

'Ballet Energy for Boys' in Finland: A Description of the Workshop Content

Joey Chua and Hannele Niiranen

ABSTRACT

How can we improve Finnish boys' conceptions of ballet? How can we increase male involvement in ballet? We tried to answer these central questions by reflecting on and reviewing the goals, content and teaching methods utilized to teach methods of a tuition-free ballet workshop titled Ballet Energy for Boys. Produced by the Finnish National Opera, this workshop was introduced to about 2500 seven to eight year-old boys in elementary schools in the capital region in Finland. Written primarily for dance educators, this article aims to contribute to the literature about our recent efforts in inspiring boys to learn ballet and to learn how to appreciate ballet.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Kuinka voimme parantaa poikien käsityksiä baletista? Kuinka voimme lisätä miespuolisten baletin harrastajien määrää? Yritämme vastata näihin keskeisiin kysymyksiin pohtimalla ja tarkastelemalla tavoitteita, sisältöä ja opetusmenetelmiä, joita sovelletaan Kansallisoopperan tukemassa, ilmaiseksi tarjottavassa Balettienergiaa Pojille! -työpajassa, joka on vuosina 2011-2013 tavoittanut lähes 2500 7-8 -vuotiasta poikaa pääkaupunkiseudun peruskouluissa. Tanssikasvattajille suunnattu, poikien tanssiharrastusta edistävä artikkelimme nojaa aiheesta tehtyihin tutkimuksiin.

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Introduction

The lack of male dancers in ballet is hardly news. As Kenneth Greve, the artistic director of the Finnish National Ballet (FNB) has lamented:

I have to say that I am looking at tons and tons of lovely young ladies but I am missing boys and this is creating a void. And it's unfortunate and I believe that it's a question of culture. (Salmi 2010)

Lehikoinen (2003, 28) echoed this by explaining that Finnish men, as early as during the 20th century, have been hesitant to take up dancing ballet due to social prejudices. Similarly, Viitala (1998) suggested that it could be due to unnecessary social pressures. Sarje (1997), in a quantitative study of students in four elementary schools in Central Finland, found out that boys had more negative conceptions about dancing than girls. Unfortunately, she did not provide any reason for the differences in their conceptions. Researchers in the US, the UK and Australia also suggested reasons that dissuade men from dancing. They investigated, using gendered lenses, the masculinity (e.g. Ashley 2009), sexuality (e.g. Burt 2007) and stereotyping of male dancers as virtuosic and likened to sportsmen (Gard 2001). In another study conducted in six all-boys' schools in Dublin, Ireland, Gray (2007) surveyed the students aged 7 to 8 and 11 regarding their attitudes towards dancing. From the negative responses — 43.2% of the boys strongly disagreed

to the statement "We should have more time for dance" — Gray inferred that boys refrained from dancing probably due to gender regimes within the family and school (2007, 47).

Whilst we, in this present article, do not aim to provide reasons why boys distance themselves from dancing, we aim to describe how we can encourage them to dance. Hence, we follow Isto Turpeinen's assertion to focus on the possibilities and potential of dance (2012). Boys love dancing, as Isto Turpeinen suggested, because of peer influence and support, the innate pleasures derived from dancing and the physical action of dance.

This article consists of three parts. First, we provide the contexts for dance education for boys in Finland to situate our study. Second, we describe the workshop of *Ballet Energy for Boys* in terms of its goals, content and teaching methods. Finally in the conclusion, we provide the reflections of the workshop.

Dance Education for Boys in Finland

Prior to the 1980s, the Finnish National Opera Ballet School (FNOBS) was the only school in Finland that offered systematic training for [ballet] dancers (Nieminen 1999). Here, all-male ballet classes were offered since 1959 (Ahjolinna 1994). In the early 1980s, Ilkka Lampi, a highly-respected male teacher who was trained at the Vaganova Institute's teaching programme, assumed the role for teaching the male students

at the FNOBS; and henceforth, ballet education for boys “gained new impetus in Finland” (Lehikoinen 2003, 32).

Moreover, the 1980s were regarded as the golden age in the field of dance education because the Theatre Academy Helsinki, offering both BA and MA degrees in dance, was established in 1983, and vocational-level teacher training was offered in universities of applied sciences (Nieminen 1998, 1999). Nieminen (1999) writes that possibly due to the systematic dance teacher education, more teachers-as-researchers became interested in improving gendered dance education in Finland. For example, many teachers-as-researchers have written about how to teach dance to young boys and male adolescents in Finland (Anttila 1994; Lampi et al. 2002; Viitala 1998; Wiemers 2006). In 2002, a working group consisting of pedagogue Ilkka Lampi, FNOBS’ principal Hannele Niiranen, FNOBS’ vice-principal Aarne Mäntylä and Vantaa Dance Institute’s principal Isto Turpeinen, wrote a dance education framework for boys titled *Popeda* (Lampi et al. 2002). The framework, intended for three age groups of boys – 5-8, 9-12, and 13 year-old and above – included goals, guidelines and practical teaching methods. *Popeda* has had far-reaching results: for example recently, relying on *Popeda*, the Kaleva Youth Association produced a booklet to aid dance teachers and school teachers in teaching boys dance activities, although in folk dance (Kokkonen 2012). *Ballet Energy for Boys* takes its model from that framework.

Besides FNOBS, the Vantaa Dance Institute is among the few schools in Finland that offer boys-only dance classes (Rauhamaa 2008). Led by Isto Turpeinen, the Vantaa Dance Institute has become increasingly important for boys and male adolescents in learning dance since the early 1990s (Lehikoinen 2003, 34). Indeed, Isto Turpeinen is a leading figure for boys’ dance

education in Finland: he has been steadfastly developing the so-called ‘raw-board-method’ that embodies his vision of art education and working style over the past two decades (Turpeinen 2012). Furthermore, the residential dance camp for boys at the Kuopio Dance and Music Festival established by Ilkka Lampi since 1987 is another place where boys can experience all-boys dance classes.

Ballet Energy for Boys

Background

Ballet Energy for Boys was a collaborative effort among the FNB, FNOBS, and the Department of Education at the Finnish National Opera (FNO) in 2011-2013. So far, the workshop team has visited 53 schools and conducted 96 workshops and about 2500 seven to eight year-old boys have participated in this tuition-free workshop that is subsidized mainly by the Finnish National Opera.

Goals

The workshop aims at inspiring the 7 to 8 year-old participants to enter the world of ballet and to have a positive and inquisitive attitude toward ballet. The workshop team also hopes that they will enjoy ballet as a versatile, enjoyable and exciting form of activity. More specific goals include:

- Understanding the value of feedback from peers and facilitators
- Igniting interest to watch and appreciate ballet performances
- Understanding that ballet is a dynamic skill that requires special expertise, something worth pursuing
- Understanding that ballet is a meaningful art form

- Demonstrating the basic skills essential in ballet for boys, e.g. strength and flexibility
- Becoming aware of how to use one's own body in versatile and rigorous ways while dancing ballet

The age group of 7 to 8 year-old boys was chosen because they may have fewer prejudices towards dance than male adolescents (Risner 2009; Williams 2003) and hence they may be enticed to learn more about dancing ballet if they become interested. Furthermore, it is beneficial for boys to start ballet training at this early age (Schmidt and Wrisberg 2008).

Content

The workshop facilitators were three professional dancers (two male and one female) from the FNB, one female teacher from the FNOBS and a narrator who is an audience education specialist from the FNO. Since research data showed that dance students have no preference for the gender of dance teachers (van Rossum 2004), we argue against the claim that boys must have male dance teachers (cf. Viitala 1998). Therefore, it may be more important for the boys to have professional dancers as teachers and role models.

During these three years, the response from the elementary schools for our workshops has been overwhelming. Unfortunately, we could choose only a limited number of schools (10) each year in the Greater Helsinki Area – Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa – to participate in the workshop. Each workshop session lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, depending on each elementary school's schedules and the size of the group. At each school, one to three groups of about 20-50 boys at a time met the facilitators in the school gymnasium during their usual

physical education class. Meanwhile, their female classmates led by the physical education teacher went, for example, to a swimming lesson.

The Ballet Energy for Boys workshop consisted of three segments. First, during the Appreciating segment, the boys watched a five-minutes' pas de deux-excerpt of *The Magic Lamp* (*Taikalamppu*) from *The Nutcracker* performed by the dancer-facilitators whom they would later work with. In addition to the pas de deux, the excerpt consisted of the battle between the Mouse King and the Nutcracker. Before the dance began, the narrator pointed out interesting movements for the boys to watch during the performance. For instance, she said, "See how strong or fast the dancers move" or "Pay attention to how they are able to turn and stay on balance". With such directions, it was hoped that the boys could learn to see ballet and appreciate it in the context of the learning goals of this workshop.

The scenery, dimmed lights at the gymnasium, and portable stage lighting and dance flooring helped to create a sense of reality for the boys, as if they were watching a performance in the theatre. A backstage crew from the FNO prepared the 'scenery' for the performance by placing a makeshift white backdrop. Specially designed for this workshop, the other side of the backdrop consisted of pictures from the salon scene of *The Nutcracker* with well-dressed people and children (from the FNOBS). The backdrop showing the salon scene was displayed throughout the 'stunt track' with video segments of the workshop, reminding the boys of the dancing children to whom they could relate.

Second, during the Performing segment of the workshop, the boys participated in the 'stunt track' consisting of four 'obstacle courses' or spots. At the spots, the boys attempted various skills essential in ballet and the skills they had just seen performed by the dancers. One facilitator was at

SPOTS AND TASKS

Spots	The boys learned to ...
Balancing	Balance on one leg
Turning	Balance and to turn on one foot with the help of a pirouette 'spoon'
Flexibility and strength	Do push-ups, front and back rolls, and stretches in second position
Lifting the ballerina	Lift a 'sack' (resembling a punching bag that boxers use) filled with water, weighing a maximum of 10 kg

each spot assisting the boys. The four spots and tasks are illustrated in Table 1. If a big group of 50 boys participated in one workshop, they were divided into four groups, and each group spent at least ten minutes at each spot. The boys took a maximum of 40 minutes to complete this segment.

During the third segment of the workshop, the boys watched a video of *The Nutcracker* – an extended version of the same scene they first saw performed 'live'. Here, they also saw children performing in the video. The narrator highlighted that our students from the FNOBS performed as the little rats in the scene and that the boys could learn to dance like them and perform in a similar production if they like dancing and if they work hard. After watching the video, the boys discussed with the facilitators about what they did on the 'stunt track' and posed questions to the dancers. Dancers also shared perspectives with the boys about their work as professional dancers. The means of conducting this Appreciating segment is elaborated in the following section.

Teaching methods

The teaching methods used to promote the boys' learning experiences are related to the ideas underpinning Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of development. The theory prescribes

Table 1

that all learning occurs in social interaction and thus "the role of others in learning cannot be ignored" (Smidt 2009, 139); the others may include teachers and more knowledgeable peers. Vygotsky (1978) coined a concept known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as "the

distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, 86). Put simply, it is the gap between what a student can do with help and cannot do independently yet. Hence, applying Vygotsky's approach in the workshop, a balance between the facilitators' assistance and the boys' abilities was looked after. Based on observations, the facilitators paced the tasks so that the boys worked beyond their current skills but with assistance (that is, locating the boys' ZPD). The facilitators taught a few boys at a time and thus, they could more easily monitor the boys' progress and noticed when more assistance or challenge was needed. The facilitators gave the boys the maximum amount of help at the beginning of the task, and then gradually withdrew the help (or scaffolding) as soon as the boys' mastery of the task developed. For boys who learned easily and efficiently, the facilitators gave them more challenging tasks, thereby helping them attain the top level within their ZPD.

Play and imagination are the other central tenets of Vygotsky's theory. Play is especially productive in developing students' abstract

thoughts and imagination when specific characteristics such as imaginary situations, roles and rules are present (Bodrova and Leong 2007). Therefore during the Performing segment, the facilitators encouraged the boys to pretend that they were the Mouse King and jump as high as he did or to pretend that the soldiers were chasing them and they had to leap as far as they could so that they would not be caught. Another instance when we encouraged the boys to develop abstract thoughts and use imagination was during the Appreciating segment: The narrator requested the boys to suggest possible endings for *The Nutcracker*. Additionally, we wanted the boys to “think about, question, reflect and represent what they [saw] and [heard]” (Smidt 2009, 154) about the ‘live’ and video performances of *The Nutcracker*. Hence, the narrator posed open-ended questions, allowing the boys to contribute freely and extensively. Often, the narrator stepped back from the discussions.

Admittedly, didactic instructions that are primarily controlled by adults (Smidt 2009, 141) contradict the principles of this theory; unfortunately, dance lessons are traditionally taught this way. However, the ‘copy me’ style of teaching was minimized by focusing on the importance of “sharing of control between teacher and students [and] the development of mutual trust” (Forman, Minick, and Stone 1993, 24) and helping the boys reach their ZPD.

In terms of feedback, children up to around 8 years old are eager to please adults, so “the effects of praise on behaviour can be powerful” (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 325). Therefore, firstly, all facilitators were mindful of giving positive feedback to children. The facilitators encouraged the boys by praising effort rather than for innate ability (Dweck 2008). For example, when a boy who, after repeated attempts, finally succeeded

in doing a front roll, the facilitator would say, “That’s good! You worked really hard at it!” For a boy who attempted the tasks easily, the facilitator would say, “You are doing well but let me give you a more challenging task”. Secondly, the facilitators refrained from criticising the boys for their mistakes. Instead, they suggested another way of trying that task and reminded them “I can see that you’re trying very hard but let’s try to do it this way”.

Observations

During the Performing segment, the boys were extremely keen to learn how to turn on the pirouette ‘spoons’. They lacked inhibition and were not afraid to fall. When they fell, they quickly got up and tried again. During the Appreciating segment, most boys responded enthusiastically to the questions posed. The adults were sometimes astounded by the many imaginative guesses and lively discussions. Moreover, the ‘live’ sword-fighting scene especially seemed to entertain the boys.

The limitation of this workshop is that this is unlike an actual ballet class. Therefore, after the workshop, boys who showed interest in ballet were encouraged to register for three 60 minute tuition-free ballet classes at the FNOBS. So far, about forty boys from the workshops in 2011–2013 have attended these free activities at our school. Sadly, the schoolteachers reported that a few boys were keen to sign up for our course but their fathers did not allow them to. On a more positive note, most of the boys vividly expressed their enjoyment of the workshop.

Conclusion

Opportunities for Finnish boys to explore their skills in dance programs are scarce (Nieminen 2006; Sarje 2006). The ‘Ballet Energy for Boys’

workshops brought ballet to the grassroots level, hoping to demystify the 'elitism' of ballet. The facilitators showed that ballet skills such as turning, lifting, balancing, jumping, rolling, bending, stopping and running resemble everyday skills but are executed in a particular way in ballet. Undoubtedly, with the aid of these different physical tasks related to ballet, the boys were motivated to learn more about it. While Lehtikainen likened gendered dance pedagogy to "the mysterious Holy Grail: a secret that [he] had no access to" (2003, 8), we, nonetheless hope that the present account of the workshop has 'demystified' the content of boys' ballet classes and offers appropriate teaching methods that can be used in order to entice more boys to appreciate ballet and to enjoy ballet.

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