambience.

Reflective drawing/telling – the children were provided with drawing boards and A4 white paper and black fine liner pens and were asked 'to draw something remembered from the class today'. Upon completion of their drawing the children were asked by the teacher to 'tell me about your drawing' and these words were written on all drawings.

The Data Sources

Placing the child participants centrally in the research paradigm places a responsibility on the researcher to ensure that the views of the children are appropriately represented. To this end the teacher/researcher ensured that the participating children had every opportunity possible to participate in the research as active social agents and in so doing become co-producers of the knowledge generated through the research. Data collection was undertaken over a period of one year (3 Terms) with the data collection sources including children's drawing/telling (n=432), photographic documentation (n=3000), including the children's 'eye for dance' photographs (n=340), digital video (n=20 hours), teacher/researcher program plans and journal notes, written observations taken from the video, semi-structured child interviews/focus groups.

Drawing/telling

As outlined earlier the children were asked at the conclusion of the class to 'draw something remembered from dance today' (Bond & Deans, 1997 and given the opportunity to share this drawing with the teacher/ researcher who recorded the child's verbatim verbal description of the drawing (Wright, 2007). The data collection technique of drawing/telling is well suited to this study as it is a comfortable and accessible technique for collecting meaningful data from young children and allows children to participate directly and effectively in the research. Piaget (1962) commented that a child's art represents a replica of his/her thinking, hence the visual record created by each participating child at the conclusion of the session involved the individual in the immediate identification and tracking of thoughts, feelings, images and actions experienced during the class. These drawings will be subjected to a content analysis, which will uncover categories of description that will inform the research.

As language is attached to lived experience (Wittgenstein, 1980) and words in effect are socially fashioned mediatory devices that are an end product of thinking (Vygotsky, 1986) the record of children's descriptions of their drawings will add additional strength to this data set. It is also important to note that listening to children and what they have to say about their drawings provides significant insight into their personal, social and intellectual worlds (Cameron, 2005, Clark, 2005, Docket & Perry, 2005, Wright, 2003).

Interviews/focus groups

Data was also collected via interview and or focus group discussions (Christenson & James, 1999, Kindler, 1994, Wright, 2001) where the participating children had a chance to view and comment on a selected video clip of their personal learning in dance. This was an additional technique that provided a suitable and accessible means of capturing first hand the children's responses in relation to their dance experience. The interviews and or focus groups conversations were guided by three main questions inspired by a thinking routine developed by Ritchhart, Palmer, Church & Tishman (2006) namely:
- What do you see in this video?
- What do you think about what you have seen?
- What do you wonder about what you have just seen?

Photographs – photo-narratives

A systematic record of the children's learning in dance and the role of the teacher was captured through photographs. These photographs will be subjected to a content analysis and a selection transcribed using a 'learning story' approach, which will describe anecdotes using a structured framework (Arthur et al, 2008; Lockett, 2002, Nyland & Ferris, 2008). This 'photo-narrative' method is adapted from a variety of research techniques that utilize cameras as a research tool (Polkinghorne, 1988) including reflexive photography (Harrington, & Schibik, 2003) and photo novella (Wang & Burris 1994, Wang et al 1996, Wang and Burris 1997) where the camera is seen to offer participants an opportunity to capture what transpires in a particular community. At a basic level photo-narrative is a technique for exploring less conscious aspects of lived experience and as dance is a transient art form it is necessary to capture the evidence of children's expressive movement both individually and within the group situation. Each participating child was regularly photographed over the 24 weeks; the aim being to create through the photographic documentation and resulting narrative a gestalt of each child's physical experience of learning in dance and to provide an important aide memoir for the analysis. Photo-narratives will be created and then coded using appropriate methods.

Children's 'eye for dance' photos

All participating children were given a digital still camera with which to record their understandings of learning in dance. This is a research method empowers the participants to be part of the research process and provides yet another technique for capturing the personal and individual interests and stories of the children. These photographs were used as stimulus for discussion during the interviews where the thinking routine 'I see, I think, I wonder' was also be used.

Digital video

A systematic record of the lived experience of the dance class was recorded using digital video. This was considered a necessary technique to capture both the children's physical, verbal and social interactions and the role of the teacher. From this footage an accurate record of the children's movement vocabulary, their voices and the teacher's interactions with the children can be guaranteed. The footage also provides a memoir for the analysis with certain selections used as a stimulus for child interviews/focus groups.

Teacher /researcher program plans & journal notes

The teacher/researcher maintained a comprehensive and systematic documentation of the dance program, which was used throughout the data collection period as an important working tool to support on going reflective practice (Schon, 1983) and provide insight into the development of the curriculum and teacher's responses. Weekly evaluation of the program was documented in the journal providing a first step to focus thinking around the children's responses to their meaning making in dance.

THE METHODOLOGY

Vygotsky (1971) maintains that the experience of art is both personal and social and it is the intention of this study to investigate dance as an expression of the children's 'lived experience' from both a personal and individual perspective and from the perspective of making shared meaning within a social situation. The study will adopt a qualitative approach to research; an approach that aims to search for understanding through the investigation of the whole by looking at relationships within the culture of the dance class (Ary, Jacobs Razavieh, 2002). As Chappell and Young (2006, p.10) point out: " Researching any artistic work which prioritises sensory, embodied, unpredictable activity presents challenges. These challenges are compounded when the artistic work involves young children". Therefore what has been required is a research paradigm that caters for an in-depth investigation of thinking and learning and the characteristics and qualities of dance with child participation being central. To this end qualitative research with its capacity to uncover the "importance of the subjective, experiential life world of human beings" (Burns, 1990. p.9) provides a number of different ways to support the discovery of personal meaning and the nature of the experience under review. Through the use of a range of methods such as case studies, observations of experience, interviews, visual and written texts, the nature of the experience will be uncovered with the researcher being involved in an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the analysis of the subject matter (Flick, 1992).

Heeding the advice of Carr and Claxton (2002) that no single method is adequate on its own and that what is necessary is the development of instruments and approaches that integrate a range of assessment methods, this study has adopted a range of interconnected methods using approaches from Phenomenology, Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry. It is envisaged that such an approach will provide vigour, breadth and depth to the investigation and add to the growing body of qualitative research that places the child's ideas and thoughts at the centre of the investigation. Added to this has been an attempt to make a shift from the idea of 'research on children' to 'research with children' and even moving one step further to 'research by children' by involving the participating children more directly in the research process by selecting participatory techniques such as drawing/ telling, child interviews and focus groups and child photographs. The aim here is to allow children to have the opportunity for equitable input into the research process where their interests, ideas and thoughts can be given voice through regular opportunities to record their experience and talk through the meanings of their understandings (James, 1996).

THE ANALYSIS

Although 'the fundamental stance is an interpretative one' (Giorgi, 1992. P. 120) the wide range of methods described below will generate rich description and allow for an analysis of data from a number of perspectives.

INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA)

Phenomenology is a research method widely used to investigate lived experience; the aim being, to deeply explore and describe a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1970, Moustakas, 1994, van Manen, 1984, 1990). For the purposes of this research the phenomena being investigated is the lived experience of the children's learning in dance; a phenomena that can be perceived and observed from a cognitive, visual and affective viewpoint. As Husserl (1965), an early pioneer of phenomenology points out the experience can be understood if the researcher returns

'to the things themselves' seeing these things free of biases. For the purposes of this study the researcher will use IPA through purposive sampling from all data sources which will be subjected to a systematic search for themes which once identified will be clustered into master themes and sub-themes. The final table of themes will then be turned into a narrative account with verbatim excerpts from the participants used to support the list of themes.

GROUNDED THEORY

A number of basic features of grounded theory also make it an appropriate methodology for this research namely: grounded theory

- specifically includes an analysis of process. From the outset of the first observed dance class, collection of children's drawing/tellings records, photographic and video records and child interviews, the researcher was involved in a reflective process that aimed to uncover the meaning of what was heard or seen;
- takes into consideration broader contextual issues (in the case of this study the preschool context) that may influence the phenomena being studied; and
- makes a sought after contribution in areas where little research has been done and as stated previously there has been little empirical research into preschool children's learning through dance.

The aim of the ground theory coding will be to create new theory that is "built form data or grounded in data" (Newman, 2006 p.157). Such an approach allows data and theory to interact giving the researcher the opportunity to remain open to the unexpected. Raw data will be reduced into concepts that are designated to stand for categories with these being developed and integrated into a final theory, a process that will be achieved by 'open coding', 'axial coding', 'selective coding', journaling and diagramming. Hence the data will be subjected to a multi-tiered analysis, which will include:

- word-based 'open coding' which will be undertaken to ensure that the children's words drive the analysis. This process will achieve the identification of patterns or categories of description put forward by the children in the research process (Richards, 2001; Siraj Blatchford & Siraj Blatchford, 2001).
- axial coding which will involve the rebuilding the data, that had been fractured from the open coding process, in new ways by establishing relationships between categories and between categories and their sub-categories as identified in the literature (Creswell, 2003); and
- selective coding which will involve the scanning all the data and previous codes, making a selection of core categories of the re-built data, systematically relating them to other categories, validating a selection of relationships and filling in categories that need further development or refinement. During this phase of the coding, differences and similarities of how children experienced their learning in dance will be uncovered with the major themes or concepts identified guiding the search (Neuman, 2006).

SUB-GROUP CASE STUDY SAMPLES AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

As the study has generated a large volume of data, it has been necessary to select a number of sub-group case studies from the overarching case study that comprises 20 children. These sub-groups will be identified to ensure gender balance, differences in learning dispositions and styles and contrasting personalized movement vocabularies. As the literature points out "the principal characteristic of case studies is that they examine

individual instances or cases, of some phenomenon" (McBurney 2001 p. 223) and provide an appropriate method to investigate the outcomes of experience within the real-life context. Following the selection of a number of sub-group case studies (n=8) an in depth content analysis of all data generated by participating children will be undertaken. In the first instance this will involve coding the 'manifest content' that will identify the frequency of occurring themes, ideas or feelings. To ensure reliability it may be necessary to undertake 'latent content' analysis that will involve some personal interpretation of the identified themes, ideas or feelings with 'bracketing' adopted as a way of questioning and re-examining the themes, ideas and feelings that emerge.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Polkinghorne (1988) has identified two types of narrative inquiry, namely descriptive and explanatory and it is my intention to use descriptive narrative to produce an accurate description of the identified 'critical events' so as to capture the vivid dance experience for individuals and groups. The identification by Schon (1991) of 'reflection-in-action' allows the researcher to construct new theory of a unique case and as such it is the aim of this research to describe the phenomena of the dance experience, shape what passes for evidence of children making meaning through dance and create defensible research texts. Also to ensure that the research is located within the early childhood paradigm, 'Learning Stories' (Carr, 2001) which will include an in-depth narrative of the observed event will be generated from multiple data sources and allow for a contextual analysis. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) have introduced the concept of the 'three dimensional' narrative inquiry space; a concept that allows inquiries (situated in place) to travel- inward, outward, backward and forward. It will be the challenge of such an in-depth analysis to successfully create a picture of the lived experience of the dance program and present evidence which demonstrates how young children make meaning through dance and the role of the teacher in supporting this meaning making.

CONCLUSION

It has been the intention of this paper to outline current doctorate qualitative research into children's learning in dance. The literature presented supports the relevance of the investigation and the research methodology and procedures indicate a commitment to a systematic and detailed inquiry. The quest for the creation of new knowledge about how young children learn through dance and the role of the teacher in facilitating this learning is currently fuelling an in-depth and extensive analysis of the data. Before too much time has elapsed it is envisaged that the outcomes of this process will provide teachers and other researchers with insight into the nature of dance teaching and the outcomes that can be contributed to learning through dance. In the Four Quartets, T S Eliot draws attention to the importance of explorative inquiry. He writes:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all of our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*

The research endeavour described herewith outlines an ambitious and unique exploratory journey that aims to generate new discoveries and understandings.

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