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New Visions of AFRICAN DANCE for a Creative, Healthy Lifestyle

African Dance Aesthetics in a K–12 Dance Setting: *From History to Social Justice*

SHEILA A. WARD



Aesthetics may be described as principles relating to what is beautiful, pleasing, and appreciated. “Dance expresses in movement and rhythm the aesthetic values of a society that are perceived to be beautiful and indicative of the best of that society” (Welsh, 2004, p. 20). Dance also provides a kinesthetic and engaging way to broaden the worldview of students by exploring the values system of diverse cultures, dispelling myths, circulating historical accuracies, and establishing traditional cultural connections that impact pop culture. A discussion in a K–12 setting of the aesthetics of African dances within Africa and throughout the African diaspora opens the doorway to present these dances within their cultural context, explore a concept of beauty that may be different from one’s own, and dispel misconceptions that have become tied to Africa and people of the African diaspora.

K–12 Setting: Challenges and Benefits

Perceptions and misconceptions about African and African-based dances have been contentious due to the United States’ history of slavery, racism, discrimination, and deliberate acts to keep the positive aspects of some cultures out of K–12 curriculums (Cruz-Banks, 2010; DeFrantz, 2005; Glass, 2007; Osumare, 2007; Welsh, 2004). The larger American public has rarely considered the physical features of African Americans to be “beautiful” (DeFrantz, 2005, p. 94), and the historical context of American racism has marginalized the “global meanings of blackness” (Osumare, 2007, p. 62). Although these issues may be provocative and uncomfortable, they are too important to ignore, and African and African-based dances provide an activity from which to frame the discussion along with a way to channel the “nervous” energy that may be stimulated from processing this information. Such channeled energy may now be described as *body power* (DeFrantz, 2004) or *power moves* (Osumare, 2007) whereby identities are negotiated and articulated, cultures are expressed through the body, and global and capitalistic aspects may now be framed to promote critical thinking. The details of such discussions will depend on the grade level, any associated standard, and the length of class or timeframe. Furthermore, such discussions also open the doorway

for students to engage, not only with historical aspects, but with a variety of additional issues as well, such as sociopolitical, diversity, and cultural competency, which demonstrates the interdisciplinary and integration potential across the curriculum. This may also be comforting to school officials concerned with time being taken away from meeting benchmarks and testing deadlines. Along with the historical aspect, traditional African dance provides a cultural activity that may kinesthetically connect students to their bodies and, based on its role in traditional African societies, may be used as a health-promoting model (Ward, 2008). In regard to multicultural education, the opportunity to learn about another culture/worldview is provided. Finally, African dance highlights a connection to United States urban and global hip-hop (Osumare, 2007), keeping it relevant for current generations and connecting African dance to American culture.

Relevance to Today’s Youth

African diaspora dance and Dunham scholar Osumare (2007) describes the “technology-mediated global youth culture” of hip-hop as a “contemporary trajectory” able to display “a historical continuum” (p. 12) of African-based cultural practice and disseminate African aesthetics through its “cultural connections to African expressive practices” (p. 12). She states that “hip-hop culture, therefore, has grown out of both the black cultural lineage in the United States and the dialogue of African diaspora cultures in the Americas” (Osumare, 2007, p. 24). By making the cultural connections, African dance becomes relevant to students, and they may be prompted to explore other cultural connections throughout America and the world.

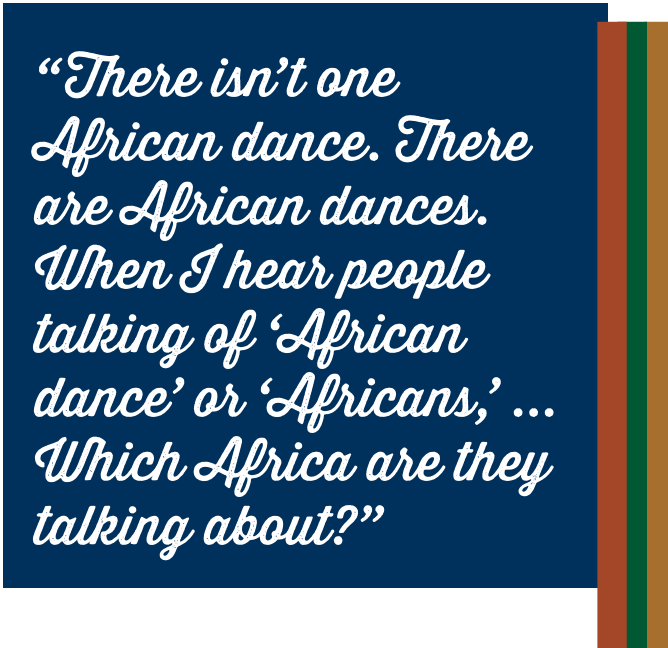
A United States West African Dance Project documented more active participation, passionate investment, and change in feelings, particularly among African American students who were more

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apprehensive at the start of the project, “when they realized the rhythmic connections between Guinea and hip-hop dance, a movement form they already practiced” (Cruz-Banks, 2010, p. 24). The project director believed that the lack of African study in the curriculums and students who were culturally dissociated from their African heritage contributed to the initial apprehensiveness about participation. Additionally, excessive images of poverty and disease in media presentations of Africa were believed to have fueled “internalized racism” and early resistance to West African dance from the African American students, which dispersed by the end of the program, as evidenced by students’ reflections documenting “connections they made between dance, culture, and their own notions of self” (p. 26).

Cultural Context of African Dances

African dance is a collection of African dances from different



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regions of Africa reflecting various cultural practices, traditions, and beliefs. The cultural context of the dance provides “the personality of the dance, its history, and arrangement” and “informs the construction and execution of the dance” (Streets, 2011, p. 79). This history of the dance may include the country of origin, the people that danced it, the purpose, the political and religious belief systems, and the geographical climate and use of space. The cultural context also enables the focus to be placed on the emotional and sensate attachments of African dance and less on the technical aspects, which, for many, may take time.

Because Africa is a big continent with many different ethnic groups with different customs, traditions, and dances, there is not just one African dance. An African dance practitioner born and based in Mozambique with training also from Cuba and Paris expressed: “I think that it’s very pretentious to talk of contemporary African dance or even African dance. There isn’t one African dance. There are African dances. When I hear people talking of ‘African dance’ or ‘Africans,’ I don’t understand what they are talking about. Which Africa are they talking about?” (Gilbert et al., 2006, p. 109). African dance traditions lay the

foundation for contemporary expressions such as those of current African practitioners in Africa (Gilbert, 2006) and are manifest in works by the legendary Pearl Primus, the Katherine Dunham technique, and the Umfundalai African dance technique of Kariamu Welsh.

African Dance Practitioners in Africa and Aesthetics

African dance artists and practicing dance artists on the continent of Africa deliberate over the idea of a contemporary African dance aesthetic (Gilbert et al., 2006) as detailed in a heated discussion among African contemporary dance-makers in Africa. Even they have been plagued with being “told that their work is not ‘African’ or ‘African enough’” (p. 103). Such insights underscore the need to reiterate the vastness and variations of traditions, especially technique-wise, in Africa because “there are different countries, different languages, different cultures, and different people to influence us” (p. 104). Although the quest to define or create a common denominator for contemporary African dance aesthetics remains challenging, an African dance practitioner based in Zimbabwe believes that “For an African dancer, tradition is the basis from which to start from and from there to explore where contemporary dance can go” (p. 104). Such discussions underscore that African dance is not static—as expressed by an African dance practitioner from Cameroon, “...we cannot generalize about African dance—values and culture change within Africa” (p. 113). The fluidity and adapting nature of African dance was also witnessed by my studies in the Senegambia region.

What was very interesting about the Jolla community in the Taney Village [is] the fact that the young artist[s] were creating new songs and that the people in the community took the time to seriously learn and perform them. They knew the meaning of these songs and their movements. People often think of African culture as “old” but there are new traditions that are being created all the time. (Field notes/journal, July 11, 2005)

Theory and Social Action

Rarely is social action provided as a benefit of the inclusion of African dance in a K–12 setting. However, dance scholars are documenting the transformation of lives by encouraging students to not only recognize but also to question inequities in everything from how African-based dance is valued and recognized among other dance forms, and dialogue about why African-based dance is or is not included in settings where dance curriculums are instituted. Cruz-Banks (2010) developed the framework of critical postcolonial dance theory and practice to explain healing from cultural oppression through African dance in various postcolonial contexts through a West African dance program in an American school. The project boasted of “mobilizing social action by reclaiming youth education” and classroom enrichment through “an African ethos...important to developing self-esteem and meaningful learning experiences for U.S. youth” (p. 30).

Social change resulting from learning through reflection from a West African dance camp immersion experience enabled a U.S. educator to integrate it into United States and world history and other systems of oppression (Streets, 2011). The U.S. educator expressed, “When I discuss the beauty, history, and meaning of the Baamaya dance and dispel stereotypes commonly voiced by viewers of the dance, I am acting as a social change agent” (p. 78). A contemporary

African diaspora dance scholar offers insight into discussions of recognition and appreciation for African Americans and “suggests that ‘beauty’ may indeed produce social change for its attendant audiences” (DeFrantz, 2005, p. 93). Furthermore, the author of the book *Power Moves* “chronicles hip-hop as one aspect of social change that is evident on several fronts” (Osumare, 2007, p. 8).

The Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2006) has three criteria for successful practice and implementation: academic success, cultural competence, and, of interest for this article, sociopolitical consciousness. Applied to a meaningful, culturally empowering African dance experience, sociopolitical consciousness prepares participants to view dance in a manner that challenges social and racial inequalities by “questioning the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 128). Applications of theory, reflection, and critical thinking to African-based dance experiences has the potential to promote empowerment, transformation, and the desire to act, not only because of what is now known but what is also now sensible and felt by the participant.

Designing the Experience

Although it may not be possible to cover all that an African-based dance class has to offer (transformative, social justice, expanding world view) in a lesson, the experience should be designed with these elements in mind. When afforded the opportunity to do multiple sessions or a unit, to work with upper grade levels, or to present the class in collaboration with a subject such as anthropology, sociology, political science, history, or geography, the interdisciplinary and cross-curricular aspect is already embedded in the movement experience.

An introductory African dance class may focus on dances and themes that “provide an overview of some foundational aspects of African dance, as it relates to history, culture, and aesthetics (Welsh, 2004), and intermediate and advanced classes may include themes related to sociopolitical consciousness and social justice. Although the degree of detail depends on the length of the class and/or residency, the cultural context of the dance should be present, and African commonalities and aesthetics may be highlighted.

Some common African dance characteristics that may be considered for an introductory class in a K–12 setting are also foundational for advanced-level dance classes and other African-derived techniques and styles, including hip-hop. These aesthetics also have the capacity to be expanded for intermediate and advanced-level African or African-based dance classes that may include Dunham, Umfundalai, and hip-hop, for example, which often contain underlying characteristics that may be incorporated into a class setting. Several excellent resources discuss African dance aesthetics (Welsh, 2004; Welsh-Asante, 1990; Glass, 2007), and this article presents several of these aesthetics based on research and personal experience as a teacher and dancer.

Aesthetics of African and African-Based Dances

- *Polyrhythmic* refers to multiple rhythms. The students are directed to the many rhythms occurring at the same time in the musical accompaniment of the drumming or being created by handclapping, foot-stamping, or vocalizations. The multiple rhythms allow continuity of movement as well as the opportunity to switch back and forth between rhythms.

- *Body isolation* refers to moving or articulating one part of the body at a time. The students are directed to move the head, legs, arms, or hips, for example, in isolation. Body isolations, or the emphasis on particular body parts, may reflect regional and cultural differences “based on their belief systems, environment, and physical structures” (Welsh, 2004, p. 20).

- *Polycentrism* refers to multiple movements. The students are directed to move more than one body part at the same time, which adds to the complexity of the movement. Polyrhythmic, body isolations, and polycentrism offer implications for teaching flexibility, especially among multiple levels, because of the ability to manipulate the complexity of the movement. Additionally, these qualities have been incorporated into other dance forms, such as modern dance techniques, jazz dance, and hip-hop.

- The *grounded* nature of African dance in the flexion of the knee joint and torso demonstrates the connection with the earth that houses ancestors and provides food that sustains life. However, the concept of groundedness or earthiness is really about the “holistic perception of the entire body to the earth, which includes the feet” (Mills, 1996). Although some dances require the use of footwear, African dance is usually performed *barefoot*. In a K–12 setting, displaying the feet may meet with several responses, from complete compliance to complete resistance, but most often giggling. One strategy that has worked is the option to remove footwear, and everyone is instructed to get out one big collective laugh at all our feet, followed by being thankful that we have feet no matter how they look. Furthermore, students gradually remove shoes later in the dance session as they find the movements easier—and often safer than wearing socks—to perform without footwear.



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- The *dynamics of speed* reflect skill and confidence, and *repetition* reflects the importance of giving into the movement or mood in African dance. Both represent tools to texturize the dance and facilitate transcendence or communion at a higher level. The dynamics of increasing speed and repetition add more energy and intensity to the movement, which may result in exhaustion and/or feelings of exhilaration. As a teaching strategy, repetition of a dance or movement phrase provides an opportunity for practice and skill improvement as well as the development of important neuromuscular connections. Performing the dance movement or phrase at slower speeds enables the participant to work on execution and sequencing before increasing the complexity by increasing the speed. Participants performing at a higher level may be allowed to perform the movement at a faster speed earlier in the lesson or unit.

- African dance is *participatory* and *vocal*. Dance is communal and belongs to everybody. Young, old, male, female, varying body shapes and sizes, and even spectators—everybody dances. The participatory/communal nature of African dance represents socializa-

The aesthetic values of a society expressed through dance represent beauty and the best it has to offer.

tion and the willingness to place the needs of the community over individual needs. As a teaching strategy, this offers an opportunity for those who choose not to dance to still be a part of the experience and group as the keeper of rhythm or through positive vocalization. Silence and stillness represents negative criticism to the art form, since the music and dance should move the participants and observers.

- The *circle* formation and dances represent continuity of life, community connections, and protection (in a circle, someone may warn a person of danger not seen from behind, with the opportunity to have the welcome gesture reciprocated). The diameter of the circle may increase or decrease, impacting the use of space and movement. The circle formation represents a great way to begin and end class. Inclusion of the drummers and musicians, if present, into the circle formation at the beginning of the session establishes a relationship among the dance participants with the musicians and music and their vital contribution to the dances. The circular formation at or toward the end of the session also reaffirms the shared experience of the group and an opportunity for a collective closing.

- *Improvisation, competition, and the solo performance* within the circle demonstrate willingness to share individual style, uniqueness, and variations on a theme or rhythmic pattern,

engagement in friendly challenges that are physical in nature, and the courage to lead or be recognized as a leader. These qualities all represent opportunities to demonstrate creativity and divergent thinking skills.

Conclusion

The aesthetic values of a society expressed through dance represent beauty and the best it has to offer. Therefore, African dance aesthetics represent beauty, commonalities, and the best of West, East, Central, North, and South African societies. The cultural connections between African dance aesthetics and contemporary African-based dance techniques, such as Umfundalai, Dunham, and hip-hop, add relevance to the K–12 youth population. The historical and cultural contexts of the movements underscore the emphasis on the aesthetic qualities and emotional bonds linked to African dances, and remove potential fears associated with a high level of technical proficiency and performance capability in a K–12 setting. African dance aesthetics also open the doorway to discuss contentious and sometimes uncomfortable topics, such as perceptions of beauty, marginality, racism, and discrimination, in an age-appropriate manner connected to a positive movement experience that discredits stereotypes and misconceptions associated with Africa and the people of the African diaspora. Finally, meaningful culturally engaging experiences through African dance aesthetics have the power to empower and transform individuals to question and act on inequalities and social injustices and encourage the world to associate with their African heritage because it permeates globally.

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