

Dance as a Cultural Meeting Point

Anette Sture Iversen

ABSTRACT

Dance as a cultural meeting point is a project that *Dance in Schools*, Norway, executed in three schools in Oslo during the spring of 2013, with funds from *The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training*. The funding was to be given to projects that would, amongst other things, help schools reach curriculum objectives, increase the use of varied working methods, increase the pupils' understanding of different cultural expressions and experience art. The project included a one-day workshop, a survey and reports from two observers. One class in three different schools got an introduction to Norwegian folk dance, hip hop, Bollywood and creative dance, and created and performed dances to each other in small groups. *Dance in Schools'* aim was to gather information about the pupils' knowledge of and experience with dance, contribute to increasing the pupils' and teachers' understanding of dance and how dance can stimulate learning, and social competence. The cultural meeting intended to be the meeting of dance forms and pupils from different cultures. The most important cultural meeting, however, turned out to be between the pedagogues' dance culture and the pupils' school culture.

SAMMENDRAG

Dans som kulturell møteplass er et prosjekt som *Dans i Skolen* gjennomførte på tre skoler i Oslo våren 2013, med midler fra Utdanningsdirektoratet. Midlene skulle gå til prosjekter som blant annet ville hjelpe skolene å nå læreplanmål, bidra til økt bruk av varierte arbeidsmåter i skolen, øke elevenes forståelse for ulike kulturelle uttrykk og erfare kunst. Dans i Skolens prosjekt omfattet en 1-dags workshop, spørreundersøkelse og rapporter fra to observatører. På tre utvalgte skoler fikk en klasse på mellomtrinnet innføring i norsk folkedans, hip hop, Bollywood og skapende dans, og lagde og fremførte danser for hverandre i mindre grupper. Dans i Skolens mål var å innhente informasjon om elevenes kunnskap om og erfaring med dans, bidra til å gi elever og lærere økt forståelse for dans og hvordan dans kan stimulere til læring, dannelse og sosial kompetanse. Den kulturelle møteplassen skulle være møtet mellom danseformer og elever fra ulike kulturer. Det mest interessante kulturelle møtet viste seg imidlertid å være mellom pedagogenes dansekultur og elevenes skolekultur.

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Introduction

Dance as a cultural meeting point is a project initiated by *Dance in Schools*, Norway, supported by project funds from *The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training* – the executive agency for *The Ministry of Education and Research*. The project (consisting of a one-day workshop, a survey and observational reports) took place in three selected elementary schools in Oslo during the spring of 2013. The project's main goal was to explore how dance could be applied as a cultural bridge between pupils in a class environment. However, what ended up being perhaps the most interesting cultural meeting was the one between the pedagogues' dance culture and the pupils' school culture.

Background

Two years in a row *The Directorate* had called for projects that would contribute to – amongst other things – helping the schools reach curriculum objectives and increase the use of varied working methods, the pupils understanding of different cultural expressions and participation in a multicultural society, as well as contributing to more pupils getting an opportunity to experience art.

Dance in Schools (DiS) applied for funds on the basis of a project that was called *Dance as a Cultural Meeting Point*, in order to meet the demands from *The Directorate* (see above). The idea was to explore how dance as a subject could provide varied working methods, different

cultural expressions and opportunity for pupils to experience art. This is why the project took the form of a one-day workshop where one class in one school would get introduction to as varied dance forms as Norwegian folk dance, hip hop/break, flamenco, Bollywood and creative dance. Four pedagogues from DiS were involved, and the workshop covered a number of curriculum objectives in PE and music.

We, as the pedagogues involved in the project, paid a visit to the schools a few days before the actual workshop and thus, we could introduce ourselves and hand out a questionnaire to the pupils. From this questionnaire we sought to find out more about the pupils' experiences with dance and understanding of dance, prior to the workshop and after the workshop.

Aims

The aims for the project based on the conditions for support from *The Directorate* and DiS' ambitions on behalf of dance as subject in schools, consisted of the following:

- Help schools reach curriculum objectives in PE and music
- Exchange competence between schools and professional artists/pedagogues within the dance field
- Increase the pupils' and teachers' understanding of why dance is important for learning, formation and social cohesion
- Obtain information about the pupils' knowledge of dance and relation to dance

- Expand the pupils' experience with dance and conceptual understanding
- Highlight DiS as a relevant contributor to pedagogical development within the aesthetic subjects in schools

We selected which schools we would offer the workshop to on the basis of our knowledge of socio-economic factors in the environment, cultural background of pupils and/or parents and the schools' pedagogical methods. We gave an identical questionnaire to the pupils before the workshop (2-7 days) and immediately after the workshop, in order to document level of knowledge, expectations and effect of the workshop. The questionnaire had questions like: *What dance forms do you know? Have you had any dance training? Do you like to dance? Why/ why not? If you dance: when and where, and in what context do you dance? Do you think there should be dance in schools? Why/ why not? Etc.*

Photo 1: Creating various figures or shapes in the creative dance session. Photo: Trine Sjølyst.

Content of the Workshop

On the day of the workshop the order of the content was as follows:

1. Session

We talked about dance, dance forms, mapped what the pupils knew. We taught basic steps and movements within Norwegian folk dance, hip hop/ break, flamenco and Bollywood, adding some background information on the history of each of the dance forms introduced.

When one pedagogue was teaching, the other three were engaged in assisting when and where needed.

The workshop proceeded in the following order:

- Dance from Norwegian culture. Responsible pedagogue: Trine Sjølyst.
- Dances from other cultures. Responsible pedagogue: Corinne Lyche Campos.
- Youth culture (hip hop/ break). Responsible pedagogue: Mathias Jin Budtz





*Photo 2: Exploring effort in the creative dance session.
Photo: Trine Sjølyst*

2. Session:

We worked with tasks that included basic principles within creative dance: space, time, effort, relations.

Responsible pedagogue: Anette Sture Iversen.

3. Session:

This session was divided in two.

1. The pupils were divided in four groups: yellow, green, blue and red (supplied with t-shirts in the group color). Each group got a room/space of their own to work in and was followed by one of the four pedagogues. The task was for each pupil to pick two movements they had done earlier in the day and that they liked. Everyone in the group then taught each other the movements they had picked, and the movements were put into one long sequence. The role of the pedagogue was to help the pupils structure the sequence according to the following:

Make a dance that consists of:

- A clear beginning
- A clear end
- Something everyone does the same way and at the same time
- Something that is not done the same way and at the same time
- A tableau
- A solo
- Variation in space, time and effort

2. All the groups then met in one of the spaces; each group performed their composition to the other groups. The pedagogue encouraged the pupils to give feedback to each other and try to verbalize what they had seen and how it felt to perform for each other. We encouraged the pupils to use the terms space, time, effort, relations, repetition, solo, tableau etc.

We talked about how the day had been and the questionnaire was handed out again.



Photo 3: Hip hop/break pedagogue Daniel Laquian and pupil in the blue group. Daniel was substituting for Mathias in one of the workshops. Photo: Trine Sjølyst.

Evaluation of Achievement of Aims

At DiS, we saw it as essential in a project like this that we somehow could show to what extent the aims were reached. In addition to the questionnaires that we thought would give us some of the answers, we wanted to observe what was happening in the actual workshop. Instead of video documentation (that we thought would inhibit the pupils in the creative work) we decided to use two observers. Their task was to (individually) evaluate each pedagogue's session and note to what extent s/he and the dance form in question would engage the pupils. Factors that would interrupt or disturb the pupil's concentration were noted. Other factors like gender issues, creativity and expression of joy were also registered.

The three schools we visited were quite different from one another: one had mainly ethnical Norwegian pupils and is placed in a part

of Oslo where the population has high economic and cultural capital¹ (school A). The two others (school B and C) had a predominance of immigrants or second-generation immigrants, but were quite different from each other when it comes to cultural and religious orientation, both based on the pupils' background and the school's profile.

Selected Findings

Attitude Towards Dance and Experience with Dance

Based on our experience and observations, the pupils in schools A and B seemed interested in dance, were looking forward to the workshop and had quite a lot of experience with dance, from various courses outside school. In school C, the pupils' responses were quite different. They expressed aversion towards having to participate in the workshop and to dance in general, especially in the questionnaire given before the workshop, and also during the workshop. However, their answers in the questionnaire after the workshop clearly indicated that they had gained a larger interest towards dance. They had very little previous experiences with dance. These pupils, to a larger extent than the others, linked dance to holiday or celebration in the questionnaire.

The Resonance of the Dance Forms

Hip hop/break was not surprisingly the dance form that most (if not all) the pupils had either experience with or at least a mental image of. This indicates that hip hop has an impact in popular culture that goes beyond social or



Photo 4: The observers Gunbild Kilde and Marte Amundsen. Photo: Trine Sjølyst.

cultural borders. The Norwegian folk dance as well as creative dance were the dance forms that the pupils in general had the least experience with, but most pupils were positive and open-minded towards these sessions, and quite a few of the pupils expressed that they linked Norwegian folk dance to tradition, country life, fairy-tales etc. Bollywood was the dance form that gave a very different resonance in the pupils with a Norwegian background, compared to the pupils with a non-Norwegian background. In school A very few of the pupils had experience with or knowledge of what it was, whereas in school B and C almost all the pupils knew movements, songs, films, actors etc. from Bollywood and seemed at home in this part of the workshop. This was very beneficial for the effect of the workshop, especially in school C.

Vocabulary and Conceptual Understanding

Even though the pupils in the three schools had different knowledge and understanding of dance before the workshop, we clearly could see in the questionnaire that all the pupils had expanded their vocabulary and conceptual understanding of dance during the workshop. The most interesting finding was that the pupils in school B before the workshop to a large degree linked dance to emotions. They said things like: *"I dance when I feel like it"*, *"I take anger out on dance"*, *"Dance makes me become happy if I'm sad and happier if I'm happy"*. They argued that more dance in school would help them express emotions more. From this we concluded that in this school and probably in the pupils' family background, experience with dance may be

connected to a positive view on the value of art in general and probably also to a positive view on each pupil's potential and possibilities on expressing themselves through art.

Collaboration and Creativity

In school A, the pupils showed discipline and collaboration skills, and the will to learn was very much present. But the pupils seemed a lot more afraid to go wrong and this affected their independence and creativity to a certain extent. They needed continuous confirmation that what they were doing was “right”, especially in the 1st session. Could this have anything to do with the Norwegian Jantelov²?

In school B both the girls and the boys seemed confident and independent in their expressions. However, in this school collaboration was more of a challenge than in the other classes. In school C, where traditional gender roles seemed to be more present, we had to divide the pupils in pure boys' and girls' groups in order to make collaboration possible.

Discipline and Stamina

Especially in school A but also in school B, the pupils continued working even though they were tired and hungry. They showed great stamina and patience. In school C both boys and girls kept sitting down and had to be told to continue to participate, from the start and throughout the workshop. They seemed to lack motivation and did not seem to be used to bodily work to the same extent as the pupils from the other two schools. To some extent the clothes were also an obstacle, especially for the girls, and our recommendations for proper clothing (that were given on the meeting beforehand) were not followed. Some boys kept disturbing the work by trying to make fun of themselves,

crash into other pupils etc., even in the hip hop session. The hip hop pedagogue told the boys that this was not the right attitude and that discipline was needed in all dance work – even in something as laid-back/cool as hip hop and break. Some boys were removed from the class in order to let the others get on with their work.

Gender Issues

School A seemed to have the most uniform pupils in the sense that boys and girls behaved and participated quite similarly in the different sessions. In school B the girls were very strong and independent both verbally and physically, and confident with dancing. In spite of less experience with dance, the boys in this school did not seem to be too bothered by this or feel inhibited by the girls and most of them participated untroubled. On the other hand, in school C the girls' behavior was clearly dominated by traditional gender roles. In that class both pedagogues and the class principal found it beneficial to divide into pure girls' and boys' groups for the composing-session, so that the girls would not be inhibited in their expression by the boys and in order to make collaboration possible. The latter was not an issue in the two other schools.

Dance Culture in Meeting with School Culture

The cultural meeting in the name of the project refers to the dances from different cultures and pupils from different (cultural) backgrounds. The observation reports indicated that the workshop worked very well as an introduction to various dance forms, creative work, performance and reflection. The workshop did open the pupils' perspective and expanded their conceptual understanding of

dance. Further it encouraged collaboration, reflection, concentration, a different kind of body work and listening. Almost all the pupils answered that they enjoyed dancing, after the workshop had finished. However, the experience showed that the different dance forms may find different resonance depending on the pupils' expectations and knowledge. It also showed that there are cultural differences, for instance connected to gender, and that it is beneficial that the pedagogues take this into consideration when organizing a class.

Further, through the workshop, the questionnaire and the observers' reports, we have seen that the pupils in these three quite different schools all have challenges that could be worked on through dance. Be it discipline, creativity and artistic exploration, perseverance and stamina, concentration and collaboration, just to mention a few of the many challenges that we met in various degrees in the three schools.

Our experience is that dance works very well as a cultural meeting point and as a means to work on the various aspects mentioned that

define a class culture. Even though the four dancers/dance pedagogues involved in the project came from different dance forms, it soon became clear that we brought with us a common culture on how to behave in a dance studio, take instructions, relate to other bodies, and understand personal space, listening, body awareness, and concentration. We concluded that through dance training one becomes disciplined in a specific way and accustomed to codes, values and attitudes. These codes, values and attitudes are based on understanding the body and on ways of interacting with others which seem to be quite different from those that pupils meet in a school culture. We suggest that school cultures could be greatly developed by encounters with dance cultures, and that experiencing artistic cultures would be an enriching experience for pupils and the entire school community.

Notes

- 1 The concept of cultural capital refers to knowledge of cultural expressions/art forms, as defined by Bourdieu (see, e.g. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>).
- 2 The Law of Jante is the idea that there is a pattern of group behavior towards individuals within Scandinavian communities that negatively portrays and criticizes individual success and achievement as unworthy and inappropriate.

BIOGRAPHY

Anette Sture Iversen is a dance artist, pedagogue and scholar with a BA in theatre dance, MA in theatre studies and a teaching degree from Oslo National Academy of the Arts. She has been a dancer and choreographer with her own dance company alongside teaching contemporary dance, dance history and

related subjects to dance students, mainly in upper secondary school. Since 2008 she has been employed by DiS as a dance consultant and initiated projects like *Dance as a cultural meeting point*. Anette is the editor of *På Spissen*: members' magazine for the Norwegian Association for Dance Artists.