

Musicians United for Superior Education - People Page

Dance Daily. Dance Early. Dance Now.

by

Charlie Keil

As the title declares, this essay is intended to encourage every teacher, parent and care-giver to think about and act upon the idea of some dancing each day in the lives of small children. Brighten the corner where you are! But it is also an appeal to join us at MUSE, Inc. by visiting our website, supporting us with your membership and contributions (475 Beard Ave., suite 514-A, Buffalo, N.Y. 14214, Phone 716-834-6873, that's 834-MUSE!), sending in your thoughts about these urgent reforms suggested below, getting in touch with the author (via e-mail charleskeil@sbcglobal.net or via regular mail, 22 Wells Hill Rd., Lakeville CT, 06039).

All we are saying is "give dance a chance." If all the children have one or two dance breaks every day from pre-pre-K through 3rd or 4th grade, they will get into drumming and singing to support their dancing after a while, and from there they will get into instrument playing and masking and costuming and dramatizing, and from there they will get into playwriting and poetry and narratives and from there into a lifetime of performing, creativity, full expression in which the three r's, a scientific specialty, a great career, might be a satisfying profession but not the entire reason for living. "Can you write like you talk like you sing like you drum like you dance your life?" (Keil 1992:332) is the question to ask a child. Not, "Can you sit still long enough and behave well enough to become alienated without suffering from Attention deficit disorder?"

What do teachers and childcare specialists need to know about MUSE (Musicians United For Superior Education), Inc.? We started in Buffalo as a

non-profit organization in 1990 and one big problem we are getting to the root of is passivity-alienation-boredom: children sitting at desks sullen and/or twitchy; children feeling foreign to their own bodies, to nature, to society, to work; children cut off from life and eager learning. In many Buffalo inner city schools, at least, there is no play period or playground anywhere in sight, no activity, no gym, no art, no music below the 4th grade to ease the repression, offer a direction. So we promote activity/participation/joy by sending a team of a drummer and a dancer into a school once or twice a week to start a self-sustaining tradition in which dozens of 4th and 5th graders become excellent dancers and drummers who can mentor pre-K, Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders, teaching them their rhythms and dance moves. Within two years basic, powerful, motivating, music and dance skills are within easy reach of everyone in the school.

So far, we have produced many excellent dancers at five primary schools, a fewer number of fine drummers, and we can't quite get the mentoring to be regular, daily, and rippling throughout a school to reach all the children. Not quite there yet. At Martin Luther King School we have two crack teams of fifth and sixth graders who are expert in Akonkon and Kotoba, two dancing-drumming styles from Senegal. We have over 40 dancers there who are expert and could be teachers in any context. At Academic Challenge we have 6th and 7th graders who know bomba, salsa, chachacha, rumba/guaguanco, a little merengue and are good at singing and dancing, singing and drumming, in Spanish. At School 77 our bomba efforts fizzled out but an after school program keeps both the Afro-Latin and Senegalese traditions available. At Bennett Park Montessori, a very big club that was mostly African-American shrank in size but became much more diversified in both repertoire and demographics; white boys are dancing, girls have been doing more drumming. At the Makowski Center last year we had about 100 third graders involved in a shouting, moving, dancing and drumming gospel-influenced choir that sang original compositions by local composers. This year the school has returned to a more African drum and dance tradition. Each school has different traditions, strengths, weaknesses and makes adjustments each year.

But in all of them the question of how to pass the skills on to the littlest children has yet to be answered clearly and convincingly. (See "On Mentoring" below for a more detailed discussion of these mentoring issues.)

Maybe you are the person to figure out how to get a program like this going well and spreading throughout an entire school quickly. It only costs a few thousand dollars to have excellent drummers and dancers teach at your school regularly, year round, and we can show you how to get started.

Activity and participation get more blood to more brains.

Activity and participation make children happier.

Activity and participation in a music-dance tradition prepares children for a life well lived at a great many deep and mostly unconscious levels: how to be in time, in tune, in graceful synchrony with other people, how to be an energetic presence, a shining individual in tight relationships with many others simultaneously. I can write about this here, but these lessons can't really be taught in print or from books. It's whole body stuff: gestures, rhythms, steps, flow, grace, having lots of expressive skills. These skills or wrights require rites (Charles Keil and Steve Feld, *Music Grooves* 1994:229-231), memorable life-enhancing events, dramas, ceremonies in which to display an awareness of synchrony, consciousness of self in tune with others, a lively questing after excellence with others that everyone can witness and acclaim. Teamwork on display. Sports can do this too, but music-dance is less competitive, more for the fun of it, easier to do at earlier ages.

Activity and participation can be inspired by a tradition that comes to us over a long period of time from a very specific place, but every tradition can also be modified to fit our current needs. We haven't made a major fuss about the cultural, multicultural, and intercultural value of our work, but to have a confident, exuberant, African-American man doing something beautiful and energizing in an inner city school and modeling cooperation with an equally confident and skilled African-American woman can do a whole lot of

educating. Say it loud, I'm Afro-Latin and proud is another great message for expressive men and women from Ponce or Loiza in Puerto Rico to bring. And the Malinke experts, recently arrived from Senegal, really punch home the message that difference is cool and tradition is power. Children know immediately that "someone's ancestors did this" without being told. Children of all backgrounds and colors know something important is happening when a Tuscarora person tells them a story and then puts Iroquois social dancing into their muscles. Children of all backgrounds and colors want to feel an African or African-diaspora style in their hands and feet and bones rather than just watch the latest commodified version of it on MTV. All children can become very enthusiastic about Balkan circle and line dances too; in Bulgaria the Romani wedding bands brought James Brown rhythms into the mix 20 years ago! Celtic jigs and clogging, wailing pennywhistles, pounding bodhrans have, in mediated versions like "River Dance," synthesized black tapdancing, Fred Astaire, the Rockettes, to layer up the cultures of the world in a fresh presentation of deep Irish traditions. Music-dance traditions are way ahead of politicians and diplomats, present appealing visions of sophisticated cultural layering (many cultures inhabiting and inspiring each person), can be learned 100 times faster than a language, can communicate at deeper levels than language, can accomplish so much more than "keep kids off the streets," "keep kids from being bored," "give them something to do." We can do all that, AND educate for fulfilling, expressive, passionate living. Every skill learned, every style mastered, lasts the rest of your life.

Pick a tradition. Find out which local artists are most enthusiastic about doing this year round work. Figure out which tradition might be most likely to inspire contagion, enthusiasm, mentoring, spreading the moves and grooves to everyone in your school. We are currently working with African and African diaspora traditions because they seem to summon the most energy in our inner city schools, but any single, living tradition taught by people who grew up in it can get the job done. It is best, I think, to start with one way of dancing, singing, drumming to get into the groove, fully coordinated, at home in performances. But music-dance traditions have a

way of blending, hybridizing, and children who dance any specific African tradition, or Afro-Latin tradition are soon adding "street" moves or gestures from MTV to it. With one tradition in hand, in feet, inside a person, all other traditions are accessible and more quickly learned in depth than is the case with languages; if you know an African tradition well, salsa basics take 20 minutes to learn; if you can dance Bulgarian you're ready to drum the most modern jazz. Start with one tradition, then look, listen, for ways to blend it, make it unique to your school or community center. Think about a sequence of cultures/styles, because once a tradition has been mastered, children could be learning a new dance style each month, or even each week.

Persuading People that Music and Dance are Basic Skills

In a world of increasingly passive chair and desk education at school and with so much TV viewing at home I don't understand why 100% of the children are not "hyperactive" or suffering from "attention deficit disorder." If *Homo ludens collaboratus* evolved biologically as a moving and grooving animal (Keil 1992:327-333; Keil and Feld 1994:1-194; McNeill 1995:1-36), won't the young of this species want to be moving and grooving a lot, learning what they were designed to learn? Won't these young go crazy, go wrong, have lots of behavior problems, get sick, if they are constantly restrained, constantly pressured by a pacification program at home and at school? It's the negative case and hypothetical, to be sure, but I'm ready to blame a lot of society's problems, and the problems of growing children in particular, on insufficient musicking and dancing and singing and dramatizing and expressing, on insufficient action. If we had enough sweaty parties, rewarding rites of passage and soul-satisfying ceremonies in all our communities, who would want to be sour? If we had enough music-dance-drama in our schools, who would be bored? If the amount of live music-dance has been declining rapidly in our communities, and it has, due to massive mass media substitutions, then shouldn't we make a special effort to increase the daily amount of dancing and musicking in our schools?

The positive case presented more reasonably. A cover story in Newsweek ("Your Child's Brain" Feb. 19, 1996, pages 55-62) and another cover story in Time more recently ("How a Child's Brain Develops" Feb. 3, 1997) have probably been brought to the attention of every concerned teacher by now. While I am not convinced that all the focus on just the right ages and stages and "windows of opportunity" for this and that kind of learning is necessary, the main points of this very useful summary of findings are in perfect alignment with our dance daily goals. A few quotations:

If more administrators were tuned to brain research, scientists argue, not only would schedules change, but subjects such as foreign language and geometry would be offered to much younger children. **Music and gym would be daily requirements.** (Emphasis added) Lectures, work sheets and rote memorization would be replaced by hands-on materials, drama and project work. And teachers would pay greater attention to children's emotional connections to subjects.... ."

"Plato once said that music "is a more potent instrument than any other for education." Now scientists know why. Music, they believe, trains the brain for higher forms of thinking."

"Then there's gym -- another expendable hour by most school standards. Only 36 percent of schoolchildren today are required to participate in daily physical education. Yet researchers now know that exercise is good not only for the heart. It also juices up the brain, feeding it nutrients in the form of glucose and increasing nerve connections -- all of which make it easier for kids of all ages to learn."

"Knowledge is retained longer if children connect not only aurally but emotionally and physically to the material..."

These findings make the case for intensive dancing, singing, drumming, musicking, etc. at earlier ages. Getting the inspiration for creativity into young muscles and central nervous systems at an early age must become a

high priority. Children need music and dance together, with plenty of call and response singing. They need the emotional satisfaction of mastering music-dance of the 'Mother tongue', the African diasporic traditions, the music and dance they see and hear all around them in rock, jazz, soul, pop, rap, gospel, dance music. And they need it daily.

How many times or how much of each day is optimal? We don't know because no one dares find out how smart and powerful children would become if they had more and more of the education they so desperately need rather than more and more days tied to desks. I firmly believe that we will find out one day (what the ancient Greeks of Periclean Athens already knew) that almost ALL of education up to the age of 6 or 7 should be music-dance-sports-drama-movement with about 10% desk work (3 Rs, Etc.) at age 7, 20% desk work at age 8, 40% desk work at age 9, etc. If children are educated ontologically to be skillful, expressive beings in the world --drummers, dancers, singers, actors, runners, painters, leapers, sculptors, poets, ball players, jugglers, etc. etc. -- from birth to age 8 or so, their increased gray matter, better brain wiring, greater health and happiness, will let them soar through the more epistemological or cognitive education of math, reading, and sciences at greater speeds and with deeper comprehension than anyone currently believes possible. And probably a lot of the 3 Rs could be done efficiently with computers while teachers concentrate on the 3 Ms -- Movement, Music and Morality (you know, being kind and compassionate in all the specific ways that matter).

I am very sure that many teachers in primary schools are already promoting the 3 Ms as part of the daily mix in their classrooms. Let us hear from you (we publish a MUSE Letter every few years that contains more detailed reports on our work and on similar efforts around the country, write to MUSE, Inc., 475 Beard Ave., Buffalo, N.Y. 14214) if you have found ways to get movement and music into each day. But how much support for music and movement do teachers receive? Isn't the premium placed on the 3Rs? Isn't a quiet classroom, and children busy at desks the norm most parents, school

boards and administrators want to see? In the midst of the rising anxiety over 3Rs and test scores, isn't it harder and harder to imagine a curriculum in which the 3Ms get at least equal time in the first few years of school?

Institutionally, organizationally, almost all the efforts to reverse the decline of musicking in the schools seem to go into "exposure": opening the societal raincoat and showing the kids -- art! Concerts for "young audiences," short term "artist in residencies," world music samplings where children get to toot Andean panpipes for a few minutes or listen appreciatively to a few gongs and songs from the East. For those "talented" kids allowed to do a little something musical in the suburbs there is an occasional South African number in choir, a Caribbean or calypso novelty number in band, and a nod in some multicultural direction for the orchestra as long as it doesn't disrupt business as usual.

In contrast, what we are promoting is:

1. year round, hands-on, arts education by
2. traditional artists
3. teaching music and dance at the same time
4. encouraging mentoring, older children teaching younger ones
5. with the goal of building a self-sustaining tradition in each school.

If we succeed and can encourage other school systems to build self-sustaining music-dance traditions with local talents on low budgets we will make a big difference in children's lives everywhere. If we're right about mentoring being the key to tradition building and if our goals can be met eventually by children teaching children, then a few decades from now all schools and community centers will have their own self-sustaining traditions. It doesn't get any more cost-effective than that.

On Mentoring

If mentoring is the key to tradition building in a school, let's talk about it

in some detail. Older children teaching the younger ones the rhythms and songs and dance steps should be easy enough to do. If the older children really know how to drum and sing and dance, are expert at it and like to show off their skills, then they ought to be able to teach those skills the same way they learned them -- by mimesis, imitation, a little "I sing, you sing," simon sez do this, simon sez do that. Can you spin in time and get your right foot to hit the floor with everyone else? You know this drum beat, but can you add this other pattern and keep it in the right place?

At schools where we have at least a few good drummers and a dozen or so great dancers, we have tried to "get the mentoring going strong" for years now, and with some success. Yet it hasn't become a regular, natural, easily scheduled, self-sustaining process anywhere. Our program director usually has to go to the school and arrange for it to happen a few times: "let's take this group of four or five expert fifth graders down to a third grade classroom, perform what we want them to learn and then show them how to do it." This works. It works so amazingly well that a few third graders know the dance steps, can dance in time, after just two visits. The kids who are mentoring start strategizing like teachers, "how are we going to keep their attention?" "what should we do with someone who is just not getting it?" But somehow these mentoring processes that our program director initiates haven't become regular, don't pick up momentum, don't spread to more classrooms as a weekly or daily practice. The little third graders who do pick it up quickly are not asked to lead a ten minute practice session in their classroom each day. The scheduling issue of older children leaving a study hall or another activity to go and do the mentoring regularly, doesn't get resolved permanently. One thing or another seems to prevent us from "getting the mentoring going strong" in a way that reaches all the children in a school regularly.

Recently we have formed a Program Committee of MUSE Directors and we will develop one or more heavily structured strategies, articulated in detail: guidelines for our artist-teachers (replicate yourselves! here's how), guidelines for mentors (become like your artist-teachers! here's how),

guidelines for school administrators (support these older children as you would your teachers), guidelines for teachers and teacher's aides (as quickly as you spot children who can dance in time, drum accurately, put them in charge of a ten minute exercise break each day), guidelines for parents (ask your children to show you what they know every so often), and maybe these detailed strategies, structures, guidelines, incentives, rewards, certificates, rites of passage, will create a transformation and "get the mentoring going strong" in school after school.

But let's think for a moment about what is in the way, let's anticipate the obstacles, in hopes that we can make our strategies proactive and foolproof.

"All the children?" Very few people in the USA really believe that all children are talented, able to drum, able to dance, able to sing. A lot of people think that some children are born "tone-deaf" and will never sing. A lot of people think that if you don't "have rhythm" you will never get it. Many people think that a world in which a few talented, creative people perform for an appreciative majority of not-so-talented, not-so-creative people is normal, o.k., the way things are, the way things will always be. "Hey, we can't get all the children to read and write and do math yet, now you want us to get all the children to dance and drum and sing?"

A variation on this common-sense dismissal of our basic goal goes something like this, "Well, maybe. . . in theory . . . as an ideal. . . it would be nice if. . . all the children learned to dance and drum and sing, but clearly they are not all equally motivated, equally interested, equally able at particular moments in their lives, to get into this just the way you want them to." Suddenly we are deep into chicken and egg country and big ethical questions: if we don't believe that all children can do it, and if a child doesn't believe he or she can do it, isn't that a perfect consensus, a truth that we have all come to believe, so that "doing it" just won't get done? At least not today. Or maybe not tomorrow either. In schools all over the USA many non-readers get passed from grade to grade. And many kindergartners are never ever

asked to dance a first time, much less a second time or a third. In how many classrooms are the children given "a chance to dance" each day during their formative years? If most kids were doing a little dancing daily, wouldn't all kids get it after a while? Unlike reading, dance is very social, very infectious and contagious, and you can learn the steps by standing behind someone who knows them better than you. And when you know some steps you can stand in front, or join the inner circle. There are so many gradual ways into the dance! Our guidelines need to reflect these gradations and degrees of involvement without ever losing sight of the fact that we were all born to dance, drum and sing. If you can dance in time you can drum in time and sing in time and write poetry with rhythm and rhyme.

Certainly we can not coerce pleasure. We can't force children to dance, drum or sing. So any child can opt for the sidelines at any time. But we need to recognize that the children who don't participate easily or who decide not to participate at all are probably the ones who most need to have their muses incorporated. Somehow the inspiration to create, to be in the groove, to flow, to focus, to synchronize with others, has already gotten outside them, is no longer as natural to them as breathing. This is why it is so important that we play with the pre-K children each day, in the earliest years before pacification, alienation, the forces of non-participation, have any kind of grip on any of them.

"Won't all this mentoring put me out of a job?" an artist-teacher might ask. Another chicken and egg quandary: if we are successful in starting traditions that grow in a few schools, then many other schools will want to get started. Every school will be looking for new dances, new drum interlocks. Artists will be in much greater demand. As quickly as older children teach all they know to the youngers, they will be begging the artists for more traditions, new ideas -- what can I teach those 2nd graders next?? On the other hand, if our artists settle into being teachers but not teaching kids to be teachers the major magic of our tradition building probably won't happen; we'll never have a school that's like an African village or a Havana

neighborhood where everyone dances, drums and sings.

But there is a sense in which there is only room for one leader, one "take-charge" person, one decision maker at a time in the rehearsal of musicking and dancing processes. What are we all going to be doing at once? How will we be "keeping together in time?" (McNeill 1995) One person's consciousness is usually shaping, directing, calling forth that synchrony at any given moment. The question for our artist-teachers in the MUSE program is: You've been modeling "taking charge" but can you describe and teach the process of "taking charge" to the children, show each one of them how to come into a situation and lead it? Can they take turns being "the take charge person?" Can they sustain longer turns as the leader? If so, we should give them a certificate describing what they know how to teach and turn them loose on the little ones.

"How can we take 6th and 7th graders out of regular classes and study halls to be teachers when they really need to be students?" an administrator asks. They may ask this question with some urgency if some of the best drummers and dancers in a school are still having trouble with reading, writing and arithmetic. We will have to demonstrate that Musicians United for Superior Education really does make superior education possible. Or make it a condition of becoming a mentor for MUSE that a student must maintain above average grades.

"We can't just tell the teachers in the lower grades to welcome the mentors whenever they show up." The double scheduling whammy. Liberating the mentors from other assignments and their schedules is one problem; matching the mentors to the schedules, assignments, pacing of work in the lower grades is another problem. Do these teachers want to have dance breaks in their classrooms regularly, daily, morning and/or afternoon? Won't drumming and dancing in one classroom disrupt a neighboring classroom? Is there a quieter way to dance? Should classes make a special pilgrimage to the gym or auditorium for just a 10 or 15 minute dance

interlude with the mentors? Why not ask teachers and teacher's aides to learn the dances and use them for exercise breaks daily with their children, then ask children who are getting it quickly to model the steps and mentor each other? The mentors could come by once in a while to introduce new steps and beats.

"Wouldn't it simplify matters, solve a lot of the double scheduling problems, if just one mentor 'took charge' of introducing new steps, beats, songs in each classroom?" A single good dancer with a boombox playing the parts could develop a relationship with one lower grade, working out a schedule that is mutually satisfactory with the teacher, and taking responsibility for bringing the children into the school's traditions. As they get good at the dance steps, we can add the live drumming to the mix (ideally our single mentor is proficient in both dancing and drumming and can teach the basic drum part or parts, or we can recruit one more mentor and make a team for those weeks when the drumming is learned) and dancers can take turns being the drummers while the mentor(s) is there and during practice sessions/exercise breaks between visits from mentors.

Where there's a will, there's a way. What do we want to happen at each school? Should we permit single mentors with boomboxes in one school but stick to our "live tradition," "drumming and dancing together" principles in another? Have mentors visit classrooms in one school, have classes come to the mentors in another? How can we find out what the best ways are to create "the village" that will raise the child? Under what circumstances are we most likely to easily and pleasurably involve all the children? Which ways of mentoring and tradition building will give the artists the most satisfaction? Which ways will keep the mentors most enthusiastic and eager to pass the traditions on? Where there's a will there's a way. Where does the will to build a tradition come from?

What You Can Do

Don't wait for music education specialists to do this for you. You may find

key allies in this field but most music teachers, in schools and school systems where they still exist, have very limited time, lots of curricular instructions, a struggle to develop specialists on instruments, a commitment to and skills built upon written music, and often a Western bias that says "don't tap your foot" rather than "let's dance!" At the furthest left and most progressive corner of the Music Educator's National Conference there is a "May Day Group" whose manifesto of abstract principles and philosophical axioms is probably not unfriendly to most dimensions of the "dance daily" agenda, but so far I haven't heard any specific and encouraging words about African diaspora traditions, or combating sexism, or the gross disparities between city and suburban schools. It may be a while before these critical theorists get to the practical questions: where is dance? which tradition to teach when? how to thoroughly empower all children before the age of 6 or 7? how to combat gender and race stereotyping limitations proactively?

Don't wait for the central administration to do this for you.

But it is not quite "do it all yourself" time once again either. There is a lot you can add to whatever music and dance you are already doing.

1. Ask any teachers who seem to be doing more with music and movement in their classes to come over and help you or show you how they do it.
2. Keep an eye and ear out for what children are doing for themselves -- hand-games and songs, double dutch jump roping, stepping or drill team routines, etc. and help these processes along. (Campbell 1998) Who knows how to keep together in time? Can the kids with skills in these areas lead $\text{\textcircled{E}}$ simon sez' routines in front of the class? Are the black girls who "step" willing to teach the white girls who don't? Could the ace steppers teach the younger boys and girls a couple of grades down?
3. Going to the nearest "aerobics" classes (where they use "country" line-dancing tapes, shouting "gospel" tapes, "world beat," "hip-hop," "house," "techno," "bass & drum," tapes -- a lot of different grooves to help people stay in shape and lose pounds) can give you ideas about what might help

your kids to move and groove more each day.

4. Turn yourself into more of a resource by learning the drumming/dancing skills of a specific tradition in your spare time.

These are shorter term or immediate things to do for your children.

Longer term, of course, we are hoping that every school in the USA will have a traditional dancing-drumming-singing program going soon that can build a self-sustaining tradition. This means raising a few thousand dollars from a local foundation or two this year so that you can contract with the best traditional musicians and dancers available to come into your school every week and transmit their skills to your most eager students and teachers. We have eight years of experience doing this, so we can help you get started. People in Seattle, Washington and Albuquerque, New Mexico are getting started this year.

Write to us at MUSE, Inc. 475 Beard Ave., Buffalo, N.Y. 14214.

Check out this Web Site. <http://www.musekids.org> Find us new "links".

Send us money and receive brochures, Muse News, Muse Letters.

Help us spread the word.

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