***Dancing With Digital Tools: Discourses on Teaching and Learning in
School-Age Educare in Sweden***

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Abstract

Internationally, there is a growing interest in School-Age Educare and the meaning of aesthetic aspects of teaching and learning in educational settings. Even if dancing is beneficial for human wellbeing and can be understood as both a physical activity as well as an aesthetic expression there are few studies that examine dance in School-Age Educare. Dance as an aesthetic expression can be linked to femininity which adds challenges in educational practice. According to UNICEF, dancing is one way for children to develop imagination, creativity, and social skills. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the prerequisites for teaching and learning dance in School-Age Educare in Sweden. This study sheds light on discursive constructions made by school-age educators when they reason around dance in their education. The empirical material consists of six semi-structured interviews with eighteen educators in sex School-Age Educares in Sweden. Mainly two discourses of how dance is constructed appear in the material. Firstly, a discourse on dance as a joyful "learning" activity. Secondly, a discourse on "teaching" dance by using digital tools. The results show that it is challenging for the educators to encourage pupils while managing the risk that dance as a feminine activity is consolidated. Moreover, in its current form, there is a shortcoming of possibilities for pupils´to develop their own creativity in dance. Finally, the educators lack the know-how to develop pupils´ dance skills beyond what they already know.

Keywords: Dance, Digital Tools, School-Age Educare

Introduction

Internationally, there is a growing interest in extended education (eg. Fischer et al., 2014; Bae, 2019) and studies in pupils' school performance, as well as social and emotional abilities (Durlak et al., 2010; Kanefuji, 2015; Zief et al., 2006). The demands on high quality in the School-Age Educare in Sweden have increased with a distinct focus on teaching (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Almost 85 % of all children 6-9 years, took part in School-Age Educare in Sweden during 2021-2022 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). This shows the importance of what is happening during the extended school day. In line with the focus on teaching, the responsibility for School-Age Educare in Sweden was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education already in 1996. A holistic, democratic, and lifelong learning is aspirational in School-Age Educare (Andishmand, 2017; SOU 1974:42). To be a qualified educator in School-Age Educare there is a demand of university studies for three years. Despite the importance of School-Age Educare in Sweden, the number of qualified educators is below 25 %. This is a paramount challenge for qualitative aspects in educational settings, and, therefore, our study is relevant to contribute to developing high quality education. The curriculum for School-Age Educare states that creation through various aesthetic forms of expression, for example play, art, music, dance, and drama should be a part of the education (Swedish National Agency for education, 2022). Although, in general, there are few studies that examine dance in School-Age Educare. One study of dance in School-Age Educare by Pereia and Pinto (2017) assert that dance contributes to students' social and emotional development.

Dance has existed in different forms and cultures, and people throughout history have valued dance highly (e.g., Bond & Stinson, 2000; Shapiro, 2008). There is a body of research of dance in other educational settings and dance is well explored. The importance of dance for children's development has been shown in several studies (e.g. (Gard, 2003; Smith Autard, 2002; Svendler Nielsen, 2009; Svendler Nielsen and Burridge, 2015; Stinson, 1989, 2005a, 2005b; Winner et al., 2013). Dance can be understood both as a physical activity and as an aesthetic expression (Gard, 2006; Mattsson, 2016; Mattsson and Larsson, 2021). Dance as an artform involves performing and creating bodily movements and can therefore be a way for children to understand themselves and the world. In several studies it is shown how dance can be linked to femininity (Gard, 2003; Pastorek Gripson, 2016; Risner, 2009; Stinson, 2001). According to UNICEF (2019), dancing is one way for children to develop imagination, creativity, and social skills. Since it is every child's right to participate in cultural activities, dance provides a platform that can meet such needs, and it also contributes to gender repositioning.

Aim and research questions

The aim is to critically examine prerequisites for teaching and learning of dance in School-Age Educare in Sweden**.**

Research Questions

- How do school-age educators reflect on dance in educational settings?
- What discourses of teaching and learning related to dance in School Age Educare are identified?

Theoretical framework

This study is inspired by discourse analysis and aims to shed light on discursive constructions articulated by school-age educators as they reason around dance in their education. Analyses of discourses are focused on the basic concepts of the petition and their opportunity conditions and relation to power (Olsson, 1999). This means that it is the way something is described or constructed that is in focus. Olsson (1999) states that discourses are constituted by linguistic productions of "truth" and by societal processes in institutions, for example schools. From a discourse analytical perspective, not only what is articulated are of importance, as this would merely provide a description of a theme or area of focus (Bryman, 2020). What is not mentioned, or mentioned to a limited extent, is telling us how a topic is understood (Lindgren, 2006). As discourse is related to power, what is not occurring in the empirical material, can be understood as marginalized or having a low status. Therefore, deconstruction enables identifying and problematizing dichotomic positions. For instance, if teachers regularly mention specific aspects of the education, but seldom mention other aspects, this points toward a shared consensus. In agreement with Lenz Taguchi (2009), we as researchers aim to destabilize taken for granted perspectives and to instead illuminate alternative "truths". Those alternative truths can be regarded as productive, as they point at areas that can be developed and contribute to repositioning the dichotomies, and the hierarchy between positions (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2009). Significantly, alternative truths are paramount as they reveal terra incognita, which can be developed into contributing to the repositioning of dichotomies (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2009).

In line with Potter (1996), we aim to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by school-age educators when they describe dance and its position in their everyday practice. The function of a statement shows how it works as a strategy to create a specific picture of something (in this case dance in school age educare) and the effects it brings to the understanding of the specific topic (Holmberg, 2010: Potter, 1996). In this sense function and effects are related, as the function gives a specific potential effect in meaning making of dance for school-age educators.

Methodology

In this study we have involved eighteen school-age educators, twelve women and six men. Twelve of them had the qualifications required for their positions, five had no university degree at all. Two educators did their university education part time and worked part time at the time of the interviews. In Swedish School Age-Educare, 25 % of the educators have a teacher's degree, which means that our respondents were higher qualified than in School-Age Educare in general.

During the interviews, which were semi-structured and lasted around one hour each, our intention was to connect with the respondents and make them feel respected and safe. Therefore, we spent initial time on relationship-building, and we organized the interviews in a way that gave great freedom to the respondents to reflect on dance in their everyday teaching practice. We made sure that the interviews covered the same themes, but they were carried out in flexible and diverse ways. The pupils were not present during the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Swedish School-Age Educare is often organized within the primary schools' pedagogical setting. The empirical studies took place at six School-Age Educares in South Sweden during

spring 2022. The sizes of the schools differed from 180-750 pupils. The schools were situated in a big city, medium sized cities, suburbs, and villages.

Interview themes

To be able to cover similar areas, we arranged our conversations with the respondents around predetermined themes. They occurred spontaneously in the educators' narratives. If any theme did not occur spontaneously, we encouraged the respondents to share their intentions, experiences, or beliefs, by initiating a question informed by the theme we wanted to explore further together.

The themes were meant to both cover wide and deep perspectives and therefore included: 1) Experiences of and attitudes towards dance; 2) Spontaneous dance among the children; 3) Pedagogical considerations about dance; 4) Documentation and curriculum in work with dance and 5) Development, training and needs for educators to support pupils learning in dance.

As the interviews were semi-structured those themes were not separated, but often intertwined. For example, the educators' experiences of dance (theme 1) were often connected to their own training/lack of training in dance (theme 5). In our analyses though, two discourses emerged that related to children's learning and educators' teaching strategies. Digital tools were often mentioned, and similar tools were used by pupils and educators in all School-Age Educares.

Analytical angels

As we intend to study discourses, a critical and social constructionist perspective (Burr 2003; Davies & Harre', 1990; Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Potter & Wetherell, 2007) has informed our analysis. We deconstruct the empirical material by paying attention to dichotomies that are visible and then organizing the transcriptions in different categories (McQuillan, 2000). In this phase we pay attention to variations in the statements and shared understandings among the respondents (Potter and Wetherell, 2007). When something "is at stake" it is also of importance, for example, when different opinions or conflicting statements are articulated by the respondents.

Categorization is not "a banal naming process" (Potter, 1996) but a process where something is constituted. Our empirical material takes a new shape when it is broken down into pieces. For example, it can become obvious if dance is understood as an aesthetic activity or perhaps a physical activity, by the way dance is described. If it is described mainly as bodily movements, or if it is linked to expression and meaning making, it depends on how dance is connected in narrative chains.

We then re-read all the statements from our interviews and thematized the empirical material in a more narrow way, to be able to picture emerging discourses. Based on repetitions, when a specific theme is occurring on a regular basis in the material, those discourses become visible. Lenz Taguchi (2009) indicates that what is not mentioned, or mentioned to a limited extent, sheds light on differences and shared understanding in the statements, and this also contributes to the discourses. Local expressions, metaphors and even jokes contribute to nuances and specific understanding of the topic that is investigated (Holmberg, 2010).

Ethical considerations

All participating educators, and their principals, received written information about the study before the interviews. The School Age Educares also received oral information adjacent to the interviews, and they gave their informed consent before we began the interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). They were informed that all participation was voluntary and that they could quit at any time. The study follows the Research Council's guiding principles for social science research (Swedish Research Council, 2017). An important ethical aspect has been to build up a respectful and trustful interview situation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003), where the respondents feel free to contribute with their understanding and experiences without being judged or dismissed.

Findings

All educators in the six School-Age Educares state that dance is included in their work. They perceive that the pupils show a great interest in dance. All school-age educators talk about dance in a positive way and that dance has a position in the educational setting. Mainly two discourses of prerequisites for teaching and learning of dance in School-Age Educare in Sweden appear in the empirical material. Firstly, a discourse on dance as a joyful "learning" activity. Secondly, a discourse on "teaching" dance as an imitation of movement to digital tools.

A discourse on dance as a joyful "learning" activity

The interviews clearly demonstrate that dance creates joy and well-being in the School-Age Educare. Dance is also motivated because it is fun, and it is not mandatory for the pupils to participate in the activity if they do not want to. The educators explain and motivate dancing to have fun. It is more important for them that the pupils dare to dance than if they get any knowledge from dancing. In one of the interviews, a conversation on the aim of dance in School-Age Educare emerges:

> Interviewer: What do you want "dance" for and what do you want them to know?
>
> Monika: That it's fun
>
> Caleb: Yes
>
> Samir: Yes
>
> Monika: That it's fun to dance
>
> Caleb: That they can move.
>
> Samir: Yes, but it is also to show oneself, to be able to stand in front of others and show. I also think it's important to have self-esteem. As I said, some may be in a group of 2-3 girls and dance secretly but do not dare to come forward. But they dance anyway. That might have been fun to get many pupils to dare. Trying to pep them to come to dance a little. Then they come, but then they disappear again.

Monika: And I probably think more that it's for one's own well-being. That it's fun to dance and it's good for the body, it's good for the brain. To feel music and get to move to the music. It is the feeling you want to convey that it is actually fun and joyful.

In this conversation the educators talk about the importance of daring to dance and that dancing gives a better self-esteem. It is not of importance what kind of dancing it is as long as the pupils are dancing. Monika believes that dance gives joy and that it is fun. Kaleb highlights dance as a physical activity and the importance of children being allowed to move. Samir mentions another dimension of joy that is about daring. He connects the joy-filled activity with having self-esteem.

The goal of dance is articulated with the following elements together: fun, well-being, move, dare to dance, dance anything. What it looks like does not matter if the children are dancing and moving. The educators do not mention the knowledge the pupils get from dancing, or other dimensions of dance. Dance is a joyful "learning" activity and a physical activity that is "good for your body."

The educators emphasize that the pupils like to choose their own music. Tiktok and Just dance are examples when the pupils experience dance as fun:

Erik: Tiktok! There is a great demand. We hear that every break when we are out in the schoolyard. We dance to TikTok. That's where it's interesting. There they make movements that are quite advanced, but we take the pupils into the sports hall for physical education. I cannot.

Madde: Then it's not fun anymore.

When the movements take place voluntarily to music in the schoolyard, they are perceived as easy to perform. But if the same movements are performed in physical education, it is perceived as difficult and boring.

In the statements, most educators categorize themselves as educators who cannot dance. But it is not perceived as something negative because they can still create situations where the children are allowed to dance. The educators take the speaker out on the schoolyard or bring out the projector indoors. However, not all children are attracted to the activity. It is mostly girls who like dancing.

The educators often take a speaker out in the schoolyard and they let the pupils dance their own dances as a voluntary activity:

Monika: We have had a bit of this "Just dance"… You put on and then you should do the same as they do. And it's a lot of fun, but quite difficult sometimes (laughs). But we have had that sometimes. And it's great fun.

Interviewer: Yes

Monika: Like everyone. And even the boys participate (colleagues agree)

The educators in this study explain that they do not have much knowledge in dance. In some cases, the educators argue that it could be an advantage not having knowledge in dance. Instead, the educators act like "ice breakers" to encourage pupils to dance:

> Monika: Yes, but you do not need much education. These trends like Jerusalem and this "Do do do" (sings a popular tune, our remark). It's just hooking up and learning yourself and getting involved. And think it's fun because then the kids think it's fun.

Some of the educators explain that they can act like a clown and that it can help anxious pupils to participate in dance.

A discourse on "teaching" dance by using digital tools

During all our interviews, digital tools were brought up as a dominating resource to teach dance. Tiktok and Just dance, where pupils watch and copy pre choreographed dances were repeatedly described as useful. To work with outdoor dancing during breaks was also a common strategy to offer possibilities for pupils to dance in playful ways without any claim of outcome.

One of the educators, Lena, gives an example of how "Just dance" is used with a projector to show pre-choreographed routines that the pupils can imitate.

> Lena: We have a lot of "Just dance" for example where they follow movements on the white board, which you set up. It's very popular, because it's both their music and it's movements that they recognize. I think very much, when it comes to dance, that they should be something they recognize. Otherwise, it inhibits participation instead of motivating participation.

Both Lena and another respondent, Doris, argue that pupils' musical preferences are of importance. When pupils are familiar with the music, often mainstream music, they appear more encouraged to engage in dancing. If the pupils do not know the music, they tend to be less motivated to take part.

Examples of how popular culture and games, for example *Fortnite*, provides opportunities to "catch" pupils is mentioned by Marie-Louise. Lena agrees with Marie- Louise and shows a specific hip and arm movement (flossa) that have been popular among the pupils. In another interview, similar experiences are expressed as Monica sings a popular tune that also has pre-choreographed moments that are well known to the pupils. All the resources mentioned involve social media and/or digital tools. The pupils have experiences from computer games and social media, which is portrayed as closely connected to dance, and almost a condition required for dance education.

But social media also brings challenges. From a gender perspective, girls that "shake their buttocks" in a stereotypical feminine way are addressed by Sebbe. He reasons around a dilemma, when pupils (often girls) choose gender stereotypical ways to dance known from Tiktok they are engaged, but they "grow up a bit too fast", according to Sebbe. Limited clothing, coolness, and high status (many followers on Tiktok) are examples of how those role models can prevent a wider gender positioning among the pupils. Limited clothing, make-up but also thin body shapes among influencers tend to limit the pupils' (girls) childhood and narrow their understanding of girls/women. Sebbe expresses an insecurity

regarding how he as an educator could deal with this dilemma. He knows that gender equality is a goal in the curricula that he also should take responsibility for addressing, and he states a difficulty when influencers have such a strong impact. On the other hand, Sebbe has also seen possibilities when boys take part in Just dance and follow "feminine characters". Some boys resist at first, but when peers attend, more boys join.

Anette, who has a background as a dance instructor for children in her spare time reflects on her own challenges. To be able to "catch" pupils you have to be "up to date". She problematizes her own limited knowledge regarding social media and digital tools, such as Tiktok and Just dance. She describes that dances pupils perform outdoors during school-breaks and at school-age educare are unfamiliar to her. Probably as she is not familiar with Tiktok, and she sees this as a limitation. She expresses an ambition to give pupils increased opportunities to learn dance, and even if she has sufficient dance skills, those are not mentioned by her as resources. Rather her lack of knowledge regarding digital tools and social media is pictured as limitations. This illuminates the digital tools as a core aspect in dance education, more important than own embodied qualifications.

Monika reflects on pupils' possibilities to improvise and states that the pupils do not improvise a lot. They use set dances that they imitate.

> Monika: It is, after all, a dance. Then you have an organized dance where you dance a Bulgarian folk dance with specific movements. Then you have... There are many kinds of dance. Now I do not think our pupils dance so much improvisation. But…I feel that… I get a little eager to maybe teach the children a little differently, maybe we can look at a little different dance forms.
>
> *Silence*
>
> Khaled: Yes
>
> Samir: Yes (*doubtful*)
>
> *Silence*
>
> Monika: … Ballet. …Then we have improvisation. …Hip hop…

Monica and her colleagues Kahleb and Samirc discuss possibilities to include other genres than those used by the children themselves and to introduce improvisation in their teaching. Khaled also describes that his teaching of dance consists of arranging chairs and putting on music (to play a movement game). Monika, who knows about a few other dance forms from her private life, brings up the idea that educators more carefully design learning situations to challenge children. Lena also mentioned that, as the time is limited for educators to plan teaching, it is easier to use YouTube and Just dance as an easy and pragmatic way to offer dance at all to the pupils. Especially, when the educator lacks bodily knowledge in dance. Monica has a family member with a dance education, and she mentions different genres that could be part of the School-Age Educare, if the educator planned their teaching and had specific goals related to dance as an aesthetic form of expression.

Discussion on learning as tourism or Huaka'i

It has been obvious that dance occurs often in School-Age Educare. The educators describe the dancing as important, popular, and often appreciated by some pupils (often girls). Our aim was to critically examine prerequisites for teaching and learning of dance in School-Age Educare in Sweden. As the results show, two discourses emerged: "A discourse on dance as a joyful "learning" activity" and "a discourse on "teaching" dance by using digital tools". Pupils learning dance is closely connected to the feeling of "having fun". This seems to be the dominating argument for attending and offering dance activities in School-Age Educare. Our interpretation is that doing (spontaneous dancing) is experienced as fun and learning choreography is connected to more boring experiences. Julia Kaomea, (Keynote speaker at IICE 2003 conference, Honolulu 2023) discusses the difference between the concept of "Huaka'i" and "tourism". She points at tourism as a fun way to travel without any troublesome prerequisites. Huaka*i, on the other hand, involves traveling that can be demanding, tiring, and testing one's abilities in an occurring situation during the journey. In the same way, learning can be challenging and provocative to one's understanding on a general level. We see similarities between learning and "Huakai" and between tourism and a fun-filled activity. This is also in line with other research on how to make learning "fun" in a more long-lasting perspective. Stinson (2005 b), for example, points toward the importance of combining play, practice, mastery, and connection to facilitate a long lasting joyful and deeper learning environment. This kind of learning involves demanding AND playful aspects in combination.

Accordingly, there is a visible didactic focus on holistic education in line with the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022) but not any didactical focus specifically on how to develop pupils' dance knowledge, for example, by using improvisation, readymade dances not well known to the pupils, different genres, and the teachers own bodily engagement. Frequently, social media or digital tools (Just dance and TikTok) preclude a more active educator-led dance education, and, therefore, exclude pedagogical support as well as a focus on a variety of content that could be emphasized in dance. The educators tend to limit their own bodily involvement in dance activities, and instead rely on digital tools. However, there are some exceptions, provided by the educators that have experiences from dancing in their spare time. Therefore, it indicates that educators with knowledge in dance can contribute to the development of pupils' dance skills to a greater extent than educators without embodied knowledge in dance.

Dance is offered to all pupils, but more girls than boys participate. As dance can contribute to cross-gender work, this shows a potential for improvement (Gard, 2003; Pastorek Gripson, 2016; Risner, 2009; Stinson, 2005a, 2005b). According to the Swedish National Agency of Education (2022), School-Age Educare has a responsibility to raise awareness on gender equality among pupils, and dance can contribute in this perspective. In one way, simply by offering dance, the educators give a typical "girl activity" space. On the other hand, if gender stereotypical choices are made and are continually performed in movements, group constellations, and genres chosen, the practice may reinforce the very same ideals it set out to challenge. More emphasis could be put into helping children to move outside those dichotomic positions.

In line with the curriculum for School-Age Educare, children's creative skills should be promoted. As most of the dance activities involve imitation pre-choreographed dances, the potential that dance improvisation and composition could contribute with is not utilized.

Furthermore, the educators lack the know-how to develop children's dance skills beyond what the children already know. Instead, the educators act as organizers (providing digital tools, arranging chairs) rather than teaching the children themselves. Finally, dance offered in School-Age Educare tends to follow trends rather than knowledge development in creative aesthetic activities.

Conclusions

The aim was to critically examine prerequisites for teaching and learning of dance in School-Age Educare in Sweden. This study aimed at answering the two following research questions:

- How do school-age educators reflect on dance in educational settings?
- What discourses of teaching and learning related to dance in School Age Educare are identified?

School age educators have a positive attitude towards dance, but the constant statements on dance related to joy can also be a limitation when they reflect on dance in their everyday practice. We have seen that dance as a joyful "learning" activity is a strong discourse among school-age educators. We question if the possibilities to learn dance are utilized, or if the strive to prioritize joyful and fun activities also prevent pupils' learning opportunities in dance. Aspects that challenge pupils in different ways might not occur in the teaching practice because as soon as it is not instantly fun pupils drop out. In this sense, we argue, in line with Kaomea (2023), that pupils become more "tourists" than learners engaged in Huaka'i. Educators in general do not have dance knowledge that can help them to reach out to all pupils and help them to appreciate dance (Smith-Autard, 2011) in more diverse ways. For example, we lack examples on how educators introduce improvisation, different genres, and reflective talks with the pupils on dance, dance history, dance in different cultural aspects, dance as expression, dance as communication, dance as a possibility to get deeper kinesthetic awareness movement skills and more.

The educators have high ambitions when it comes to holistic aspects of the education. However, the lack of their own dance competence limits their possibilities to challenge and motivate pupils. The educators tend to provide digital tools as resources to learn dance when they themselves lack bodily "know how". This becomes evident through both emerging discourses in this study. The educators emphasize the importance of pupils' voluntary participation in the learning activity. Consequently, more girls than boys take part and gender stereotypical movements are influencing pupils' dancing. Pupils are left alone to imitate Just dance or Tiktok rather than creating dance themselves, and the educators typically do not involve themselves physically in the dancing. Pupils do not get subject specific support and they are not challenged by the educators to develop new embodied knowledge or appreciation for dancing.

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