

# DANCE FOR CHILDREN: A FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL GROWTH

\*Cyrus Damisa SURU

## Abstract

*Dance for children is a functional education for national growth. This statement of fact was discovered and aptly applied by the traditional societies of Nigeria in time past to sustain the existing culture and tradition of the society and, to maintain growth and development of the child. Dance was a prehistoric tool for moralistic knowledge. At that time, in most societies, it was mandatory for every child to go through the process of cultural initiation, where the dos and don'ts vis-à-vis morals, mores and values of the society were taught and demonstrated afterwards in a dance performance. However, dance today is now looked at with disdain and impunity, not just by the modern and acculturated child but, by parents and the government as well. This is inimical to the growth of the nation. This paper, therefore, focuses on this emergent aridity and disaffection for dance by children as a career, and the attempt to reduce its significance to mere cabaret. It is aimed at redirecting, refocusing, and attracting Nigerians, particularly parents and children, to that neglected pillar of growth, the traditional dance, using dance for children, participant-observer, experimentation methodology of research, in children's theatre arrangement as paradigm. We discover that children love to dance and their interest in the art is an avenue for therapy and character moulding.*

**Keywords:** Dance, Children, Functional education, Character, Growth, Development

## Introduction

Dance is not an exclusive reserve of the adults. It is an act and art that accommodates all living creatures; human beings, animals, birds and so on. For instance, birds do courtship dance before mating. This is evidenced among the western grebe courtship dance, before mating, western grebes perform unique courtship dances, as cited in the Encarta Encyclopaedia (2008). Post modern dancers also share this view, that dance is not restricted to living things alone; that even non-living things like trees, stones, engines etc. indulge in dance in one way or another. However, human beings communicate more through dance than the inanimate or non-living things. Alwin Nicholas, Alvin Ailey and Merce Cunningham are among others who hold this view. What then is dance? Attempts have been made by several scholars of dance to provide suitable answers to this seemingly simple question. Scholars in our list include, Ojuade (2004) Amali (2005), Harper, Akunna (2005), Badejo (2006), Yerima (2006), Molokwu, Akinsipe (2006), Udoka, Bakare, and Ugolo (2007). They say; dance is a human expression in space through body movements and other dance elements to

make statements about the immediate or cognate environment. For instance, Badejo (2006, p.204) writing on Hausa Bori ritual dance, says that:

Dance in Bori religion, serves as a means of communication between man and spirits, as a means of preservation of some non-Islamic practices, and as a means of traditional therapeutic healing and medicine. It also serves as a means of exhibiting the traditional Hausa society's relationship with the forces that govern their daily lives.

Badejo's definition posits dance as been capable to communicate, preserve, heal, and meet the society's needs. Agreeing with the above, Olomu (2007, p.27) stresses that:

Dance is an activity very intimately connected with the human condition; it reveals many aspects of human development. In dance, the only instrument used is the body itself. The texture of dance is the movement of the dancer, and no other media are necessary to reveal expression, symbolism, and eventually poetry, non-verbally. Perhaps nowhere else has man ever expressed himself so directly and completely as through dance.

Tracing dance to man's existence, Enem (1975, p.68) maintains that dancing is an instinct as old as man's existence on earth. In its simplest form it prompts such reactions as jumping for joy, weeping, raging and of course laughing. Children are not left out of these emotional actions. They enjoy music and dancing just like their parents or the adults in the society. Children as described by the sociologists grow from the cooing stage to the imitation stage. They learn by imitation. Therefore, they imitate the adults whenever they make any body movement such as walking and dancing in addition to the natural instinct to dance. Apart from the fact that they observe and imitate adults when they indulge in dance movements, they also acquire or are taught traditional dance movements during rites-of-passages such as initiations, where they are taught good conduct, socio-cultural values, morality and so on. This act is fading and tilting towards extinction owing to Western education, religion, culture and modern technology occasioned by technological explosion and globalization, and this is inimical to the growth of the Nigerian child, and Nigeria in general.

Albeit, dance features in celebrations and graduations, parents appreciate dance among children at such occasions as something so beautiful to behold. But, they regard it as a profession for the never-dowells and thus stigmatize anyone who dances as a wastrel. It is noticeable in contemporary society that parents have implanted this inglorious impression about dance into the psyche of their children and it translates into lack of interest in dance studies at any level of education or institutions of learning. This is evidenced in the infinitesimal number of students who take dance as their major in the universities where theatre studies is taught. Parents in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, tend to dictate life for their

children. They have neglected dance, the first medium of functional education known to man. Noting this untoward attitude by parents on their children and wards, Nwosu (2006, p.34), quoting from Nigeria and the Rights of the Child 2000, elaborates that:

Every child has the right to life and be allowed to survive and develop.

Every child is entitled to a name, family and nationality.

Every child is free to belong to any association or assembly according to law.

Every child has the right to express opinions and freely communicate them on any issue or subject without restriction under law.

As it were, a child has right to life, to be named, to associate, to express opinion and communicate freely be it in dance or otherwise. It is this article's opinion that children's interest in dance should be sustained and not left to the whims and caprices of their parents if he or she must grow healthy and intellectually. Schools, particularly the elementary schools, have not included dance studies in their curriculum. It is germane to point out that dance education amongst primary school children is germane to enhance a child to grow physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually strong. However, children are denied this basic form of education whenever they are prevented from participating in dance activity. According to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of a Child, it is declared that, "All children have the right to education that would help develop their personality and talents; their parents, culture and Language+ and in extension the nation. This paper therefore considers dance to be a vital tool for the proper growth of a child and the nation.

### **Dance and Children Conceptualized**

Dance is the first known traditional form of theatre given to a child. This explains why it stands out as the mother of all other arms of the theatre; drama, music, poetry, puppetry, and so on. A child's first form of theatre is the entertainment from the mother in lullaby, child tossing and throwing up and down, body shaking and twisting etc. Children's theatre is therefore an offshoot of dance for children. It is in the light of the above that several attempts have gone into the area of children's theatre; in respect of it being a form of child-centred education and a macrocosm of the essence of dance for and by children. Ododo (2000, p.142) affirms that the child-centred education is that which "focuses on how the child rapidly fruits up in knowledge acquisition and utilitarian values+ Ododo further outlines and defines the three most common kinds and types of approaches to the concept of 'Children's Theatre' being an umbrella name for all that children can do in representative art; drama, dance, puppetry and masquerading. According to Ododo (2000, p.143) these three kinds are:

-Theatre for children by adults

-Theatre with children, and

-Theatre by children.

We however advocate that the genre of theatre suitable to Ododo's concept and approach is dance-theatre. Udengwu (2002, p.138) did not agree less and affirms that children's theatre is %a forum in which children are taken through the processes of theatre from the conception of idea to its artistic concretization and final display before an audience+ Dance is the closest to the forms of play and interest of children. We do not tow the path of the argument above to claim superiority of dance over other forms of theatre, as that will be pointless. The whole argument of choice and preferences is geared towards focusing our attention on the issue at stake, dance for children. In Okwori (1986, p.2)'s words %he goals of children's drama (dance or theatre in general) is not performance or the final production but the process of developing skills in children by engaging them in a creative process+. There are scanty pieces of evidence as to the evolvment of policies and enforcement of a concerted governmental agenda at teachings and explorations of educational methodologies via the medium of dance. However, one such record is contained in the communiqué of the National Symposium of Nigerian Dance at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan (1986, p.3). It was organized by the National Council for Arts and Culture from the 7th 11th July, in wish experts were drawn from dance educators, researchers and so on (Nigerian Dance Scholars Round-table Discussion was organised by Dance Scholars in Nigeria in April 26-28, 2013). They validated and suggested the teaching and study of dance in the Nigerian schools to be made compulsory. In one of their resolutions, as contained in the communiqué, they call on the Nigerian government to:

1. Promote a dynamic and committed National Cultural Policy on dance that,
  - (a) can serve as an umbrella for National Unity,
  - (b) our diverse and vibrant dance culture can be preserved and harnessed towards the realization of our national objectives,
  - (c) a national dance idiom can be evolved.
2. Include the study of dance in both primary and secondary school syllabus i.e. the 6-3-3-4 Educational system etc.

The suggestions above remain as opinions of some individuals. In fact, primary school children are becoming increasingly disinterested in dance, this is worrisome. Wendy (1981, p.iv) observes, %We know now that if a child is interested in a subject, his ability to absorb knowledge is very great, but if a child is not particularly interested or if he or she is actually bored, then the rate of learning will be much slower+. We acknowledge that

children in primary schools indulge in dance only during special occasions in schools. These are occasions like inter-house sports, graduation ceremonies, anniversaries and so on. From observations, these children do not understand the dance and they are often 'coerced' into doing it. Armed with the above information and understanding, one can develop a curriculum for dance in the primary schools which will facilitate refreshing a child's love and interest in dance as in the traditional setting and for a life time.

### **Dance Training for Children**

Teaching dance form among children (ages 6-12 years) will require the following steps or ideas. These steps are borne from our understanding and knowledge of the psychology of the child based on an experiment, from beginning to end, participant-observer methodology of data collection, carried out at the Christ field International School, Lokoja, Kogi State. There, we discovered that children love doing what adults do. And, that a child learns by imitation which usually results from his trust for, and dependence on the adults and also by working in collaboration with his peers. Giving acknowledgment to this assertion, Worugji (2006, p.19) affirms that:

The saying that no man is an Island comes into play here, as children come to realize that the success of their learning needs a communal effort. Children learn to cooperate with others, to plan together, enact ideas together and to tolerate one another. Participation gives children confidence in themselves. It boosts their ego and gives them an improved self concept of their person. It is true that the child learns when he is instructed on what to do but he learns faster through participation (doing).

Therefore, working with children in groups, in a dance workshop, will not only help the children to find themselves, but help them to build confidence and self-actualization, the weapon with which to lead a more balanced life. In this regard, a dance workshop with children could take the following steps:

#### **1. Ask the children what they know about dance.**

This first step will allow the children to give one their concepts and understanding of dance. Children between the ages six and twelve as stated above have their own experiences and ideas of dance which might be useful to the teacher. Furthermore, it will afford one the opportunity to choose a dance form that is not beyond one's intellectual, emotional and physical capabilities.

#### **2. Ask them to teach you a dance.**

This may sound funny but it will stimulate their enthusiasm. Usually, children sing and dance when they play. A teacher of dance will be wise enough to get steps from their game-plays. For example:

A a a be say x2

A a Abe A say

lbe say

A a Abe A say x2

lbe say

All all of us

All of us

The game above involves two children. They dance to the rhythm of hand clapping which also involves movements like leaping, jumping and turning around of both children. This is an attempt to get them interested in dance through a game that requires body movements.

### **3. Ask each of them to demonstrate dances from their culture.**

Usually, children shy away from this aspect because their %olonized parents+and educational background may have taken them away from their culture. But it is believed that some of them will be bold to teach traditional dances that they have seen on television or witnessed during festivals, among other ceremonies. However poor a child demonstrates the dance steps/movements, the whole class should applaud him or her. This show of appreciation might motivate other responses.

### **4. Give them dance steps.**

The idea of dance steps must be relevant to the children's experiences. The teacher should group them, with each group having a step to learn and master. The result is that the learning of this step may lead to movement exercise. Thus they will be physically and mentally ready for the next stage.

### **5. Build their confidence.**

Among the factors that may cause a child to be a slow starter are %poor ability, emotional disturbances, tension+, and so on concludes, Wendy Ijioma (1981:iv). Building their confidence may include confidence in them and confidence in you (the teacher). This process will involve allowing them to create steps around a subject or object. One can ask them to sing and dance to the song:

Limbo limbo limbo like me

Limbo limbo like meõ

Dance o dance o dance o like me

Dance o dance o like me etc.

Boys and girls limbo like me

Limbo limbo like me

One may also ask them to imitate monkey movements in dance or other animals or birds. By so doing, one is inadvertently giving them confidence in creativity and interest in the workshop and the delight of having taken part in a creative experience.

#### **6. Come down to their level.**

The proverb "to catch a monkey, you have to learn to behave like one" is required here. Children find it difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Care must be taken to give them danceable and interesting steps. That is, steps that they can relate to. The steps should be related to the children's everyday life. Also, the steps must be easy and flexible to accommodate their perception of life. The teacher must first show these steps to them in his own bodily movement to catch and sustain their interest. He should appreciate their cartilaginous bones and soft muscles in his choice of steps.

#### **7. Give them light exercise and develop from there.**

The exercise must be very entertaining and very easy. The teacher should incorporate the use of songs and music. Exercises apart from preparing the muscles and bones ready for movements and dances, it also facilitates unity, trust, and concentration among the children. Through this body exercises, dance movements/steps will be introduced. Movements, which should include action and motion packed concept should be introduced. Thus we have, jumping, juggling, walking, stepping, locomotion, gliding, dabbling, stillness and so on to encourage children to develop a personal involvement in dance.

#### **8. Create a dance improvisation.**

The children could create a dance improvisation from one of their popular traditional or ethnic songs. For example, these two popular Yoruba hide and seek children dance/play-songs could be utilized; "Boju boju" and "Talo wa ninu ogba na?"

Yoruba song	Translation
(1) Boju Boju o	Go into hiding
Oloro nbo o	The masquerader is coming
Epa ara mo o o	Whoever he catches



**10. Take them to watch live performances, video or film shows on dance presentations.**

Here, to add to their knowledge, and to encourage them in the act or art of dance, the Arts councils, private dance companies or any theatre dance outfit could be visited to watch live performances on dance, video clips of indigenous dances and so on.

**11. Package and present a dance.**

This final step will include chosen dance script that is not far from their environment and experiences; for example a story about domestic chores that allows movement possibilities. The children will be auditioned and cast into various characters and movements. Their actions and movements should be taught. After a few days' rehearsals, the dance production could be done in the school hall, the stadium or at the government house with their parents and government officials in attendance. For post-production analyses the production should be recorded on video tape, to be reviewed by the pupils themselves as a feedback of their efforts to sustain their interest in dance.

**Conclusion**

Dance for children, as in other genre of the theatre music, drama, puppetry, etc, should be accorded its own unique and dignified position as a compulsory, academic exercise, whose rudimentary knowledge should commence at the primary school level of education. Similarly, parents should discontinue the attitude of dictating, and dissuading their children from choosing dance and dance studies as a career. Equally, institutions of learning where dance studies are taught should ensure that dance for children is incorporated into their curriculum.

Preventing children from engaging in dance on the basis of religious injunctions, economic and social imperatives and the non-inclusion of dance in the school curriculum, is an infringement on the basic fundamental right of the child. It is believed that if children are allowed to participate fully and actively in dance, dance aridity and apathy will be eliminated from their psyche. For this reason, the concerned authorities should try to enlighten, educate and persuade parents and religious organizations to fund the construction of well equipped dance studios in primary schools in communities where they live.

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