

Dancing with the “other”:

An action research project in a children’s social care institution

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Abstract

This article presents an educational action research that aimed to examine if student teachers can transform previous perceptions towards the diverse “other”, through an experiential dance teaching project. Participants in the project were a group of students at a Teachers’ Education University Department and a group of children living in a social care institution located in the same city as the University. The action research indicated that the deep emotional relationship that was developed between the students and the children led to the enhancement of their critical reflection. This issue affected the student teachers’ perceptions about the particular children and became a means of personal and professional empowerment.

Key words: action research, transformative learning, reflective dance pedagogy, creative dance, student teachers.

1. Introduction

The action-research project that is presented in this article aimed primarily to enable the spontaneous creative expression of a group of children that live in a social care institution. This initial aim was going to proceed through teaching children creative dance, in collaboration with a group of student preschool teachers. Within this perspective, children and students were to understand and value about how dance can support individuals to discover their inherent abilities, to communicate with different “others” and finally to understand each other’s worlds. This particular approach has certain significance, as the teaching of dance in relevant situations has often been interrelated with learning traditional dances, an aspect that might reveal ethnocentric perceptions and attitudes.

In other words, with the continuous expansion and alteration of the social and educational demands and as dance involves a multitude of forms of teaching and cooperative practices, it can relate to new intercultural social and educational environments and therefore to reduce prejudices and stereotypes. “Dancing with the other” is a metaphor that outlines interactive developments among the self and the “others” in the course of dance teaching and learning, which allowed diverse voices and experiences to emerge, while at the same time permitted active engagement, commitment, and self-reflection. In this context, the affective and poetic qualities of dance could easily activate a transformative learning process.

2. Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow (2006) learning in adults can be achieved through the elaboration of the existing frames of references, the acquisition of new frames of reference, the transformation of attitudes and, finally, through the transformation of habits of mind. The basic element of all the above ways of learning is the trainee’s critical reflection as far as their personal or other persons’ acceptances are concerned. Through the process of critical reflection, the trainees can achieve the gradual reframing of previous habits of mind, as well as the redefinition of various meaning perspective, that is the overall point of view through which one approaches and understands the world and the “other”.

Critical reflection, as the main means of transformative learning, can help a person to realize which of his/her personal opinions and acceptances and which of the frames of reference and constructions of the world are assimilations of more general social ideas that have accepted thoughtlessly or unconsciously. The assimilation of these ideas usually takes place in early childhood through the familial and the social environment, while later is reinforced by the institutions of formal education.

The transformation of previous habits of mind and frames of references starts from an intense, internal and personal crisis, which Mezirow (2006) called as “disorienting dilemma”. The disorienting dilemma indicates a situation which a person faces for the first time, not compatible with the processes one has used so far in order to interpret life and the world. A disorienting dilemma functions as the fall of a stone into a lake. The stone -a new situation the person has to face- activates a series of reflections, correspondingly to the homocentric circles created on the surface of the lake. Although these reflections have as their starting point this new situation, they extend gradually to a more general questioning related to the person’s frames of reference. The harder the situation one has to deal with is, the more intense the reflections are and the consequent perspective for transformative learning.

Apart from critical reflection, emotional learning can similarly hold an important role in the transformative process. According to Goleman (1998) an emotional stress can often activate critical reflection. The combination of the emotional change and the reflective procedure might lead an individual to a deeper questioning, which helps him/her to discover personal initial acceptances obtained through unconscious processes.

Dirkx (1997) refers to the importance of the association of feelings and reason, indicating learning through the soul as an alternative route to transformative learning. Alternative routes to the trainees’ perceptive and affective competences can be accessible through the arts education. The stimuli one can obtain through art, as for example the hands-on experience in dance, may affect cognitive and emotional lurches, which can create conditions of critical reflection and subsequently of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Perkins, 1994; Kokkos, 2010).

Dirkx (2000:2) clarifies the above as following: “Many learning situations are capable of evoking potentially powerful emotions and images among adults. In a transformative pedagogy [...] these emotions and images are given voice, expression, and elaboration. Strategies to foster this form of learning engage the adult imaginatively with the content or processes of the learning situation. Educators working from this perspective will make substantial use, regardless of the subject matter, of story, myths, poetry, music, drawing, art, journaling, dance, rituals, or performance. Such approaches allow learners to become aware of and give voice to the images and unconscious dynamics that may be animating their psychic lives within the context of the subject matter and the learning process”.

In a dance practice based research that highlights the above, Dyer (2010:111) states that the aim of her dance action research was to consider the impact of her teaching by exploring students perceptions of the value systems, socio-political processes and relations within her constructivist-oriented, student-centered contemporary dance technique courses. In addition, in “The Dance Laboratory”, an artistic educational project based on improvisation, the basic themes of scholars like Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner, Mikhail Bakhtin, Freire and Mezirow were included in the pedagogical context of the project (Ostern, 2010:49).

3. The action research

3.1. Aim and participants

In the action research presented here the main research question was whether student teachers can develop critical reflection, so as to transform previous attitudes and aspects towards the diverse “other”, through a project of experiential dance teaching. The action research was the initiative of two educators, who teach at the Department of Preschool Education of the

University of Thessaly in Greece. During the action research one of the two researchers was the teacher-researcher, while the other one was the critical friend.

Sixteen student teachers (13 women and 3 men) of the Department of Preschool Education of the University of Thessaly took part in the action research. One of the students had also the role of observer, writing down the data through the technique of participant observation. Sixteen children (12 boys and 4 girls), aged 7-19 years old, living in a Social Care Institution of the city of Volos, participated in the action research as well. The children have been living in the Institution since a Public Prosecutor decided that it was necessary for them to be taken away from their families. All the children are Greek, while one of them is Greek-Romanian and another two of them are Roma of Greek origin. Three girls and two boys among the group were children with special needs, though without kinetic problems.

The students met the children for the first time in the course of a dance teaching project, aiming towards the creative involvement with dance. The students volunteered to participate in the project, as during their studies they are taught principles of creative learning through movement and dance. As one may realize, the participants of these two groups represented different individuals for each other.

The techniques used for the data collection were focus groups interviews with the students and the children before the beginning and after the end of the action research, semi-structured interviews with the researcher during the action research, the recordings of the observer and the notes of the critical friend.

3.2 Stages of the action research

The dance teaching project and the corresponding action research started in October 2010 and were completed in May 2011. The research process was developed in three circles promoted spirally. During the first circle (October 2010-December 2010) the aims included: the children's creative involvement with dance, the encouragement of the children's and the students' self-expression and, finally, their acquaintance and interaction through dance.

Dance classes were held inside the institution's space, organized in two weekly sessions, two hours each. Teaching was focusing on creative dance that allows open-ended tasks and the exploration of natural movements, instead of stylized dance forms. The creative dance model, somehow free, open and child centered gives emphasis on the process of dancing and its affective/experiential contribution to the participant overall development as moving/feeling being (Smith-Autard, 2002:4). However, soon after the first meetings, the use of this teaching approach resulted to a rather chaotic environment. The social upbringing, the experiences, the living conditions, the interests and the imagined realities of the children were entirely dissociated from the ideals of creative dance, an issue that Marques (1998:179) confronted in relevant teaching situations.

Another important issue, which intensified the situation, was that most of the children, apart from their enthusiastic interest for dancing, were eagerly looking to talk about and/or share personal feelings and experiences. As the students responded immediately to this need, most of the time was spent in pair discussions. Evidently, the frame of teaching dance required definite changes. Around the end of the first circle, the critical friend notes:

"The researcher and I are in common looking for alternative ways to implement the aims of the project. We ended up in the beginning of a new circle by modifying the dancing and teaching approach followed so far".

Adjustment turned out to be available through three senior boys that were self-taught in break dance and revealed an astonishing talent in performing complex, vigorous movements. As a result, the younger ones had idolized them and more and more demanded to learn only this specific style of dance.

The second circle of the action research (January 2011-March 2011) was designed after a lot of discussion and reflection. The researcher, with respect to the children's features and needs, enriched the content of the activities by proposing the formation of two groups. The ones who

continued to explore the principles of creative dance would participate in the first group, while those who wished to learn break dance would participate in the second one. The researcher assigned to the three senior boys to teach break dance to the younger ones, as well as to the students and her - who still participated in both groups' practices. The researcher, in her interview, justified her choice as follows:

"The particular children have experienced, early on, the abandonment, the rejection and the conflict in their family and social environment. Their memories, which have been assimilated by their bodies, their wishes and their abilities, are connected to intense emotional experiences they have gone through. Their eager desire to learn and further practice break dance is connected to an inner wish to express themselves through vigorous movements, which might also designate their lack of fear".

The reversal of the teacher-student roles and the enrichment of the classes' content stimulated the children's interest and besides affected the students' previous points of view about the children. In the following extract the observer wrote about this subject:

"To my surprise, I recognized that D. was capable of teaching dancing. He used to start the lesson with easy movements that gradually turned into more difficult ones. When some children had a difficulty, he used to go close in order to guide and help them. Both the children and the students watched D. carefully, as they obviously wanted to obtain his skilfulness".

In reality, the children's more active involvement in dance, did not affect their needs for interpersonal relations. On the opposite, interpersonal relations became more mutual, as students began to recognize and appreciate the children's natural talents. As a consequence, they dedicated even more time than before to reassure them for their talents and/or to discuss other personal matters. The observer confirms this aspect, as following:

"Today, [towards the end of the second circle] the teacher assigned to four students the dance teaching. Nevertheless, the lesson never took place, as the children wanted to talk with the students all the time, even asking them very personal questions. The 'devices' the children used [so not to dance] were like: 'I am not inspired by this song', 'I'm tired', 'I am out of energy'".

Although, there was interest in the beginning of the second circle for dancing, the action research got once again to a crucial phase. At this point, the researcher and the critical friend discussed the following:

"What is most important for the students? To understand basic principles of teaching dance? To manage feelings affected from their contact and interaction with the children? Or could it be possible that these two issues are entangled so as their limits became vague?"

Moreover, the researcher wondered if it would be better instead of dance teaching to form small support groups, since the narration of personal stories were of so great importance for the children. This discussion brought a new option. Even if the feelings expressed in dance are not real in the same sense as personal feelings, they should be felt through practicing the dance ideas. The researcher decided to propose the creation of a dance performance. In fact "dancing with the other" is a pedagogical approach that involves a supportive relationship, a situation that does not allow the separation of movement/feeling.

The researcher and the critical friend assumed that aiming towards the preparation of a performance would discharge the need for personal discussion and promote the development of responsibility both on behalf of children and students. The above option led to a third circle of the action research (May 2011- June 2011), marking the preparation and presentation of a dance performance, co-created by the students and the children. After a discussion and an exchange of ideas, all the participants agreed with the researcher's suggestion. During the preparation of the performance, the improvisational approach of the themes converted the body memories and the

children's emotions in dance actions and images that referred symbolically to the experiences of their own lives.

In the discussion that followed in the third and last circle of the action research the researcher and the critical friend confirmed the exceptionally significant role the performance played in the transformation of the students and children's attitude. Although, in the first and second circle of the action research the role of mother or/and friend restrained the objectives of the project, in the third circle the managing of these roles came to be effective and constructive. The fact that the particular children had experienced emotional traumas, made the support and encouragement they attained of great importance. As a result, it helped them not to feel stressed over a possible failure or rejection by the audience.

The researcher evaluated the performance, which signalled the completion of the action research, as following: "each separate objective of the project emerged and united into wholeness". At the final interview, she also pointed:

"Children and students allowed the audience to perceive their imagination, perception and sensory capability. The atmosphere they created on stage affected the emotional reactions of the audience. The audience's positive comments were the result of the acceptance and recognition of the children's capabilities".

Even though the performance was successful, the unstable and continuously changing frame of the action research was a complicated process that ascertains the researcher's pedagogic responsibility, as evident into the critical friend's notes. Despite the fact that at some point she felt ambiguous about the completion of the project, this feeling was transformed by the strengthening of teamwork and interchange during the third circle. Apparently, the reason of the children's (and the students') transformation was the immediate perspective of being exposed to the audience. The performance's success illuminated the emotional interchange and the trust that had gradually developed between the researcher and the participants. Moreover, it revealed the possibility of the contribution of experiential learning in understanding and accepting the "other". Overall, dance teaching and dance performing can challenge diversity and difference, pre-conceived perceptions, as well as fixed cultural narratives about different individuals and/or capabilities of different bodies.

4. Findings of the action research

4.1 Transformation of the students' perceptions

The focus group interview which took place before the beginning of the action research shows the students' stereotypic opinions about the particular children, who they were about to get in touch and acquaint through dance teaching.

The students said characteristically:

"Those children are unhappy. And I want to help them".

"The family's abandonment is horrible. I feel very sorry for these children".

"I am afraid that the teamwork is going to be difficult. The children have too many problems".

"I don't know what these children may hide. In the past, I had watched a film which scared me".

"I have tried to work with these children in the past, something that has been proved impossible".

The students' feelings towards the children, before the beginning of the action research, were pity and ambiguity. Influenced by ruling ideas about children growing up in institutions most of the students' portrayed children as "difficult and problematic". However, the students were soon sensitized by the children's personal stories and narrations. According to the researcher:

"The students weren't experienced to deal with the children's need for interaction and communication. [...]As a result, they overtook the role of parental care. Then again, a different issue came up eventually; the student's appreciation of the children's abilities created an overwhelming attraction and/or fascination".

After the end of the research, some students defined the relationship that was developed between them and the children, by saying:

"I was charmed by the older children".

"The older children gave me energy".

"When we started working in pairs, we got to know each other better. We became friends, we became brothers and sisters".

"You can't imagine how close we were to the children. If I did not see them every week, I would miss them".

"One day I got there earlier and P. talked to me about his life. [...] I think that day something changed inside of me".

The admiration that the students felt for the children can also be found in the following dance description inscribed by the observer:

"The two boys improvised a dance piece, during which they provoked each other into a 'fighting'. D. challenged P. to dance in the same way through demonstrating a series of complicated movements. And P. responded to the challenge by dancing with even greater skill. This was going on for the ten minutes the 'battle' lasted (...). All of us observed the bodily balance, the concentration of the attention, as well as the boys' will to show what kind of movements they like and also know to perform very well".

The above extracts exemplify the students' empathy towards the children. Empathy functions as a disorienting dilemma, which according to the theory of transformative learning stimulates the development of critical reflection. The disorienting dilemma and critical reflection led to the reframing of the students' initial opinions towards the particular children. As the students said in the final group interview:

"The children do not need pity. They need support so as to show their capabilities. They have a lot of capabilities".

"In the beginning, I thought I was the one who would give power to the children. Quite soon, I realized that I was given power by them".

"Now I am not afraid to face children with 'individualities'. As long as I hadn't met them, I was biased about them".

"In the beginning, I couldn't believe that the children could dance. But, they danced as [if they were] professionals and even better".

As far as the role of dance is concerned, the students said:

"The dance brought about the bug! This changed the frame".

"Dancing made us become a group".

"If it weren't for the dancing, we would not have become so close. Dancing broke the ice immediately".

"Theory is one thing and action is another. The dance was a living experience".

The approaches, as well as the comments made by the male students are of particular interest. Aside from the fact that in the first two circles the male students participated dynamically into the dance teaching, in the third circle they undertook the role of technical support. Although break dance has been formed mainly by male teenagers, the students did not participate in the creation and presentation of the performance. As they said in the final focus group interview:

"I did not want to perform on stage. And this is the reason that I accepted the role of technical support. However, this choice did not restrain my interaction and communication with the children".

"I felt awful, because I didn't participate in the performance. But, I was present always and I helped as much as I could".

"I didn't dance, because I was afraid that everyone would laugh at me".

The researcher frames the above as a product of stereotypic ideas and/or homophobic behaviours that men adopt through socially constructed ideas about gender and dance. The researchers' opinion is in agreement with Hanna (1998: xiii), who points that: "Dance is an eye-catching, riveting way for humans to identify and maintain and/or erase boundaries. Feelings and ideas about sexuality and sex roles (also referred to as gender) take shape in dance". Nevertheless, the male students made themselves familiar with dancing, as estimated in the manner they encouraged the boys to dance in many instances. Although, the male students did not participate in the performance, they had the chance to acquaint and communicate especially with the older boys.

This communication was powerful enough to lead them in reframing their previous frames of references, as the students said about it:

"I stopped feeling sorry for these children. I stopped saying "oh, the poor thing".

"I was alerted in a different way. Now, I believe that I can think in a more proper way [about these children]".

4.2 Personal and professional empowerment of the students

The students' participation in the dance project transformed not only their points of view in relation to the children, but also created a certain personal and professional strengthening. In the discussion after the completion of the action research they said:

"I felt more secure as an educator. I am not worried any more about handling situations with 'different' children in the future".

"I am stronger now. I believe I can handle more easily now a group of children with 'special' needs".

"I feel I have won the challenge hidden in difficult circumstances".

"I started appreciating people for what they are, without being influenced by anything else".

"I learned to be open to co-operation, to new relationships".

In addition, the students changed previous frames of reference related to their lives' experiences:

"I appreciated all that I was considered as given. [I appreciated] my own childhood".

"I realized how important it is that I was brought up within a family, though not a perfect one".

"These children taught me not to complain".

In the final focus group interview, most students valued their experience as:

"A life-time experience", "deeply emotional", "success of collective work", "source of energy", and "change of the way of living".

A question that worried the researcher and the critical friend was what could be done after the end of the project, so as to make the best use of the interaction and communication that was developed among the students and the children.

The students expressed the same worry, as in the final focus group interview raised the following questions:

"What opportunities could the children have when they leave the Institution?"

"Are they ever going to overcome the trauma caused by the rejection by their families?"

"How easy is it for a child stigmatized by its origin - Roma- and the Institution to find his way in life?"

The researcher herself questioned the long term results of the project's success in the children's lives, by making apparent the following:

"One of the older boys told me at some point: 'Madam, all this is not going to help at all'. I wish that he will not be proved correct in the future!"

5. Conclusions

The main question of the action research presented here was as follows: “Would it be possible that the participation of future teachers in a dance project with children of poor parental care may transform their previous points of view?” The research findings indicate that the students changed their initial stereotypic attitudes, as at the end, they recognized the children’s inner power and innate capabilities, while they also considered if these children could have the potential to develop their skills and talents in their lives.

The student teachers who participated in the action research approached critically socially constructed images that they had previously accepted. Besides, they shifted from a purely emotional approach to deeper social reflections. The interaction that was developed between the students and the children functioned as a disorienting dilemma for transformative learning, and it also became the starting point of critical reflection. Dance functioned as the supportive frame, as it gave opportunities for discussion and emotional interaction among the participants. The students developed empathy towards the children, a feeling which dominated at all the meetings of the project. In the case of the male students who trapped into the stereotypic gender roles, their emotional relationship with the children was of great importance for the transformation of certain of their initial ideas.

The constant transformation of the student roles towards the children was another element that emerged during the research. Some of the most important roles the students undertook were those of a teacher, friend, sister, brother, animator and finally co-creator and co-performer. Although, these roles were very controversial in the beginning, they became complement gradually and created a complex emotional dilemma, which was finally balanced in the last circle of the action research.

The primary role of emotional development through participation in a group work, as a path of transformative learning, has been a subject for many researchers. Kokkos and Tsimboukli (2011) underline the emotional learning practices through which reflection can be activated. Schapiro, Wasserman and Gallegos (2011:293) underline also that “the group provides a learning space for members to share their stories and the time to reflect upon those aspects of each other’s stories that are in tension with one another. The space and time that the group work affords is consequential to enabling members to reconstruct and expand their stories to include the identity narratives of others”. As evident from the findings of this particular action research, the tensions that were created during the entire process, in the context of the three way creative partnership (researchers, students, and children) led finally to professional development, as well as to a profound understanding of the participants previous social and personal beliefs, (Chappell, 2008).

Concluding, according to the theory of transformative learning, experiential learning is different than learning through the understanding of facts, which have been transmitted to us as an indirect experience. Therefore, every practice that aims to transformative learning should not ignore the significance of the living subject’s body. “The body is the means by which we express our emotions, our desires and our exchanges with the world. Is the body an experiential field rife with hope and despair, conflict and revelation all connected with representations and realities, which the crisis often reveals or destroys?” (Hampich, 2011:123-130).

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