

## **Dancing Words: Arts Integration with Literature and Dance in K-8 Schools**

**By Jill Randall**

Curriculum that bridges the studio and classroom – arts integration – provides rich and varied ways to experience and explore subject matter in K-8 schools. In particular, books and dance classes can work together, uniting dance teaching artists, classroom teachers, science teachers, reading specialists, and librarians around multifaceted content. The more opportunities and perspectives we can offer young people to get excited about literature, the better our chances are to lay solid groundwork for a lifelong love and curiosity with words, story, and text.

- *How can language inspire movement and how can movement inspire language?*
- *How can we deepen experiences for students by adding books to the “dance curriculum” --- before, during, and after movement lessons?*
- *How can we encourage classroom teachers to incorporate movement into literacy lessons for young children?*
- *How can dance teachers use picture books and even textbooks as springboards for their curriculum?*
- *How can books become a common link to bring together the work of dance teaching artists, classroom teachers, reading specialists, and librarians at a school?*

Some of the books we will discuss are specifically about the subject of dance, while others “lend themselves to movement” (such as a book about prepositions or a story related to the water cycle).

### **Before Dance Classes (In Classrooms)**

Bringing dance teaching artists and classroom teachers into conversation and joint lesson planning around a particular topic ultimately creates a deeper experience for the students. The classroom teachers can provide the foundation for a dance project: reading with the students, emphasizing vocabulary, and touching upon key concepts that will then be put into movement.

A well-prepared dance teacher can work with other teachers prior to a dance project’s start. If students are using poetry for an 8<sup>th</sup> grade choreography project, the language arts teacher and dance teacher can plan for some collaborative lessons prior to the dance project about lines, stanzas, similes, metaphors, and the rhythm of poetry. This work is happening before the students start dancing and choreographing.

With 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, a dance teaching artist and the classroom teacher can jointly launch a project about a particular picture book (e.g. *Stars* by Mary Lyn Ray and Marla Frazee). The classroom teacher reads it before your dance class with his/her students, as part of a classroom unit on verbs and sentence construction. Then the students discuss the structure of the story, the beginning/middle/end of the book, and make a list of all of the action words (verbs) from the story. Have the class bring that list into the dance room, so that you can start to create a dance based on that word list.

### **During Dance Classes (In the Studio)**

In early elementary classes, dance teaching artists can integrate picture books while teaching the lesson. The teaching artist reads a book aloud that leads to an improvisational warm up; the words and text inspire movement. Some successful warm-up books include *From Head to Toe* (Eric Carle), *Move!* (Steve Jenkins), and *Star Climbing* (Lou Fancher). Activities like these begin to show the fluid interplay of movement and text.

A class can create a group dance based upon a picture book. With the completed dance, the dance teaching artist, or a strong student reader, may narrate the book alongside the students as the students perform. The text was the inspiration for the choreography and also now serves as the “cue” for each part of the dance. *Swirl by Swirl* (Joyce Sidman) is a great example of a book to use in this way.

### **After Dance Classes (Back in Classrooms)**

During teacher collaboration time, the dance teaching artist can share with her/his colleagues themes emerging in the dance classes. For example, students in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade dance class might be working on duets and “movement conversations.” Back in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, teachers could continue this theme by exploring *I Am a Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices* (Paul Fleischman and Ken Nutt). Another example would be a science teacher extending a thematic exploration of the actions of water in a dance class, by reading books such as *This is the Rain, All the Water in the World*, or *Water Dance*.

Exploring a concept in more than one realm offers students multiple angles and opportunities for learning and comprehension. Experiencing a concept visually, aurally, and kinesthetically provides students with a broad range of ways to grasp subject matter. Contextual learning of vocabulary across disciplines also allows for deeper understanding. Exploring a concept with multiple teachers - the dance teacher, the classroom teacher, the science teacher - also offers numerous perspectives and engagements within and across the curriculum.

### **Books and Performances**

Another effective connection for elementary classroom teachers is reading books aloud in their classrooms related to upcoming assemblies and field trips. This is another opportunity for classroom teachers, dance teaching artists, and librarians to converse and work together. Sharing books with classes about *The Nutcracker* or other ballets, choreographer Alvin Ailey, or a particular kind of dance (African dance, flamenco, physically integrated dance, or Irish dance) provides students with great background information and deepens and extends their experience of the performance.

### **Book Bins**

Many classrooms have great collections of book bins divided by themes. I encourage teachers to create a dance specific book bin as well. You can work with your dance teaching artist to select 8-12 books, or reference my January 2013 *Horn Book Magazine* article on this particular subject

for a compiled list of dance books ([What Makes a Good Book about Dance?](#)). Book bins are one of the easiest ways to “bring dance back into the classroom” and continue making connections between the various programs at your school.

### **Inspiration/Language of Childhood**

Dance teaching artists are always on the lookout for inspiration for themes and projects. Classroom teachers, reading specialists, and librarians can share ideas with these dance teaching artists. These books serve as inspiration but also help dance teaching artists find age-specific themes and the “language of childhood.” Sharing a stack of books is not only a great conversation starter amongst colleagues, but also helps give insight into the focus and priorities for a school’s curriculum. The dance teaching artist might not use these books explicitly in a future project, but reviewing and reading the books can lead to more connections as he/she develops future lesson plans and units of study.

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All ideas explored here provide for multimodal learning and exploring literacy with and through the body. Students hear, see, and embody a concept; there are many opportunities to interact with printed materials, language, and pictures. Considering all of the intersections of movement and text creates a back and forth between the dance studio and the classroom. Ultimately, the curriculum is alive, creative, playful and reaches more students, especially those students who learn best by moving and kinesthetically exploring.

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