

Ahead in Air: Active Learning Through Aerial Dance

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Young children interact with the world physically as gymnasts, athletes, and dancers creating imaginative play. What kinds of kinesthetic understanding would children ages 6 through 11 create for themselves and learn from within aerial spaces, provided they have the skills, the resources, and the chance to express themselves? Supported by the muscular strength of their teacher along with ropes, harnesses, and cables, children create three-dimensional expressions of their relationship to the space in the Ahead in Air curriculum. This public school-university partnership demonstrates young children's artistry beyond the expectations of traditional dance education curricula. Foremost in the Ahead in Air curriculum is the investigation of geometry of space and the development of communication skills, collaboration, and trust. Working with a trained aerialist, dance educators, and their university professor, 12 pre-service dance educators from the University of South Carolina participated in this unique practicum experience as part of their teacher certification course work.

Elementary schoolchildren are dangling from ropes performing aerial extensions, arches, and spins, celebrating their skills as gymnasts, dancers, artists, and athletes. They are using every inch of the space around them stretching, bending, twisting, and soaring in space. They are communicating, problem solving, working together, and defying gravity as architects of space.

Dance is identified as aerial dance when special apparatus, ropes, wires, and harnesses are used to support the performers in the air. Aerial

dance is a relatively new form of dance. It has been practiced since the 1970s and is credited to the invention of professional dancer Terry Sendgraff. Sendgraff, known for her low-trapeze works, produced a blending of dance and the circus elements. Sendgraff is the inventor of the single-point trapeze, an apparatus in which the two ropes of the trapeze connect to a single attachment point, which allows an element of spinning as well as swinging.

Aerial dance has grown in popularity over the past 35 years. Currently there are aerial dance festivals and aerial dance studios that specialize in aerial fitness—including working with trapeze, fabric, bungee, and hoop—and others with a more artistic, whole-body approach focusing on body centering and flow, economy of movement, and choreography and aesthetics. Additionally, there are performing aerial dance companies, such as Project Bandaloop, which has been creating aerial dance since 1992. Project Bandaloop is known for a thrilling style of dance climbing in natural and untraditional spaces such as on the side of mountains, on bridges, and between skyscrapers. Amelia Rudolf directs the Project Bandaloop dance company, which offers workshops, school programs, and aerial dance performances using vertically dynamic environments (Browning-Bias 2010; Thomas, 2001) to support skills of artistic collaboration and trust (Hunt, 2011). Aerial work can present engaging interactive environments for learners to explore; can encourage active participation, teamwork, and exchange; and can be a highly effective tool in teaching complex concepts and ideas (Hunt, 2011; Schreiber, 2004).

There is a growing body of research praising the value of critical thinking and creative problem solving found in dance. Multiple intelligence theory supports learning fostered through movement and collaborative learning and further demonstrates that dance can be a powerful tool with the potential for transforming the learning experience (Armstrong, 2009; Rubado, 2002). Studies carried out by Howard Gardner with Project ZERO at Harvard University (Fowler, 1996; Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991) using multiple intelligence theory have indicated a range of positive effects on learning, illuminating learning goals in the arts (Eisner 2002; Paulson 2012) that include creative readiness and social competencies such as communication, collaboration, and creative thinking (Barone, 2001; Deasy, 2003; Gage, 2012; Paulson 2012).

Current back-to-basic educational initiatives have decreased the number of hours students spend in physical activity or working in the arts during the school day (DeCorby et al., 2004; Marshall & Hardman

2000). Further, budget cuts in many public schools mean that schools are now unable to provide opportunities for hiring specialists or for training classroom teachers in methods of integration of kinesthetic expression and creative problem solving through the arts. Further, working within the demands of district, state, and national curriculum initiatives and “teaching to the test” philosophies (Popham, 2001), few teachers are able to find the time and support for investigating creative, inquiry-based, interdisciplinary, and kinesthetically infused instruction found in 21st-century best-practice learning initiatives.

The kinesthetic experience is further diminished when students return home from school and get “plugged into” a “digital babysitter” of TV shows, computer video games, and online social networking. These activities further prioritize the digital experience above the physical experience (Janssen et al., 2005). Although researchers have identified several interactive video games, such as the Wii Fit, which are designed to help students build kinesthetic connections and support an active lifestyle (Graf et al., 2009; Graves, Ridgers, & Stratton, 2008; Graves, Stratton, Ridgers, & Cable, 2007), Ahead in Air believes the games are also kinesthetically limiting and often solely gestural, requiring little cardiovascular activity. The goal of Ahead in Air is therefore to work with elementary school teachers and their students to investigate kinesthetic and creative teaching and learning opportunities for aerial dance and to develop and share practical strategies for use in the primary grades.

For the majority of public schools in the United States with limited budgets, diminished resources, and field trip restrictions, there are practical challenges to implementing the project. Climbing walls, while found in some school cafeterias are large and expensive to install, and professional climbing facilities, found in health clubs and community centers, require costly transportation to and from the school. Playground equipment and the outdoor areas with coverings for shade presented a viable opportunity to explore and deliver the aerial dance curricula in the schools. After much investigation, Ahead in Air selected to use the covered sports court, the Ramada shade covering, and other playground structures for our aerial program.

Ahead in Air: Aerial Dance Research Questions

Young Aerialists

- When children ages 6 to 11 are provided the skills, resources, and chance to express themselves, what kinds of kinesthetic and geometric understanding would they create for themselves?
- What kind of learning can emerge within such aerial dance works?
- What kind of social development emerge within such aerial dance works?

Preservice Teachers

- When teachers in training are provided the training and support for aerial dance praxis, what kind of learning is fostered?



Figure 1. A fifth-grade student explores the freedom of flying in Ahead in Air.

Ahead in Air is a university-school partnership designed to support children's aesthetic and kinesthetic awareness as well as the realization and evaluation of Aerial praxis instructional units. Ahead in Air also served as a teaching practicum for University of South Carolina Dance Education (USC-DE) students. Hands-on praxis experience supports the value and principles of constructivism for teacher education (Dewey 1934; Dewey 1938; Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000; Von Glasersfeld, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978) and the implementation of constructivist approaches for special needs students (Duhaney & Duhaney 2000; Armstrong, 2009; Schirduan & Case, 2004). Further, the Ahead in Air curricular progression enables students and teachers to discuss issues, implement instruction, and evaluate their pedagogical practice.

Constructivist theory views students as actively involved in the construction of their own representations of knowledge. Students build on past learning and define new knowledge by connecting previous and newly acquired ideas, concepts, and thinking, leading to the development of new ideas. In adopting such views, we considered the role of the learner, the environment, and the knowledge construction process in the development of the curriculum (see Figures 1 and 2). Specific theoretical principles of constructivism (DeVries, 2002) guided our process, which include the following:

- The collaborative group process is emphasized.
- Students are encouraged to reflect on their own process.
- The learning should be relevant to the students' lived experience.

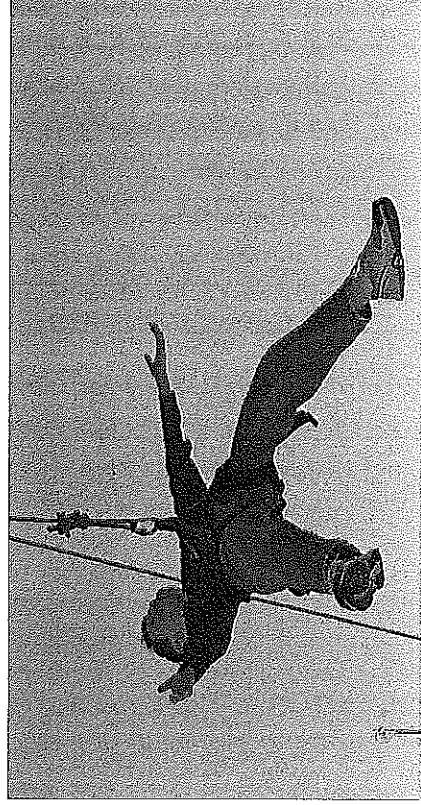


Figure 2. Session 1: A Round Top Elementary School student demonstrates core support soaring in the sky in a big X extended shape.

Additional pedagogical constructs guiding this research include the importance of kinesthetic problem solving and self-expression as the result of creating art (Armstrong, 2009; Gardner, 1983, 1999, 2000) and the belief that collaborative problem solving and community is critical to learning (Karpov & Haywood, 1998; Vygotksy, 1978).

Ahead in Air cultivates a climate in which artistry, collaboration, and communication are critical for project completion and calls for the elementary school students to become the directors, choreographers, performers, and evaluators of the program. Ahead in Air thereby seeks to assess the student's collaborative thinking and problem solving in the discipline of aerial dance and the student's knowledge construction from participating in the process.

Using encouragement and verbal cues, preservice teachers guide elementary students toward engaged and personally meaningful expression of their ideas. In daily activities, preservice teachers describe what they see and encourage elementary students' innovation and exploration.

Ahead in Air calls for the university students to work one-on-one with the elementary students; preservice dance education students develop skills of clear communication and effective directives as well as application and the articulation of dance content in terms of Body, Effort, Space, Shape, and Relationship (Laban, 1975).

The Ahead in Air curriculum was designed to connect USC-DE student course work in their major to their future profession and to support student's ability to make a direct connection between theory and practice in dance education. During the program, university students maintained journals to assess their effectiveness leading the aerial dance activities under the following criteria: communication, inspiration, engagement, and articulation. Daily wrap-up focus group discussions supported the exchange of ideas and were applied immediately, resulting in greater depth of subsequent reflection and observations. This practice led to the introduction of inquiry, feedback, and problem-solving strategies and was considered a valuable practice by the students. Communication, inspiration, engagement, and articulation have all been identified as critical components of effective and successful teacher education (Gray, 1996; Yureitch, 2004; Mirus, 2004; Penrod & Plastino, 2004; Redfern 1978; Schlaich, 1993; Yureitch, 2004).

Round Top Elementary School is a K-5 public school in located in Blythewood, South Carolina. Blythewood is a 30-minute drive north of the state capitol, Columbia. The Ahead in Air partnership involved more



Figure 3. Ramirez teaches aerial fundamentals.

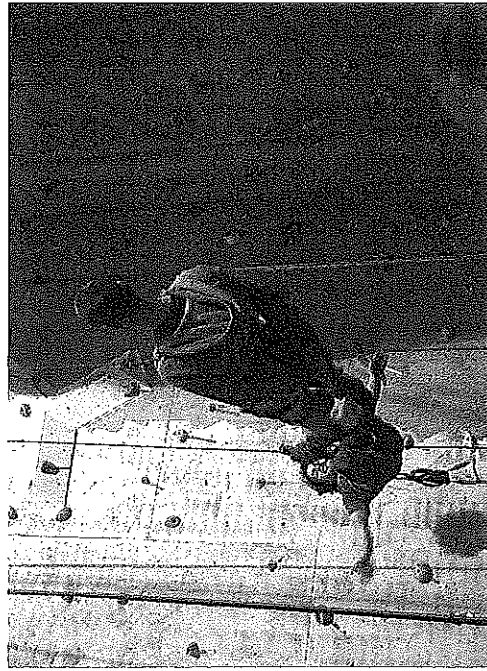


Figure 4. Ramirez with dance education student creating a mirror counterbalance.



Figure 5. After 20 hours of training, USC dance education students perform a duet.

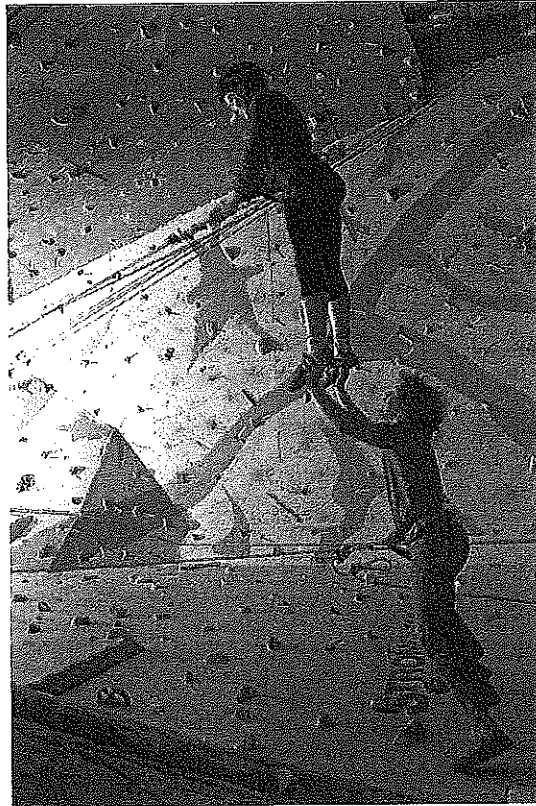


Figure 6. Aerialist Ramirez and USC dance education student create a duet

than 120 children in second through fifth grade, their teachers, and 12 USC-DE students from the University of South Carolina.

Round Top Elementary School is an ABC school with unique arts and science initiatives. Students have physical education (PE) once a week and the opportunity to learn foreign languages, computer applications, and experience three art disciplines (art, music, and dance) during the school day. The Round Top school curriculum centers on literacy, science, and technology, interdisciplinary instruction, and critical thinking skills. As an ABC school, it has additional state funding to support educational research initiatives such as Palmetto Writing Initiative and the CLEAN environmental advocacy. The student body is 66% White and 28% African American; 21% of the students receive reduced-price or free lunch, and 12% are identified as English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners and special needs students. Ongoing issues in the surrounding community are similar to other communities just outside urban centers of crime, poverty, and drugs.

The University of South Carolina is the largest university in South Carolina with multiple campuses and more than 45,000 students. The Dance Program offers a BA in Dance Education with K-12 teacher certification. USC-DE students enter the certification sequence as a cohort



Figure 7. Session 3: Partner dance activity in which a USC-DE student and a teacher relate and create complementary shapes.

with extensive focus on service learning, research, and practicum experiences in the schools. Ahead in Air USC student participants were enrolled in methods courses on dance pedagogy for children and final practicum studies prior to student teaching. The Ahead in Air partnership was made possible by funding from an Arts Initiative grant from USC and an ABC Grant from the State of South Carolina.

In preparations for the Ahead in Air partnership, USC-DE students met with Nicole Hardenberg, the dance specialist at Round Top in order to learn about her curriculum, school, community, and students interests. As none of the USC-DE students were previously trained in aerial dance, they trained at a climbing facility with aerialist, climber, and professional dancer Eddie Ramirez (see Figures 3–6). Ramirez worked with Project Bandaloop, one of the premiere performing aerial dance companies in the nation. USC-DE students learned about rigging, dynamic alignment balance, and counterbalance while suspended in the air and also about developing upper body strength and pelvic grounding. For more than 30 hours, they worked in teams getting physically prepared in order to support the younger students in the air. Over the course of the sessions with Ramirez, they not only learned about safety and the equipment but also explored partnering, improvisation, and choreography.

The USC-DE students viewed, analyzed, and discussed videos of aerial dance and shared concerns. Working closely with the teachers and specialists, a timetable that would coordinate with the USC-DE student pedagogy courses, the school calendar for state tests, and the USC-DE students schedule was created in order to encourage maximum participation by all partners. In terms of instruction preparations, the USC-DE students sharpened their skills of motivation for creative invention and studied the existing Round Top dance curricula to understand what the students' focus should be on in terms of dance structures and of the Laban framework of Body, Effort, Space, Shape, and Relationship.

Our Ahead in Air sessions were 55 minutes and had 20 to 25 students in each class (see Figure 7). To efficiently deliver the content and to provide optimum access to the aerial dance experience, four aerial suspension stations were created. To maximize the students' time in the air and with specialists, students completed journal entries in their homeroom classes directly following the aerial session. Classroom teachers identified interested students for small focus group interviews, and on completion of the research, larger focus group interviews were conducted.

Curricula

Ahead in Air leaders approached the curriculum as a creative yet flexible plan for guiding the children. The Ahead in Air partnership incorporated both traditional dance “done on land” combined with nontraditional dance “done in the air” in the curriculum. Curricular planning decisions were made as a team, which allowed the sequence of activities to be informed by student interest, daily progress, and the brainstorming session with the specialists and USC students following each session.

Participants used skills in aerial dance arts in combination with traditional dance activities such as shape relationships, shape forms, and the sequencing basic movement actions, initially within the context of improvisation and then extending them into choreographic forms. One of the primary goals of the project was to see what was possible in this environment. The team felt it was essential for the students to establish a sense of ownership of their creations and to allow each group of students the freedom to determine the theme and form of the final dances.

As preparation, students worked together in small groups, first watching partner demonstrations by specialists and then trying it out for themselves. Ahead in Air moved through the stages of creative process from observation, investigation, organization, discussion, and creation, followed by more planning, designing and sharing, discussing, editing, and eventually performing and reflecting. This pedagogical method was effective for the third- through fifth-grade students; however, the second-grade students needed additional assurance and guidance from the USC student leaders and aerial specialists. The second-grade work was almost exclusively improvisational in nature.

Integrating the Ahead in Air program within the context of classroom curriculum and familiar dance activities helped the students to establish a sense of ownership and allowed their creations to become personally meaningful for them. Using an interdisciplinary and collaborative model, Ahead in Air specifically aimed at identifying the ways in which students use aerial dance as an expression of imagination and problem solving and their connection to geometric space while making connections to science themes such as gravity, motion, action and reaction, and dynamic alignment in space.

Further, Ahead in Air examined how working in this nontraditional performance space informed the students' development of communication skills and support for collaborative learning and collaborative trust

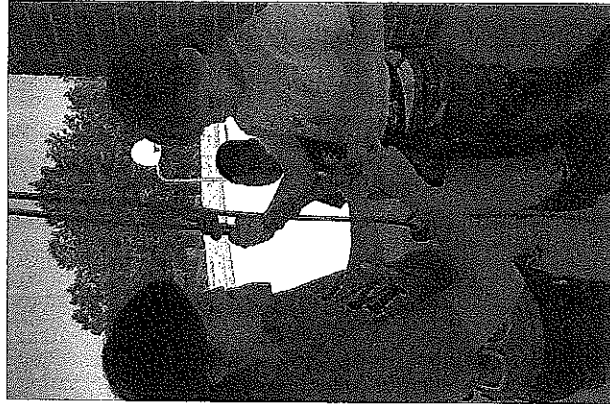


Figure 8. Session 1: In a quiet moment, a USC-DE student discusses proper safety precautions with second-grade student.

strategies. The Ahead in Air partnership focused on creating situations where children had to listen, observe, take initiative, and work together. Students considered the power of gravity, motion, action and reaction, and dynamic alignment in space while making connections to the environment, science, and collaborative trust.

Developing the Project

In aerial dance, aerialists use every inch of the space around them while stretching, bending, twisting, and soaring in space. Ahead in Air preparation and planning began in 2009 and was implemented in the spring of 2010. Hardenberg, a professional dance educator at Round Top Elementary school, and Dr. Parrish, the Director of dance education at USC, discussed the possibilities of a unique community partnership investigating the potential of aerial dance in the schools. With funding sources secured and Ramirez, a professional dancer and aerialist on board, the aerial dance initiative could be realized.

The dance curriculum at Round Top Elementary school includes weekly dance classes; therefore, students were familiar with Laban concepts of Body, Shape, Space, and Relationship as well as concepts of collaboration, improvisation, and choreography. In preparation for the partnership, Hardenberg introduced the work of Ploboius Dance Theatre and discussed positive and negative space and responding and reacting to a partner.

Parrish was eager for many students to participate in this one-of-a-kind community partnership; she therefore integrated Ahead in Air into the practicum sequence for two of her dance education methods courses: Methods of Teaching Children Dance and Integrated Curricula. USC-ED students were familiar with the conceptual elements of dance, constructivist pedagogy, curricular integration, 21st-century learning goals, and developmental learning. Additionally, their training with Ramirez in aerial instruction, safety precautions, stance and muscular control, harnessing, support, and suspension gave them a solid foundation for the partnership.

Each Ahead in Air class began with a demonstration of aerial dance and a discussion of safety precautions. Working in small groups, USC-DE students and Ramirez would set the harness for the elementary students and calm nerves before "flying." This was a critical step as it helped the leaders learn the names of the children, assess anxiety levels, and assess the students' ability to listen. This moment of stillness and focus before soaring into space and the relationship it created was a critical building block for the youngsters establishing trust (see Figure 8).

As the students became more self-assured in the aerial space, they were encouraged to feel core support and to organize and stabilize their body. Once this step was attained, they were encouraged to investigate kinesphere reach space by making big shapes and dynamic alignment by finding balance between what the right and left sides of their body were doing (see Figure 9). Once dynamic alignment and body control was attained, students were encouraged to focus on shape making and shape sequencing. This was a fluid transition from skill to skill, and it appeared that with each rotation, the students had grown exponentially.

The students' initial creations were interesting but did not express their knowledge of dance. The Ahead in Air team quickly realized that it needed a way to communicate and to describe the aerial dance movement to encourage student exploration. This was challenging because the USC-DE students had to attend to many things to ensure the safety of all participants. USC-DE students were unsure what to say and what the students needed to hear. After the first 55-minute session with the children, it

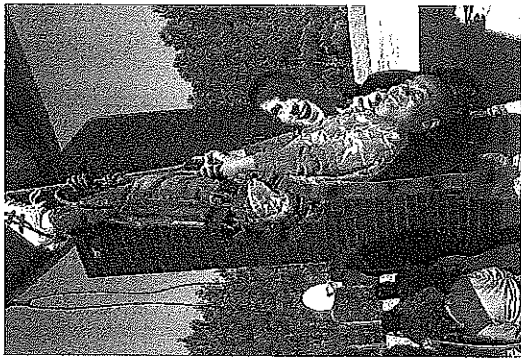


Figure 9. Session 2: A USC-DE student establishes a trusting relationship with children completion of inverted shape

became clear that the USC-DE students needed to communicate what they were seeing to the students in familiar dance terms such as stretch, twist, shrink, round shape, and so on.

The Laban Framework of Dance was relatively new for many of the USC-DE students, so they at first struggled with finding and applying the language correctly in order to guide the students' problem-solving activities in the air. Working together to try out new relationships in geometric space, USC-DE students guided the students by verbalizing the concepts of Body, Shape, and Space with directives such as "Explore the ways you can make a round shape" and "What happens when you tilt and twist that shape?" With practice, describing dance movement ultimately became an invaluable tool for describing both what was being observed and what to explore (see Figure 10).

Another benchmark early in the program was the young aerialists' ability to find and hold their balance in inverted shapes and to maintain the body control to transition from shape to shape. Socially, this benchmark centered on the development of listening skills, confidence in themselves, and trust in their USC preservice guide (see Figures 8–11). Motivating children to move past their comfort zone and to try new things in the air was a challenge. Affirmations such as "Good job" were not effective, perhaps because they are so commonplace they went unheard. Feedback and

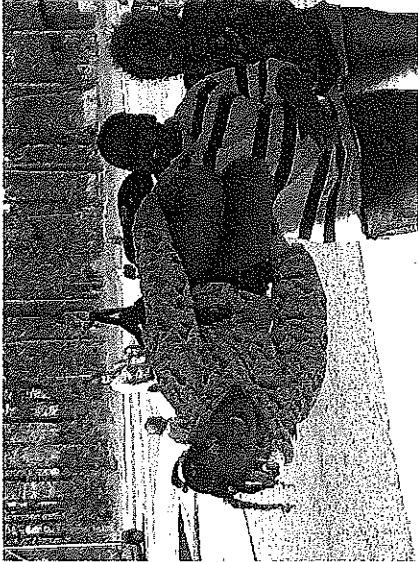


Figure 10. Session 2: An Ahead in Air fifth-grade student in a tilted ball shape while suspended in the air.



Figure 11 Session 2: USC-DE student directs a child using Laban language. Child extends his kinesphere reach space into a balanced layout.

specific praise provided useful information about what happened, what worked, and why it worked, which encouraged the students to think critically and to make conscious decisions about their work. Another benchmark for USC-DE students was their ability to use specific and effective words of encouragement and praise such as "That was a wonderful big X shape" or "Wow! I have never seen that type of shape before; it reminded me of . . ." to the aerial students.

Because only four students can be in the air at once, children spent a lot of time waiting for their turn. In order to encourage focus, observation skills, and active participation for the waiting children, the Ahead in Air

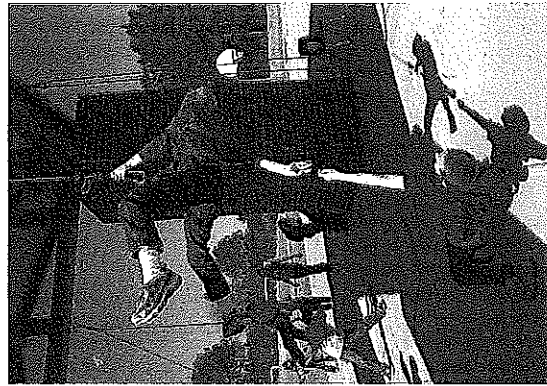


Figure 12. Session 2: A Round Top student begins to trust inversion and suspension in the air. small-group leaders discussed with the children things to look for and to remember in each other's aerial dances. Also, waiting children were given digital cameras to take photos of their fellow aerialists in order to document the experience.

At the beginning of each day the Ahead in Air team discussed what happened, what worked, and what was a challenge with the students. By taking the time to prepare, actively participate, and reflect on the aerial experience within the process, the children were able to discuss and recall each other's achievements in great detail. Many students were able to attain a level of collaborative interplay that the team had not yet considered possible (see Figure 12).

However, not all students were able to maintain focus during the activity. Some students were able to sustain focus longer than were others, and some USC-DE teachers were more capable of managing their students, encouraging focus, and developing effective communication with the children than were others. It became clear that additional strategies needed to be developed.

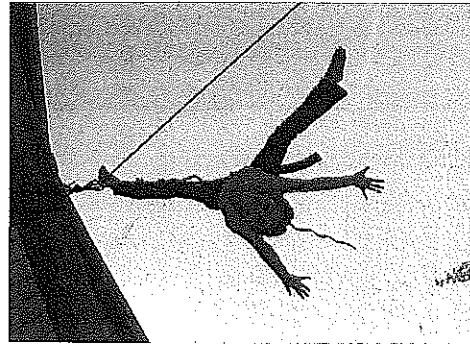


Figure 13. Session 3: A Round Top student "snowflakes," expanding her body to create a wide shape that reaches to the edges of her kinesphere.

Imagery

The next stage in the Ahead in Air program was the integration of evocative language and imagery as creative stimulus. Imagery requires visualization, concentration, and imagination. Imagery in the dance experience provides a source for inspiration and a conscious way of expressing movement, which can be particularly helpful when working with younger students and those individuals with limited vocabulary in dance.

In this stage, children respond to evocative language, which in turn informs their movement choices in the air. Examples of imagery directives that the USC-DE students used include "Show me a powerful shape"; or "Show me a flat pancake shape . . . remember it is round, soft and hot with lots of syrup"; or "Can you show me the feeling of sunshine glowing all around you?" Imagery in the context of aerial dance was an unexpected and a very effective and creative way of directing the children toward new and highly personalized ways of moving.

After the children created responsive movements to the teacher's words, they made lists and developed their own imagery as inspiration for guiding their own and each other's movements. By creating their personal imagery—such as Spider-Man, butterflies, snowflakes, flowers, and frogs—not only did the students make powerful connections to the meaning behind their movement choices but were also able to express a greater

variety of interpretations and more three-dimensional embodiment representations of the imagery (see Figure 13).

Partnering

The final theme addressed in the Ahead in Air curricular unit was partnering. Partnering and relating to others is very important in dance, as it requires communication, listening skills, problem solving, and respecting the needs of the dancers in the air.

The goal of the partnering activity was creating a duet with one dancer on the ground and the other in the air. This was challenging for young dancers, because the person dangling is not in control of the movement; he or she is being tilted, turned, and swung by the other person. Before entering this stage in the Ahead in Air program, the team leaders discussed respect, touching, and caring for one's partner.

The partnering sessions began with children being partnered with university students to demonstrate relationships and the clear concepts of under, around, over, near, far, and negative and positive space. In small groups, students created a short dance with the USC-DE students. After sharing these initial partner dances, it became clear that close and respectful relationships between the children and the USC-DE students had been created. Both the children and the USC-DE students enjoyed the activity because it provided a shared personal experience. This was one of the most highly discussed stages in the students' reflection journals. Dancing with a "real professional dancer" who moved them safely, who smiled, who complemented their movements, and who helped make beautiful complementary shapes gave the students a sense of purpose and personal commitment. This success was an essential step before the students proceeded into their final dances.

To prepare for the partner dance, the USC-DE students discussed rules and options with the children regarding dance themes, relationships, and imagery. When it was clear that the rules of safety would be adhered to, the children were free to employ their considerable skills of improvisation, and new ideas were realized. However, the team began to notice that the students' ideas would quickly shift to another theme, morphing from one theme to the next. For example, the students would begin with the theme of water, and then, when interesting movement options happened, the students would transform into fish and moments later transform into

dolphins. The cognitive transformation of ideas from theme to theme in the dance-making process demonstrated the students' search for unique forms of meaning. It was remarkable to see.

Ahead in Air classes discussed the intersection of interdisciplinary and dance content themes, particularly science and cultural themes. During the Ahead in Air residency USC-DE students spent time with the students, analyzed the kinesthetic and developmental differences among grades, identified successful and unsuccessful creative problem solving methods, and developed evocative language for later use in non-aerial classes.

Assessment

The five aerial dance sessions were designed to support critical competencies necessary to create personally expressive aerial dances. The sequence of sessions supported the acquisition of basic aerial dance tools: how to balance and establish dynamic alignment, how to create and sequence shapes, how to use imagery as inspiration for dance making, and how to communicate and relate to a partner safely, as well as how to develop communication skills necessary to exchange ideas.

Multiple methods of assessment were used to provide a data record. The Ahead in Air team worked together to develop and implement a range of assessment strategies, for example, peer and self-assessment, critique, portfolio, and video analysis. The children were an active part in the assessment process. Ahead in Air projects and assignments were designed to support knowledge of the expressive possibilities in a kinesthetic aerial dance artistic experience. Daily journaling, focus group interviews, and brainstorming sessions with the children and the USC-DE students informed the curricular planning and provided valuable accounts of the Round Top Elementary School students and the USC-DE students' experience. Photographs and videos of the process, aerial dance improvisations, choreography, performances, and interviews were analyzed for emergent themes.

It was anticipated that both the children and the USC-DE students would struggle with the physicality, communication, focus, and limitations of time. Specifically, the USC-DE students struggled with the rigor of physically hoisting the children while guiding the children verbally through the Laban movement framework and using imagery to guide improvisational responses. One USC-DE student compared the challenge to

“trying to move a piano as you continue to play the piano.” However, the daily sense of accomplishment served to motivate all participants to persist and to push past the immediate challenges. It was fascinating to see the level of closeness and the community formed each day in the process of problem solving, refining, analyzing, describing, and re-creating aerials dances (see Figures 14–16).



Figure 14. Session 4: A USC DE student performs a partnering dance with third grader.

As the children practiced and became more skilled and confident in the discipline of aerial dance, they were able to unite previous kinesthetic knowledge in both dance and art and to create connections to their own interests (dolphins, waves, superheroes, and aspects of nature such as tornadoes and even dragons) to create work that was memorable and personally satisfying.

Discussion

During the Ahead in Air project, a number of themes became evident that will be investigated more closely in future collaborations. It is hoped that this research may encourage alternative approaches to dance teacher education in university dance education courses. The analysis of data suggests that the following issues need to be considered when designing similar university community partnerships:



Figure 15. Sessions 4 and 5: Two third-grade students make connected shapes while collaborating on a partner dance.



Figure 16. Session 4: Children investigate positive and negative space in relation to their partner.

1. There were strong indicators that preservice dance education students benefited from applied learning in the real-world context during the Ahead in Air dance practicum.

Successful communication in dance requires knowledge of the discipline and the ability to think, observe, listen, respond, and articulate ideas. Without the ability to communicate through a common language, it is nearly impossible to guide a student. In support of the children, the USC-DE students needed to determine what to say, how to clearly say it, how to look and listen to know when would be the most effective time to communicate, and how to guide and support the students' efforts.

Effective verbal communication in dance requires the (a) skillful application of the elements of dance, (b) knowledge of inquiry and problem-solving approaches, (c) access to imagery examples and evocative language to inspire and motivate, and (d) expressions of praise to guide students in the aerial experiences. Although the USC-DE students had successfully passed a formal examination on the elements of dance Body, Effort, Space, Shape, and Relationship (BESSR) as a part of a preliminary pedagogy course, when asked to apply the BESSR vocabulary to guide the young aerialists, they found the task very challenging. This practicum was a highly effective examination of BESSR content, far more effective than any paper-and-pencil examination. One student describes it as "being thrown into the deep end of the pool; you just had to make connections and use the language to swim and to succeed." The USC-DE students identified the Ahead in Air as a very effective way of covering these critical competencies in guiding student's knowledge constructions in the dance discipline.

Preservice dance teachers must learn strategies to encourage participants to experience dance from different perspectives, including the body, points in space, forming relationships with others, partnering with others, and exploring the environment in order to help students come up with new ideas and new connections that they can share.

2. The Ahead in Air project demonstrated the potential for the development of collaboration and communication skill with and among all participants.

Through participation in the Ahead in Air partnership, young children developed skills of collaboration and communication as they problem solved, improvised, and created aerial dances with the USC-DE students and peers. The collaborative partner dances were a highlight in the program and provided a sense of mutual authorship and ownership in the aerial dance making.

Having only one USC-DE student leader per group of four to six students was challenging for the USC-DE students because it necessitated clear management strategies to ensure not only the safety of the aerialists but also that of the children on the ground. The USC-DE students quickly realized that they had a big job on their hands, one that required stating their expectations firmly in clear language while illustrating what to look for in the dances of others and physically leading the aerial movement activity.

However, working in small groups was also advantageous because it encouraged observation, listening, and communication during the process, the sharing of ideas, and the guiding of student observations while the children waited for their turn in the air. Based on their final reflections, the USC-DE students learned by necessity how to communicate clearly and manage the students whereas the children learned the value of observation and cooperation. Daily reflection time and feedback sessions followed each sharing were considered essential by the team leaders because it served to guide curricular modifications and the sharing of discoveries in the process.

In the upper grades, clear themes emerged alongside the development of trust, attentive listening, confidence, and communication skills as the Ahead in Air residency sessions unfolded. A high point on Session 2 happened when a classroom teacher stepped out of her comfort zone and into the Ahead in Air harness and was lifted high off the ground to dance in the air in hopes of helping a shy child gain confidence to participate in the activity.

3. The Ahead in Air program and curricula confirmed the potential for human character development such as caring for others, collaborating, and beginning to trust other students and oneself.

One of the primary goals of Ahead in Air was to be able to create an atmosphere of trust and personal growth. After a short safety demonstration and reminders during the process, the Ahead in Air team was amazed that for the most part the children were able to treat their peers with care and respect. As the sessions progressed so did the students' ability to support, care, and guide fellow dancers safely. The students quickly moved from shadowing and relating activities to more advanced partnering, which included touching, turning, and with one group, climbing onto a partner (see Figures 17-18).

Without prompting from the Ahead in Air team, students created aerial dances based on curricular and academic content from other classes and



Figure 17. Session 5: Partner dance investigations with two third graders suspended at the same time.

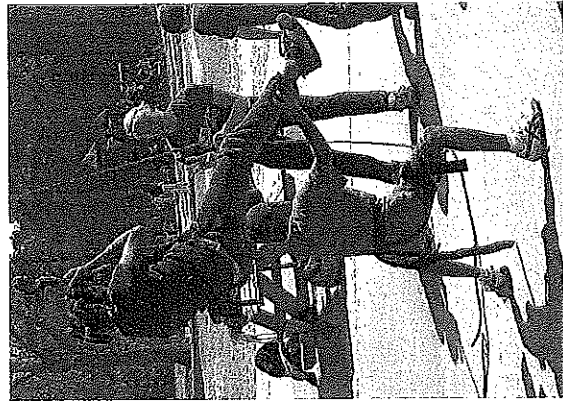


Figure 18. Session 5: A USC-DE student verbally guides a student's aerial partner exploration.

interests. An example of this was when the students created aerial dances about the water cycle seamlessly transferring and extending their knowledge from the classroom into three-dimensional space in the air.

4. This investigation suggests there are strong indications that Ahead in Air can be situated within interdisciplinary classroom contexts.

As the sessions progressed, it became evident that the students were naturally expressing interdisciplinary connections through their aerial dance making. Hardenberg's students were able to easily adapt to and transfer problem-solving and thinking strategies into the aerial dance environment, a testament to her high-quality and embodied dance instruction. During improvisation and later partner work, students selected themes and demonstrated their ability to use the aerial dance form to express new ideas in imaginative ways. As a result of this unfolding curricula it became apparent that students were able to use combined and interdisciplinary knowledge through this integrative and constructivist approach.

5. Based on the project evaluations from teachers and students the centralized location for Ahead in Air supported visibility, access, and participation by all members of the school.

The Ahead in Air team struggled with the location of the activity, but after much discussion and trial and error, the team decided on using the shade Ramada on the Round Top playground because of its low-cost and centralized location. The unexpected benefit of being at the nexus of the school's social activity was an increased interest from all members of the school, including support from administration and fellow teachers. However, it remains to be seen if this experience can be replicated in other student teaching contexts.

6. Based on the project evaluations from teachers and students, the kinesthetic self-expression was a valuable tool for the demonstration of ideas and proved to be successful with children with learning difficulties.

The majority of students were highly motivated to participate in the Ahead in Air sessions. The study confirmed research in the field, supporting the value of constructivist pedagogy and active learning (Brooks & Brooks 1999; Coté 2006; Gage 2012). It is particularly notable that children with learning differences such as attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, who might have been unengaged or disruptive in the sessions, were more focused and attentive during them.

Fortunately, fees were waived, because Ramirez is a local climbing instructor. We were also fortunate to have access to the playground Ramada, which could serve four aerial stations at the same time. Although Ramadas for shade are somewhat common, only an aerial specialist can determine the suitability for aerial work and the amount of weight a structure can hold.

Practicum:

The Ahead in Air partnership required a minimum of eight adults present during all sessions. Involving so many people was a challenge. The USC-DE students' commitment to Ahead in Air waned when the students realized the time needed for training, the rigor of the aerial dance instruction, and the distance from USC to Round Top. Other issues also hindered participation; for example, one student had an issue with an examination and another, with automotive trouble. Off-campus practicum experience requires planning, maturity, dedication, and communication, which for some university students is more difficult to attain than for others.

Conclusion

This article described the Above in Air aerial dance program, a university-community partnership, and illuminated children's experience as well as an approach to dance teacher preparation. Feedback from professionals, university students, and children has provided valuable insights surrounding the realization of future university community partnerships and may provide support for the reshaping the practicum experience in university dance education programs. By sharing the challenges and successes of the program, we hope to assist others. Aerial dance requires training, focus, athleticism, artistry and trust. Participants of different ages, body types, athleticism, and kinesthetic awareness in Ahead in Air participants begin to realize that anything is possible with hard work, creativity, and collaboration.

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Dance: Current Selected Research

That such was the case may be due to the physical exertion required to successfully complete the activity or to the high student-teacher ratio and the ability to work in small groups with the USC-DE students. Over the course of the sessions, classroom teachers noted that there was a significant increase in students' ability to focus following the aerial dance activities. As a result, students created highly focused aerial dance improvisations with adults and peers. The aerial partnering was particularly successful, as the students were able to choose the theme and collaboratively create an aerial dance that was personally meaningful.

Challenges

Overall, there were many positive outcomes from the Ahead in Air partnership; however, there were challenges that should be addressed and that need greater consideration.

Access to experts:

Ahead in Air would not have been conceivable without the commitment and devotion of specialists to the program. Finding a trained aerialist and dancer with knowledge of rigging and safety is very hard to do. Ramirez not only provided the training for the USC students but also set up all the rigging for the program. Motivated to bring the discipline of aerial dance to these young students, he went above and beyond what could have been expected. His skill, passion, and capacity for training the USC-DE students cannot be underestimated. The ability of most schools to afford an aerialist for several weeks will require grant writing and fund-raising.

Time and cost:

It is very important to use high quality equipment that fits the children perfectly. Good aerial equipment is costly. Hardenberg and Parrish spent considerable time preparing for the program, which included writing grants, securing additional fund-raising, scheduling, planning, writing the curriculum, and coordinating specialists. Without Hardenberg's remarkable efforts the Ahead in Air partnership would not have been possible.

Space and location:

Finding the correct location for aerial work can be difficult. An indoor climbing gym was secured for the training of the USC-DE students.

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Dancing a Peaceful World: Building Cooperation Skills through Creative Dance

Alice Bloch

This study presents models, lesson plans, and specific movement activities for promoting peaceful classroom interactions in a K through 12 setting. The models employ creative movement concepts and the Brain Dance integrated with children's literature, using multi-cultural stories that offer examples of overcoming personal hardship through positive action. The overarching goal of this work is to use movement and dance to enable students to develop the ability to respond to life's inevitable challenges with resourcefulness, empathy, and compassion.

This study has its roots in a series of arts integration residencies I taught in St. Louis, Missouri, from 2007 through 2011 at seven grade schools—one private and six public. The creative dance sequences presented provide the template for the residency classes based on the children's books *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr (1977), and *Owen and Mzee* by Isabella Hatkoff, Craig Hatkoff, and Dr. Paula Kahumbu (2006). I chose the books for several reasons. First, grade-school children can relate easily to and can be inspired by these true stories in which difficult and tragic situations yield positive outcomes. Second, the tales present learners with models of cooperative and empathetic behavior. Finally, because they are set in non-Western cultures, they offer opportunities to study those cultures as well as the geography and biomes that have shaped them.

The residencies, in addition to their core academic subjects of literacy, science, and social science, were built around creative movement structures that required peaceful and cooperative student interaction to