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Express Yourself

Teaching artists help children speak English through dance.

BY HANNAH MARIA HAYES

Jennifer Golonka demonstrates a passé skip with a high shape and then points to the words on a chart. Her students read and pronounce the terminology with her and then practice the movement. While this scene could easily occur in any elementary school, what makes Golonka's dance class unique is that while teaching movement, she is helping the children learn English.

"We forget how valuable the arts are for teaching, learning, creating and problem solving," says Golonka, an English Language Learners (ELLs) teaching artist who is also a freelance master teacher, choreographer and dancer with a background in modern and ballet.

Golonka recently conducted a residency at P.S. 19 in Queens, NY—one of the most diverse places in the United States, where more than 100 languages representing 80-plus countries are spoken. Her task there was to use dance to effectively teach speaking, listening and collaboration skills to about 30 students in Laura Guzmán's fifth-grade dual-language classroom.

"The kids so look forward to their dance classes," Guzmán says. "It's incredible how the classes have helped my children work better in small groups. They communicate and share their ideas better, and the effect was almost immediate."

Physical and Verbal Languages Intersect

Golonka is one of about 30 teaching artists specializing in dance with

Jennifer Golonka's English Language Learners work in small groups to create their own dance phrases.



ArtsConnection, a NYC organization that connects a roster of 150 teaching artists to children, families and schools. The teaching artists are offered 12 hours of professional development each year. Those who work with ELLs receive up to an additional 24 hours of training each year for three to four years.

Golonka specifically works with ELLs in grades three to five in a special program designed to develop self-confidence and collaborative skills. Carol Morgan, deputy director for education at ArtsConnection, says that dance is particularly helpful for these students: "If they can show their ideas and they don't rely on language alone, they develop a personal stake in them, and it helps them to take greater risks because they care."

Dance also helps the children relate to other people and to feel part of a team. "It's something unique to the arts and especially to dance," says executive director Steven Tennen. "When kids are using their bodies and communicating in a different way, it's that much easier to

add language in ways they haven't been as successful with before."

Developing Curriculum

In-school residencies are an average of 15 45- to 50-minute sessions. The teaching artist develops curriculum alongside the classroom teacher to meet the particular needs of the students.

"We honor dance as an artform and discipline and ask the teaching artists to bring their artistry into the room," Morgan says. "It's all about cognition beginning in the body and language building from the inside out—which also enables students to understand more complex ideas than their limited English capabilities might allow."

Golonka uses modern-based creative movement to help her students learn technique, terminology, spatial awareness and levels. She first shows the movement, has her students read it from a visual aid and then they try the movement with their bodies. After learning basic dance skills, the students are then able to take

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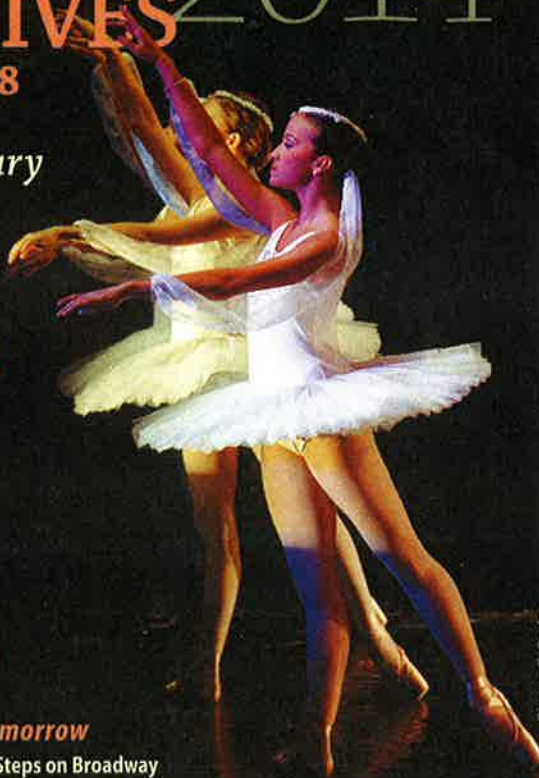


Photo: E. Patino

K-12

their dance vocabulary and create their own pieces, while also learning how to discuss ideas and practice the art of negotiation and compromise among their peers.

“Even if my students didn’t understand everything that Jen was saying, they understood what she meant because of the way she expressed herself and because they could look at her body movement,” Guzmán says. “What was great about the dance program was that the emphasis was taken away from academics. The kids didn’t feel a pressure to learn. They were free to communicate, and language flowed naturally from that.”

Inside the Classroom

Guzmán and Golonka developed a symbiotic relationship, with Guzmán assisting Golonka as necessary during the dance classes. They also worked together to meet common goals. For example, Guzmán was having student behavior issues last year due to a mix of bossy versus shy students, so Golonka created lesson plans that involved consistent small-group work, making sure everyone in each group had the chance to express an idea and then have it tested during class. “This allowed the shy students to break out of their shells because they learned collaboration skills. They had to speak back and forth and locate the vocabulary to share their thoughts,” Golonka says. “By the end, they were creating abstract things with their bodies and pushing the boundaries of what they thought they could do.”

Once Guzmán’s students learned to put value on each classmate’s idea and to take time to listen to their peers, the behavior issues stopped. “Eventually they were able to choreograph their own dance phrases, which is pretty neat for kids who have never had dance class,” she says.

Golonka ensures her dance classes are a place where the children can be confident without the pressure of having to raise their hand and talk. “Once you cultivate that confidence,” she says, “it’s easier to take a verbal risk.” **DT**

Hannah Maria Hayes is a freelance writer with an MA in dance education, American Ballet Theatre pedagogy emphasis, from New York University.



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