

Bhangra - The art of education

Anoop Watts, Dance Practitioner and Dance Writer, describes using Bhangra as a tool for building cultural awareness and calls for a strategic approach to connect leaders of dances of different cultures with social and cultural agendas within schools

Dances of different cultures and heritages are, to a large extent, celebrated in the United Kingdom, but I feel that the potential of these dance genres to support the social and cultural agendas within schools has not yet been fully explored. The embodiment of these dance styles within the performance sphere in the UK is certainly to be celebrated, however the development of a more formal structure or model that links the work of dance artists with the needs of schools is much needed.

Education in the UK naturally creates both a platform and stimuli for eradicating and challenging various issues. This is highlighted by the Department for Education's push on agendas such as SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural), Community Cohesion and ECM (Every Child Matters). They are purposeful agendas, though simultaneously rather ambiguous, and they detail how students must be given opportunities to learn about British values alongside world faiths and cultures. Troy Jenkinson, Headteacher of Highgate Community Primary School explains: "It is important for us as a school to give all of our children a rounded

experience of activities and traditions from different cultures and faiths. In this way, we can encourage children to love and appreciate their neighbours, tackling prejudice and hate."

In my work leading Bhangra workshops in schools, I am motivated by the power of dance to address these agendas and believe that a strategic approach across the UK that embraces a variety of dance styles will help to provide a greater range of choices for schools as well as offer practitioners the opportunity to develop this area of their work.

Bhangra and my journey

My Bhangra journey started when I was a child; the music, the dance, the costumes and the singing were all reaching a place in my heart that made me 'forever smile'. One Christmas morning in 1991, I was gifted the best present I could ever wish for: a Dhol drum wrapped up and ready to open. However, it wasn't quite a surprise as a Dhol drum covered in wrapping paper is rather tricky to disguise. At 11 years old, I started to teach myself how to play this drum by listening to Bhangra music on a cassette player



and trying to learn new beats over and over. I was elated; my neighbours, not so much!

My career as a secondary school teacher began in 2003 in Stoke on Trent. Within the first year, although dance was not my specialist subject, the school invited me to deliver Bhangra afterschool clubs and workshops. Their objectives were twofold: build cultural awareness and offer a 'fun activity' for students. Other schools and organisations also started to approach me to deliver workshops and presentations about Bhangra as they recognised it as a great way to create cultural awareness through fun and creative means. Over time, I was also overseeing and researching the SMSC, Community Cohesion and ECM agendas and I started to change my workshop focus and delivery with these agendas in mind in order to further support schools and broaden the students' experience during the sessions.

Over the years, I have developed an approach to using Bhangra to support these policies in specific ways. For example: through the history of Bhangra we can discuss cultural identity in Britain today; through



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Students at Mitchell High School, Stoke on Trent. Photo: School staff member

learning to dance Bhangra we can promote a positive and enjoyable experience of global culture and heritage; by exploring population, immigration and Bhangra in Britain today, we can create a platform to initiate discussions within the local community.

Bhangra stems from agricultural societies in the Punjab, North India, and is by nature a colorful genre; the music, costumes and dance create something that is already very attractive. As a performing arts genre fused with a rich cultural heritage, Bhangra encompasses music, food, religion, costume and language. When students learn how Bhangra steps and movements correlate with harvest and agriculture as its major influencer, they start to open their eyes to a new culture. This provides opportunity to build discussion, sample food, try costumes and then celebrate with Bhangra drumming and dancing again. As well as offering the opportunity to learn about Indian culture through fun and interactive means, Bhangra creates an arena where children feel safe and comfortable to ask questions and share views and opinions. All of

this supports schools towards their objective of cultural development and understanding.

Every school is different and I have developed a number of plans and strategies to tailor workshops to meet those individual needs. For example, Bhangra has acted as a ‘dance emergency service’ for schools experiencing particular issues surrounding prejudice and racism, and I have been invited to contribute towards eliminating these issues. Some schools simply want a fun and informative experience. Recently we have developed our ‘Special Day’ workshop, which takes students through an interactive journey of an Indian wedding and during the day we explore Bhangra dance, drumming, food tasting, costumes and an interactive display.

After working with over one hundred schools and organisations nationally and internationally over the past ten years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to use my love for Bhangra in an organised approach towards creating positive change. The workshops I offer still amplify Bhangra’s roots of celebration, excitement and colour

yet simultaneously act as a powerful educational tool that can bring communities together, raise cultural awareness and directly support school agendas and policies.

I am currently in the process of developing a UK-wide model that offers information and training for dance practitioners about the aims of these policies as well as a database or platform through which schools can reach practitioners who have specific workshops to offer, focused on meeting specific objectives. I also feel that including a plethora of dance styles will serve to further increase cultural awareness in schools and offer the children a richer experience of the arts.

This model could create a community between schools and dance leaders, providing opportunity to share good practice and update practitioners on educational changes and policies to support their ongoing work. I would love to hear from other artists about the cultural dance work that they are delivering in schools.

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