

Greater than the sum of the parts

Based in Derbyshire, dance education specialist **Claire Pring** believes dance is at the heart of a healthy school system and we should do whatever we can to support it



I'm worried.

The decline in dance in secondary schools concerns me, even though I work in the primary sector where dance is still a cornerstone of the physical education (PE) curriculum. We can continue to debate whether it should be there or in the arts another time, but at least it's in there.

Why am I so concerned? Oh, for so many reasons... if dance is eroded from secondary, how long is it before someone asks if it should still be in the primary curriculum... for all those children that don't have access to private dance lessons... for all those companies that tour, these are a significant chunk of your audience – and maybe more importantly your future audiences... for those who run youth groups, so many will have been directed to you or given a nudge by a teacher... for those children that need a physical or creative outlet in these days of very formal, exams driven education... I could go on.

So what can I do about it? For the longevity of an industry I love and believe in, and for the children whose lives are made better because someone opened a door to dancing that maybe allowed them to be happier, fitter, make more friends, have a better self-image, be more self-aware... please feel free to fill in the rest... I had to do something.

Well, I contacted Nicola Murray, the Head of Dance at The Fallibroome Academy in Cheshire with an offer of delivering some CPD for teachers from their feeder schools. In the end we agreed on three twilight sessions, each lasting two hours. The first focused on introduction to dance, the aspects of a lesson, how to plan a cross-curricular lesson; the second looked specifically at key stage one and the final session was key stage two.

That's all well and good I hear you say – but how's that going to help? Now I accept that this is going to take a little time, but here's my thinking:

If primary teachers deliver better lessons (and probably more of them if they feel confident with the subject matter and see how engaged the children are as learners) then the children will arrive at high school having covered all the basics and with a positive attitude to dance. Brilliant.



Above and left: Images by Adie Turford taken from Claire Pring's book, Simple Steps to Teaching Dance

“Teachers have access to so many children each year and can influence their futures by what they offer”

We've hit the ground running. That way the high school teacher can quickly get to the exciting, fun stuff that kids love so much - you know the sort of thing - lifts, action-reaction stuff, and character work. This level of engagement means you're less likely to have behavioural issues, the other teachers hear the kids talking about dance in positive terms and the profile of dance goes up. This helps to make the position of dance at key stage three more secure.

If the teacher can continue to capitalise on this level of enthusiasm through clubs, theatre trips and visiting artists (though I know there's really not much money for that one these days) then the take up at GCSE or BTEC is going to be as good as possible. There are so many factors here, mostly around the other subjects dance is

placed with in the 'options' categories. But most parents simply want their children to be happy and get good GCSE/BTEC grades. If they see their child's passion for dance and what a positive impact it is having on their motivation to go to school then I think that most are going to support their child's choices. I hear my daughter's delight on a Friday because she has Drama (her best lesson of the week).

What will happen if we standby and do nothing to help our colleagues? Frankly, I dread to think. Teachers have access to so many children each year and can influence their futures by what they offer. I have never played golf - I have no idea whether I would have been brilliant at it or would have found a social and physical outlet. I didn't do it in school and I've never had the drive to find out for myself. Pardon the pun.

It is critical that primary teachers are upskilled in dance because, as many of you will know the primary PE curriculum is often delivered by 'coaches'. Now, some are excellent/ or and have great dance knowledge. I deliver some dance units to schools myself. However many of the coaches come from a sporting background and are not always comfortable delivering dance lessons... and then what happens when the money for coaches runs out? The delivery of PE is likely to return to the class teacher, if they haven't taught it in years, how will they feel then?

Whatever our area of specialism in dance is, I think it's essential that we do whatever we can to support dance in the school system. It is a main artery. If it is blocked, damaged or constricted it really won't be long before we all feel the impact.

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