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Vesna Geršak

University of Ljubljana,
Faculty of Education
University of Primorska,
Faculty of Education

DANCE IN THE SLOVENIAN KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM

Summary: *In this article, we present dance in kindergarten in terms of what is specified by the Slovenian national curriculum for kindergartens. We analyse the similarities between the Italian Reggio Emilia pedagogical model and the British Midway model for dance. The common features of these models emphasize the child's creative process and participation, while stressing the teacher's role in encouraging the child to explore dance elements playfully, and not to create schematic, formulaic choreography. By means of our study, we investigate the current status of these features in Slovenian kindergartens. Our conclusion is that relaxation activities are widely used in practice. On the other hand, schematic choreography is still used even though it is not recommended by the Slovenian national curriculum.*

Key words: *dance, arts, kindergarten, preschool curriculum, Reggio Emilia pedagogy, Midway model*

1. Introduction

In the Road Map for Arts Education (UNESCO, 2006), it is emphasised that we need to recognise the value and use of arts in the education process, to understand its importance in the development of cognitive and social skills, and to note that it encourages innovative thinking and creativity. The “Arts in Education” approach considers the arts to be a way of teaching and exploring general areas of the curriculum. Such an approach tries to spread the positive effects of using arts education to all children and comprehensively into the many areas of kindergarten and school curriculums.

The teacher’s recognition of the children’s capacity for dance and the wonder this experience offers, enable the teacher to enter the unknown as a place of wonderment and new learning. Not only does the teacher find her own dance, she also discovers the importance of group dynamics and learning from each other. Ultimately, the teacher recognises the emergence of democracy as an applied pedagogical practice (Sansom, 2015: 29).

How well does the Slovenian national kindergarten curriculum follow these guidelines/approaches, and how do Slovenian kindergarten teachers integrate dance in daily activities?

2. Analysis of Arts in the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum

A strong component of early childhood education in Slovenia is the focus on creating stimulating learning environments that encourage play, exploration and participation. The Curriculum for Kindergarten (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999) defines the arts as a tool that allows children to realise their creative potential, which is reflected in their playful exploration of the world.

Children experience the arts, communicate through the arts, practise invention and creation of the arts, realise and develop their artistic imagination and expand their field of aesthetics. Educators encourage curiosity and the enjoyment of artistic activities by creating rich, diverse environments that enable children to experience themselves and others, their surroundings and the arts.

Examples of dance activities for children aged 1 to 3

The child can do the following:

- make up their own movement, movement sequences and positions;
- move and dance with their whole body, explore the possibilities of movement in various parts of the body, combine simultaneous and consecutive movement;
- try fast and slow, fluid and choppy, and tense and relaxed movement;

- feel the difference between moving and standing still, and non-locomotion (bending down, stretching, turning, swaying on the spot) and locomotion (crawling, climbing, walking, running, jumping);
- try movement with different bodily orientations (rising, falling, closing, opening, advancing, retreating), large or small amplitude, high and low horizontal levels;
- observe the teacher or a guest dance (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999).

Examples of dance activities for children aged 3 to 6

The child can do the following:

- communicate, create and express themselves through movement;
- improve control and awareness of body parts and the whole body in various forms of movement and stillness;
- differentiate between focused movement and relaxation;
- play and practice coordination and balance;
- observe, dance and understand the elements of stillness and movement in one place or in various floor and spatial patterns, at various tempos, rhythms and varying degrees of tension, and connect these elements into short or long, more or less independent dances;
- perceive the relation of one body part to another, the relation between the body and the floor or an object, and the relation between dancers in a pair and in a group;
- create short dances for drama performances and videos (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999).

In analysing the activities recommended by the curriculum, we can see that the emphasis is on creating, trying, combining, experiencing, expressing, communicating, developing, playing, observing, differentiating, implementing, assembling and feeling dance/through dance.

Arts (dance) activities in kindergarten should focus on the process through which a child explores, looks for and eventually finds the answer to a thought provoking, organizational or physical task, during which the adult encourages every noticeable improvement. The adult does not evaluate, comment on or critique the child's work, and does not encourage the child to make a schematic, regular, simplified version (an example of this is teaching a previously set dance routine). The adult does not interfere in the child's aesthetic judgment. One key factor in this kind of teaching is that the teacher recognizes that the process is more important than the result. The teacher follows the child's progress and encourages them to explore new forms of dance, movement and motifs through games and questions. When using dance as a way of teaching, it is important that the teacher not interfere too much in the child's creative process (as in supplying

them with set forms), but allow the child to explore and create, leading to dance sequences.

3. The Reggio Emilia Approach – Italian Kindergarten Model

The Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach (Malaguzzi, 1998) does not prioritize verbal expression. The developers believe that other forms of expression are neglected in traditional classrooms, and that children are therefore deprived of certain aspects of experiencing and expressing the world around them. Non-verbal interaction through movement or dance, and communicating through touch and movement are essential in the early stages of a child's development.

The creative arts activities in the Reggio Emilia approach all follow these three conceptual phases: **surprise, experience and expression** (Geršak and Korošec, 2011:69).

The first phase is the **surprise**; children need solid motivation to be creative. The theme on which the children work has to be interesting and important. Surprise arouses their interest, while at the same time it creates a need for them to increase their knowledge about what they discuss and experience. Without an emotional connection to the topic, the child will quickly become bored and stop paying attention.

The second phase is **experiencing**; in this phase, the children get acquainted with the place, the materials, the objects, the form, the voice, etc. They need to be offered as many experiences and as much information as possible from various sources. Teachers organize visits to museums, theatres, concerts and performances; they enable the children to explore nature, leaf through books, create sounds, listen attentively, and think of ideas for a character in a story, how the story could develop and what would follow, etc.

Expression is the third phase, when the children put their experiences into new relations; they use objects as tools or as animated objects in new relations and positions. The children experiment and explore the potential for creativity based on the available information and material, what is taking shape, what is happening around them and what happens if they do something in a certain way.

The children also present and view their creations. In the Reggio Emilia approach, documenting the whole process forms the basis for further expanding the project at hand.

This approach also stresses the importance of the alteration of the traditional role of teachers: they do not carry out a (set) program like dispensers of knowledge, but are explorers and creative, thoughtful designers of individualised programs. Teachers' task is to look for and follow the child's interests and activities, and

to constantly try to help the child explore and maintain interest. It is important for teachers to reflect on what their contribution should be and what the child should be contributing (Špoljar, 1999).

4. The British Midway Model and Its Similarities to the Reggio Emilia Approach

The Midway model for dance arts in education (Smith-Autard, 2002) combines two poles: the pedagogical (process) model and the model of professional dance teaching.

The pedagogical model is based on the process and is the most important element of dance creation. The model of professional dance teaching has more objective goals and is focused on the product - dance choreography, which is mostly pre-assembled and does not allow the participation of children.

The Midway model combines the best practices of both opposing models, pedagogical and professional, where dance activities can offer a child opportunities for research, implementation, reflective appreciation, expressing, creating, rendering, aesthetic experience, the satisfaction of completing the process and presenting it to others.

In this way, the art of dance offers the child development in the cognitive, emotional, social and psychomotor domains (Geršak and Lenard, 2013).

The Midway model of the art of dance in education recommends the use of the following three phases in the creative process: **creating, implementing and observing** (acknowledging dance) (Smith-Autard, 2002). This three-phase model is an extremely flexible structure in early childhood, and its meaning depends on the developmental characteristics of the children. The creative phase can mean "doing", "trying" or "assembling"; the implementation phase can mean "doing", "showing" or "dancing"; and the observation phase can mean "watching", "perceiving", "discussing" or "drawing" dance. It is important to remember that the aesthetic and creative aspects of dance education have much in common with those of drama, music and visual arts.

The Midway model contains the best of both models and includes new ideas about dance arts collaborating with the full range of types of education: developmental, artistic, procedural, aesthetic and cultural education. It employs the three-phase model as a basis for the experiential learning of children and offers a sense of the cultural role of dance arts (Geršak and Lenard, 2013).

6. What Do the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum, the Italian Reggio Emilia Approach and the British Midway Model Have in Common?

The key conclusion in Kroflič and Gobec (1995) was that creative dance activities affect how children (and their teachers) develop creatively and how they build a positive self-image, all while emphasizing the process and not excluding the end product. The kindergarten curriculum, the Reggio Emilia approach and the Midway model all emphasize creativity and participation – the child's active role in the creative process. We can also note that the three approaches support the notion of having a teacher who motivates, supervises and encourages the children without offering them preset patterns (choreography). Dance arts are not only important in the sense of creative thinking and implementation; they are also an important aspect of aesthetic education.

These methods include the appropriate structural tools that help to develop creativity and can be used in a broader sense to adapt to various situations (Davies, 2003). The goal of introducing dance activities in early childhood is to encourage the development of a child's natural abilities by offering them as many chances as possible to be creative and by helping them to compose simple dance sequences.

When small children dance, their dancing passes from one form to another without becoming a repetitive sequence. This does not mean that there is a lack of concentration, but that various paths and threads are intertwining. Improvisation like this is characteristic of three or four year-olds and can later serve as a more formal base for playful dance exploration. When the time comes for us to help with creating dance, there are many tools that we can use when working with children in kindergarten. A good starting point is a basic understanding of the following elements of dance: space, time (tempo) and energy (power). These are tools with which we can introduce motivation in a creative way. A child's internal motivation comes from past experiences, imagination and the reliving of emotional states. External motivation may include the observation and exploration of their environment, man-made objects, music, sounds, poetry, children's stories, emotional encouragement, clothes and various props. Using a range of props encourages children's imagination, which in turn enriches their way of expressing themselves through dance. Our encouragement helps children to open up and express things that they cannot express in words.

Harries et al (2009) believe that children can be imaginative and creative through dance, without being afraid of making mistakes. In creative dance there are no right or wrong ways of expressing yourself. Through dance, children can build a sense of their own constantly improving abilities. They are given the chance to react to various stimuli individually (in their own natural way) or in interaction with a group. Meanwhile, they can develop their own ideas and ways of being creative.

The Research Problem and Aims

The aim of our empirical research is to gain an understanding about the status of dance in Slovenian kindergartens and to explore similarities between the ideas from the Midway model of the art of dance in education and those from the Reggio Emilia approach. We were interested in establishing how often kindergarten teachers incorporate creative dance activities in their classrooms (pedagogical model), compared to how often they incorporate actual dance choreography (professional model).

Research Question

To what extent do Slovenian kindergarten teachers follow the professional or the pedagogical models?

Research Sample

The research sampling in this quantitative research was stratified. We collaborated with kindergarten teachers from the 1st round of a project carried out at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana entitled "Professional Training of Teachers in the Elements of Special Pedagogical Principles of the Reggio Emilia Concept in Pre-School Education in the Years 2008–2013". A total of 810 kindergarten teachers from various regions participated in this research project.

Data Collection and Processing

Our research was conducted through training Slovenian teachers to use certain elements from the Reggio Emilia approach (Geršak, 2010). Before training, the participants answered a closed-ended questionnaire about using dance activities in kindergarten, and about the inclusion of various forms of dance in their work with children. We processed the resulting data by using basic statistics and histograms. The arithmetic mean (average) for each variable was calculated.

Results

From the results we can conclude that kindergarten teachers i) are still following the professional model for teaching dance, ii) are teaching preset forms of dance (choreography), and iii) are focusing on the end result (performance in front of an audience). 27.4% of the participating teachers create a short piece of choreography a couple of times per month and teach it to the children. 7% of teachers do this a couple of times per week, and 49.6% do this a couple of times per year (Figure 1).

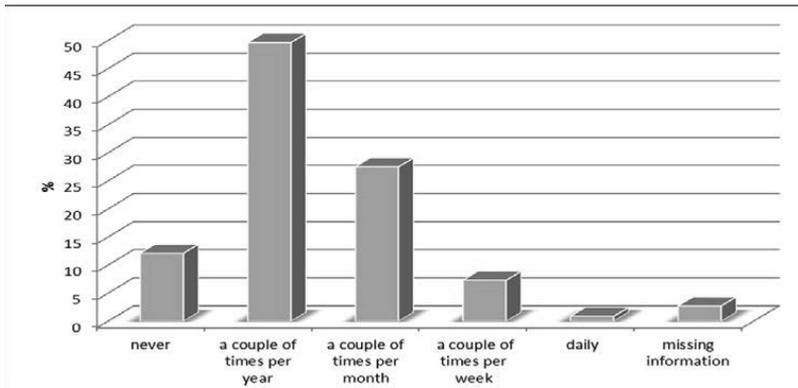


Figure 1: The frequency of teaching preset choreography in a group.

The results also showed that the kindergarten teachers who use movement and dance in their daily classroom activities, mostly use movement games with a preset structure, or use relaxation activities, without focusing on developing any elements of dance (Table 1 and Figure 2).

Daily use of movement and dance activities	f	%
movement games	32	29.62963
folk dances	2	1.851852
expressing content through dance	7	6.481481
children’s dances – choreography	1	0.925926
social movement activities	13	12.03704
imaginative content	12	11.11111
relaxation activities	41	37.96296

Table 1: Daily use of movement/dance activities.

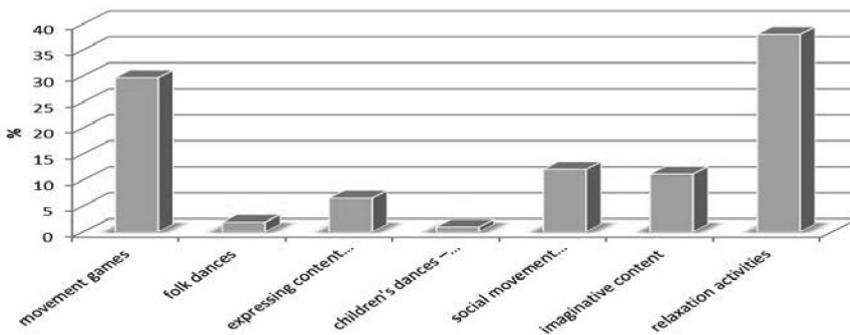


Figure 2: Daily use of movement-dance activities.

Based on our results, we can say that there are two main approaches being used in Slovenian kindergartens; the first is based on relaxation and does not focus on developing various elements of dance, and the second is the professional approach, which is focused on choreography and the final product (performance). This set choreography is usually performed for parents, relatives and guardians.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The professional model does not allow for the child to be creative or expressive, and it often does not take into account the child's natural way of moving. In this model, the teacher uses the children as a tool, which is inadmissible in pre-school dance pedagogy. Creating and remembering can be very simple if we consider contemporary views on the functioning of the brain. We do not need to emphasize dance elements, uniformity and consistency to achieve an end result (from a process). Such an approach does not allow the development of individuality, which is a key component of education.

Even though this is a complex matter, we need to evaluate the knowledge that we put into the process (partially through the end product). This is why we recommend the use of the Midway model of three-stage learning, which includes an "aesthetic product", but does not exclude doing and appreciating dance art. We need tools to measure the knowledge, skills and understanding that the child has obtained. One way of evaluating your set aims could be by evolving certain elements of dance (space, energy and time). In the end product we could verify whether the children experience these elements any better than before.

By analysing the activities recommended by the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999), we found that the emphasis is on the process (imagining, testing, combining, experiencing, expressing, communicating, creating, playing, observing, differentiating, doing, assembling and feeling of/through dance). These activities are appropriate for pre-school children. The Reggio Emilia approach also recommends using dance activities as one of the central components of teaching in kindergarten, and it emphasizes participation. These two approaches have several things in common with the Midway model in dance pedagogy, which emphasizes the creative process as well as the appreciation of dance. In all of these approaches, the teacher takes into account the developmental characteristics of the child and is open to the child's ideas in "100 languages" while encouraging the child to explore the elements of dance in a playful way. Although similar approaches have been known for decades in Slovenian dance pedagogy, these concepts are still unrealised. We are trying to implement these dance pedagogy concepts by educating teachers

formally at the Faculty of Education (programs of dance pedagogy have been in operation since 1949), organizing professional development seminars for teachers and dance pedagogy conferences, and presenting examples of good practice. Some research on the influence of guided creative movement activities in Slovenian kindergarten demonstrates impressive results on the creative thinking of children (and kindergarten teachers) (Kroflič, 1992, 2000). There are also many examples of good practice where kindergarten teachers have become receptive to children's creative expression and have thus evoked dance activities authentically created by the children.

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Vesna Geršak

Sveučilište u Ljubljani
Pedagoški fakultet

Sveučilište Primorska
Pedagoški fakultet

PLES U KURIKULU SLOVENSКИH DJEČJIH VRTIĆA

Sažetak: U ovom radu obrađujemo ples prema odrednicama Slovenskog nacionalnog kurikula dječjih vrtića. Analizirat ćemo sličnosti između talijanskog pedagoškog pristupa Reggio Emilia i britanskog modela plesa Midway. Zajedničko im je što naglašavaju djetetov kreativni proces i sudjelovanje, pritom izdvajajući ulogu odgajatelja u stimuliranju djeteta da kroz igru istraži plesne elemente, a ne u stvaranju shematske, formulaične koreografije. U ovom smo istraživanju analizirali trenutačno

stanje navedenih odrednica u slovenskim dječjim vrtićima. Zaključujemo da su u praksi dosta prisutne opuštajuće aktivnosti. S druge strane, u uporabi je i shematska koreografija iako je ne preporučuje Slovenski nacionalni kurikulum.

Ključne riječi: ples, umjetnosti, dječji vrtić, predškolski kurikulum, pedagoški pristup Reggio Emilia, model Midway.