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Recreating the man in the mirror: reflections on the use, misuse and non-use of dance within physical education

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Background

On concluding his seminal text, *The Male Dancer*, Burt (1995: 189-9) postulates that '...some men are surely, albeit with great difficulty and in slow motion, responding to recent debates about the nature of gendered identity' by 'dancing and working towards more acceptable ways of being'. Embarking on my physical education teacher education (PETE) in 1992 as a seasoned footballer I never thought Burt's words would one day resonate with me. This soon changed as during the Easter vacation of my second year I was coerced into attending a week long beginners dance course at the prestigious London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS). White Hart Lane this wasn't so I initially found trying on the title dancer a daunting and somewhat uncomfortable experience (Benjamin 2002). As the week wore on discomfort turned to pleasure and my conception of physical education, what it could be and my role within it, had also markedly changed.

My experience at LCDS adds weight to Warburton's (2009: 147) claim that attending dance for many boys can be a 'wake up call both physically and emotionally'. In my particular case this was due to seeing an inspirational performance by one of the male tutors whose dancing was a wonderful cocktail of power, grace and beauty (Burt 2007). Catching a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror was a far cry from the distorted uncomfortable images I'd been witnessing of my own body for much of the week. Like Bain (1984: 10) my brief experience of dance had enabled me to 'capture a dancing spirit' if not a dancer's body. I had painfully realised I needed to undergo a level of mental/physical re-creation/re-alignment if I was to attain the 'flexible mind and body' (Wellard 2009) I felt befitting of a PE. It is towards detailing this teaching/learning journey and its numerous shortcomings with regards to social/gender justice (Aveling 2006; Fernandez-Balboa 2009) that this paper now turns. In doing so I will share the lessons I've learned with regard to the use, misuse and non-use of dance within PETE.

Research Questions

Most of my initial attempts at becoming an effective physical/dance educator who holds sexual/gender justice (Keddie 2006a,b; McCaughtry et al 2005) dear were misguided as my PETE training failed to provide me with the requisite threshold knowledge's (e.g., understandings of gender, sexuality etc) to realise social justice in practice (Keddie 2005; McCaughtry et al 2005). Thinking more deeply/critically about social justice issues is a leitmotif of recent debates about how best to educate boys/girls in order to create socially just/inclusive physical education curricular (e.g., Martino, Kehler and Hightower 2009). As such best practice is seen as being that which blends theory and practice praxis (McCaughtry 2006; Weaver-Hightower 2003; Wellard 2009). With particular reference to dance education, there is a paucity of research that shows how democratic dance curricular can be realised in the studio/gym (Gard 2006; Lehtikoinen 2006). In light of this I agree with numerous researchers (Gard 2006; Thomas 2003; Wellard 2009) who suggest the 'palpable presence of dancing, sweating and moving bodies very much needs to be kept alive' (Desmond 2001: 13). In detailing my particular journey of getting changed for dance I will argue for the desirability of changing into something that is appropriate for sexual/gender/social justice to materialise. For me this agrees with the likes of Risner (2007) and Martino, Kehler and Weaver-Hightower (2009) who suggest educational practice needs to challenge and transform as opposed to reinforce limiting/limited heteronormative scripts.

Methods

This paper, and the larger PhD project of which it is a part, draws upon the recent call for physical educators'/trainees to engage in critical autobiographical work (e.g., Garrett 2006;). My particular

emphasis here is to chart my fru(straight)ed 'altern(arr)ative' (Grace and Benson 2001) of struggling to be, become and belong as a dance educator/researcher within a physical education profession, that despite thirty plus years of feminist research, is still dominated by a limited and limiting heteronormative 'jock' culture (e.g., Sparkes et al 2007).

Upon airing my particular journey of 'getting changed for dance', I make reference to the differing fortunes of three male ballet dancers whose respective plights have informed my critical engagement of the use, non-use and misuse of dance within physical education. Additionally, I will draw upon the respective dance works of DV8 Physical Theatre's *Enter Achilles* (1995) and CanDoCo's *Outside In* (1993) to provide a flavour of the work I do with my students in order to promote sexual/gender justice.

Frame

My teaching/research draws inspiration from (pro) feminist, post-structural and queer theory (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993) as well as the developing literature on queering straight masculinities (Clyde 2000; Heasley 2005; Hill 2006; Rodriguez and Pinar 2007; Thomas 2000). In particular I am concerned with 'turning up the volume' (Bem 1995) on the plural ways in which boy/manhood can be 'done', 'redone' and 'undone'. Following Letts and Sears (1999) I am committed to teaching queerly, which means challenging categorical thinking, developing critical consciousness and promoting interpersonal intelligence.

Research findings

As I have been arguing throughout, challenging discriminatory dance/physical education practices requires teachers to be suitably theoretically informed. Without such understanding it's easy to reinforce the very discriminatory practices one seeks to challenge. As shown, my early practice tended to 'comfort the afflicted' by making dance 'boy friendly' (Risner 2007). More latterly I have concerned myself with the more difficult project of changing boys/men to meet dance - 'afflicting the comfortable'. This approach does dance as an art form justice.

I agree with Keddie and Mills (2009) who suggest the need to foreground pedagogies which foster social justice in the round. In light of this my teaching/learning/dancing journey has shown me this can incorporate pedagogies of visibility, discomfort, resist-stance, re-alignment, care, injury, feelings, emotions, refreshment and possibility.

The dance continues ...

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