Dance Education for the Highly Creative:

Developing the Creative Potential of Gifted Children in the Dance Classroom

Prof. Kelly Lynne Harris

Atlantic Cape Community College

Author Note

Kelly is a Professor of Dance at Atlantic Cape Community College. She is on the dance faculty of Cygnus Creative Arts Centre and is a guest instructor at the Harris Conservatory of the Arts. Prof. Harris has her dance performance degree from New World School of the Arts, Bachelors from Boston University and Masters in Journalism from Kent State. She also studied for three semesters in Germany, majoring in Vaganova Ballet Technique. She has been teaching for over 20 years and performed in the U.S. and Europe with Broadway musicals and touring companies. Prof. Harris is a member of Conseil International de la Danse (CID) and the National Association for Gifted Children.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kelly Harris, Department of Dance, Atlantic Cape Community College, 5100 Black Horse Pike, Mays Landing, NJ 08330 U.S.A.

Contact: [kharris@atlantic.edu](mailto:kharris@atlantic.edu)

Abstract

How can we identify a highly gifted student in the dance classroom? Can we conceive of a pedagogical approach that will allow these students to develop to their full potential? Can we create a classroom environment that allows us to identify expertise and creativity while accomplishing a fixed task? This paper explores the special circumstances of highly creative children in the dance classroom and offers a solution in assessing gifted children and extending current pedagogical models to meet their needs. The pedagogical approach is based on research into cognitive processes and brain development and offers a way to extend fixed exercises to develop divergent and creative thinking skills.

*Keywords:* dance education, highly gifted children, developing creative potential

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**I. What Exactly is Creativity?**

The word creativity was originally borrowed from religion and the story of Creation. The etymology comes from late 14c., Latin *creatus*,"to make, bring forth, produce, beget" (Creativity”, 2016). Ancient civilizations regarded creative work and discoveries as coming from divine origin or a higher power. Creativity was mysterious, supernatural and often something to be feared. The concept of creativity as a psychological study has only been seriously pursued since the late 1950’s. The earliest studies on creativity are the Wallas Paradigms (1926). These paradigms illustrate the need for preparation (the rational discipline of research, logic and investigation), incubation (the activities of the subconscious), until the end result of illumination is achieved. Many researchers on intelligence such as Maslow, Gowan, Torrance and Piaget have written volumes on creativity and the creative process. Definitions range from a measurement of one’s mental health (Maslow, 1971) to a developmental process toward psychedelia by contacting the numinous through the preconscious (Gowan, 1975). Rhodes defines the word creativity as the phenomenon in which a person communicates a new concept (Torrance, 1965). He identifies 57 different definitions for the word creativity and suggests they fall into 4 categories: person, product, process, and press (Torrance, 2000). Stein points out that the creative person may be more sensitive to gaps that exist in his or her culture at a given time (Torrance, 1995). Ebert (1973) contrasts intelligence with creativity stating:

Both creativity and intelligence are adequate means to solve a problem. However, for an intelligent person, it is enough to find the right solution to a problem. The creative person, on the contrary, is capable of finding many solutions to the problem and then chooses the most optimal solution from the possibilities.

Throughout this paper, the term creativity will refer specifically to the ability to contribute new ideas, come up with different points of view, and solve problems in original ways with a concentration on the individual, the process, and the environment.

**II. Assessing the Highly Creative**

Highly creative children can be identified by standardized testing such as the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking that measure a child’s ability for fluency, flexibility, originality or inventiveness, and elaboration. Fluency is the ability to produce a large amount of relevant responses. Adapted to the ballet class, a teacher might ask of the students, “How many jumps can you do from 2 feet?” The students may respond *changement, sissonne, temps leve, échappé* and so forth. The more adept at fluency, the more responses the student will have.

Flexibility is the ability to have a variety of categories to a response. It is the aptitude to shift from one line of thinking to another. A classic question for measuring flexibility is, “How many uses can you come up with for a tin of cola?” A child adept in flexibility will have many different responses other than drinking out of the can, and find unusual uses such as a tool, a piece of art, or to serve another practical function. Inventiveness and originality is the invention of something new or novel. It is an idea that is infrequent or unusual. Elaboration is the amount of detail used to explain how the idea would be executed. The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking have proved to be an effective means to determine a child’s creative potential; however, it is often the parent or educator that first notices something special. Testing isn’t always the most practical approach and can be costly or difficult to organize. It is wise for both parents and educators to inform themselves of the behavioral traits normally associated with the highly creative.

There are unfair stereotypes of highly creatives being melancholy or outcasts. Educators may be annoyed by creative behavior and think something is wrong with the child; however, creativity is a sign of positive mental health (Gowan, Demos and Torrance, 1967). The following is a partial list of behaviors frequently described by parents of highly creative children (Gowan, et al, 1967):

Overactive physically and/or mentally

Annoying curiosity

Forgetful and absentminded

Good sense of humor

Doesn’t participate in class

Enjoys nature and outdoors

Likes to work alone

Sensitive

Mind wanders

Daydreams; gets lost in thought

Feels left out of things (p. 246)

A creative person has personality traits that distinguish him or her from others. Guilford (1959) identified creative personality traits as “sensitivity to problems, fluency, flexibility, originality, ability to transform meanings, and ability to elaborate” (p. 152). Maslow (1968) stated that the creative person is spontaneous, expressive, effortless, innocent, not frightened by the unknown or ambiguous, able to accept uncertainty, tolerate bipolarity, and integrate opposites. The creative student is curious, independent, imaginative and courageous. The creative student is often bored by routine which can be troublesome for some teachers.

**III. Challenges in the Theatrical Dance Classroom**

The authoritarian teaching model does not lend itself to the needs of gifted children. The authoritarian teacher attempts to shape and control the behavior and attitudes of students, and values order and structure above all. As a result, the authoritarian teacher demands obedience and doesn’t encourage the verbal give and take critical to the development of creative potential. Society often romanticizes the idea of the strict ballet master berating students; however, this is can be particularly detrimental to highly creatives. Children need a safe environment where questions are encouraged and there is freedom to explore ideas. Implementing a creative teaching method asks of the teacher to possibly let go of some of the values which he or she holds dearly.

The authoritative teacher, similar to the authoritarian teacher, is firm when necessary, but the control is through positive encouragement of a student’s autonomy. The teacher is demanding but actively listens to students and explains the reasoning behind rules and demands (Scarlett, Ponte, & Singh, 2013). In her studies of parenting styles, Baumrind found that authoritative parenting, which includes nurturance, communication, firm control, and maturity demands, best predicts a child’s well-being (Baumrind, 1966). Her findings have been supported by other scholars and educators. For example, one study found that an authoritative teaching style developed better teacher-student relationships and the children became less vulnerable to bullying and victimization (Gregory et al., 2010). To create an environment that promotes creativity, teachers should take an authoritative approach.

In traditional schools, children are organized according to chronological age. They are broken up into age groups where 9-year olds are educated separately from 10-year olds. This is because we expect children of a certain age to be at the same developmental level, but that is not a practical view. With dance education, we do not have to hold fast to the tradition of organizing classes according to age. Some 8- year olds may be as mature and advanced as a 12-year old. Teachers and parents sometimes worry that gifted children may not be mature enough or able to cope socially when they are placed with older age groups; however, emotional maturity in children tends to be correlated with intellectual ability rather than age.

Another challenge for highly creative children is socialization. Highly creative children often find it hard to make friendships with children their own age. Part of this is due to a high intellectual ability but also because of an introspective nature and different value system (Maslow, 1971). Gifted learners prefer friends who share the same ideas rather than the same age. The dance class provides this environment where groups of students of all ages become peers by sharing the same interests and mindset about art. Dance can be a powerful tool for socialization and often work to a child’s social advantage.

Gifted students often show behavior that throws off even the most seasoned dance teacher. They can be impatient, relentlessly curious, domineering and challenging. This may seem like insolence or disrespect; however, when you consider that the behavior is part of their special learning needs, a teacher can handle the actions accordingly. A classroom that is structured to accommodate the needs of the gifted will reduce behavioral problems.

A good starting point is for educators to understand the difference between high-achievers and gifted learners. High-achieving learners tend to absorb information while gifted learners analyze the information and try to apply it. A high-achiever will take your word as gold, remember it and do exactly as you say. A gifted student, however, might listen to your instruction, look at it from every angle and find half-truths, errors or over-generalizations. This behavior sometimes feels like a threat to teachers who follow strict lesson plans; they may feel disrespected. We want students to challenge ideas, but they must be taught appropriate ways without being rude or too much of a disruption. Allow students the freedom to explore information and ask questions. Don’t lecture students, but learn with them and act as a guide as they discover and learn. Reward gifted students for their passion and be prepared for challenging ideas. Above all, don’t be afraid to stray away from the lesson plan if a student is making meaningful connections.

**IV. Practical Approaches to Accommodate Highly Creatives**

What makes an effective creative teacher? It is not enough when a teacher is a creative person; they need training on how to accommodate the needs of highly creatives. The following section offers some practical tips on how to implement activities that support creative development.

Dance improvisation is the process of spontaneously creating movement. Development of improvised movement material is facilitated through a variety of creative explorations including levels, shape and dynamics. The process of improvisational dance contains the essence of artistic creation in the moment that it is created. During the creative process, there is a biological change marked by a high amount of alpha wave and low theta production, similar to a state of meditation (Gowan, 1975, p. 319). In the creative state, dreamlike pictures or words seem to spring easily into the mind as alpha waves help increase the ability to visualize. The brain waves of alpha (8-13 hertz) and theta (4-8hertz) can be further increased through somatic techniques and movement awareness exercises (Peterman, 1996).

There are a multitude of improvisation exercises that are easy to incorporate into dance class. One that I frequently use is the mimicking of objects. We begin class by lying on a mat and doing some relaxation exercises. Then, I present various objects, for example, a cotton ball, a scarf, a pine cone and then ask the students to describe the object using adjectives (i.e. soft, smooth, picky). The students observe the object using the senses and manipulate the object by squeezing it, rolling it or watching it spin. The dancers then create a short list of adjectives to describe their object. Based on the list, they develop a piece of choreography that resembles the adjectives and movement qualities of the object. The students observe one another’s dance and use critical thinking skills to guess which object they are mimicking. Through brainstorming, categorization, divergent thinking and observation the students help develop creative thinking skills by progressing through the creative stages of preparation, incubation and illumination. The movement discoveries can be drawn upon in the technical portion of class, for example, by asking students to float their arms in *porta bras* like the scarf. Older students can apply the Laban principles of time, space, weight and flow to categorize the object’s movement qualities.

Psychologists point out the need for education to address right hemisphere learning (Gowan et al, 1967). The seat of imagery appears to be in the non-verbal right cerebral hemisphere. Ordinary perception is when we receive information from external sources by way of our senses. For example, if we are standing in front of a bowl of fruit, we perceive the bowl of fruit through our senses. Right hemisphere imagery, on the other hand, is “perception in the absence of external stimulus, regardless of the sense modality in which it occurs” (Khatena, 1999, p. 58). Should a person decide to paint the bowl of fruit after seeing it and is no longer in the presence of the bowl of fruit then the person is drawing upon a mental image perceived. The person is now using memory imagery. Art uses information from the external environment and processes the information into images to draw upon. According to Preble, “Art is involved with the making of actual image forms. But creation of an actual image must be preceded by a mental image” (Khatena, 1999, p. 62). All artists, including dancers, rely on imagery to create art.

We have already discussed improvisation but now I would like to add the use of imagery. When using improvisation and imagery techniques, the teacher needs to clearly decide what goal he or she is trying to achieve. If you want the students to feel the floor and articulate the foot in *battement tendu*, for example, you can ask the students to take off their shoes and imagine a fluffy floor covered in big pink or brown teddy bear fur. Ask the students to comb the fur back and forth with their feet and toes for several minutes. Later, when doing *battement tendu* at the *barre*, the teacher can draw upon this image by saying, “Teddy bear fur!” Imagery can also be used to strengthen performance or introduce a new step. Children respond wonderfully to images and often remember technique better when a story or image is attached. Improvisation and imagery are important in developing creative potential and the opportunities are endless.

**V. Conclusion**

Creativity is quite possibly the most important cerebral process of human development. Creativity provides us with new ways to solve problems, create inventions, and make discoveries that can better our world. Dance education provides us with a unique opportunity to identify highly gifted students and develop creative thinking skills. This paper discusses the creative process in its stages of preparation, incubation and illumination. Identifiable traits of gifted children are presented as well and the challenges they face with an authoritarian teaching model, age restrictions and socialization. It is recommended that dance educators employ an authoritative teaching model and incorporate techniques including improvisation and imagery to better develop the creative potential of gifted children in the dance classroom.

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