

Education, education, education

Can we improve our training system to better serve the next generation? **Marianka Swain** goes back to school

In August 2011, David Willetts MP angered the industry by suggesting that dance A-level should carry fewer tariff points than traditional subjects, an unfortunate follow-on from Michael Gove MP's 2009 comment that "Academic rigour is the answer – not an A-level in dance."

"You hear politicians talking about the importance of music in schools, but seldom dance," observes professional development manager at the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD), Nathalie Islam-Frénoy.

"It's baffling, because dance incorporates so many positive elements: health and fitness, musical appreciation, sensitivity to movement, social skills, teamwork, understanding of different cultures and personal expression."

"It gives a lot of kids who aren't engaged by sport

another avenue," says "Strictly" champion and coach Darren Bennett, who has played a key role in Essentially Dance, which introduces sustainable dance programmes to schools. "We've also seen a dramatic improvement in attention span, social cohesion, particularly between boys and girls, and generational communication – ten-year-old kids suddenly have something in common with their grandparents!"

"Dance is unique in that nothing comes between you and what you want to express – you don't need an instrument or a paintbrush," adds Linda Jasper, director of Youth Dance England (YDE). "It cuts across cultural, language and class barriers, which fits with the political rhetoric of multiculturalism and inclusion. However, the place of dance in schools is still completely at the whim of head teachers and governors."

The question of dance's role in the curriculum is a contentious one, but what's certain is that we have to ensure high teaching standards, believes Sean Williams, outgoing director of the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET). "However people come into dance, we want their experience to be positive. The CDET was founded in 1979 by leading dance figures concerned that some teachers didn't have adequate training or safe practices or weren't providing what the industry needed.

"We offer accreditation to schools and validation to awarding organisations – it's easy for them to have first contact with



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An ISTD Summer School at the University of Chichester. Inset, Dance encourages communication between generations

us, and we also seek them out! There's a three-year guided consultation process and we don't fail anyone – we advise whether or not they're ready to submit for accreditation or validation. We also run industry-wide seminars – of course, schools and awarding organisations are competitive, but there's a huge amount of common ground where we can support and learn – and we have an 'Answers for Dancers' service on our website, where you can ask anything, from sophisticated career questions to where you can take your first steps."

The CDET doesn't have any formal ties to public education,

"but we do liaise with educators," explains Sean. "We'd love to see the standards reached in the private and voluntary dance sectors mirrored in education, but it's difficult for that to happen while dance falls under the PE umbrella."

However, Darren believes the Essentially Dance formula, implemented in hundreds of schools UK-wide, offers a realistic,

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affordable solution: "Ideally, we want highly trained dance teachers in every educational establishment in the UK, but if a school with a limited budget has the option to invest in a new maths teacher or a dance teacher, dance is going to lose out. Our philosophy is delivering dance within the current infrastructure and making the most of the available resources.

"We devised a basic syllabus and we break it down for teachers through training days, books and DVDs. It works particularly well with ballroom because it has a clear structure – steps, figures, timing – that can be easily assimilated. However, we don't dictate one way of delivering that syllabus; we trust teachers to deliver it their way, because they know what works best in that environment, with those kids, and they can do it for years to come, rather than introducing a dance teacher who disappears after a term."

Some have expressed concerns that if dance is in mainstream education, it will negatively impact dance schools, but Darren has found the opposite: "We give kids an introduction to it, but we then link up teachers with programmes and dance schools in their area and, for every class of kids having a go, a certain percentage will keep pursuing it." ►

Linda would love to see such links solidified: “Kids need early access to dance if they want to do it professionally, so it would be great for schools to know which regional organisations, local projects and training programmes they can trust. To aid that process, we’ve created a Level 6 Diploma in Dance Teaching and Learning, in consultation with Trinity College London, recognising the qualities and skills it takes to work with young people safely and progressively.

“We’ve also commissioned an accompanying book, *Shaping Practice*, edited by Dr Lorna Sanders, which has contributions from leading practitioners and educators. Our aim is to fill in that gap, allowing dance teachers to gain recognition that extends beyond the dance world.”

Such recognition can be key, notes Nathalie: “We’re fighting to demonstrate the value of dance education, which is why we introduced accredited teaching qualifications in 2004 and created a development department. Now, we have the same development structure for every faculty, incorporating key elements like health and safety, lifespan development and historical context, as well as genre-specific guidelines for each syllabus.”



Darren Bennett and Lilia Kopylova play a key role in *Essentially Dance*, introducing sustainable dance programmes to schools

Photograph © Essentially Dance

The ISTD has also created a new Level 6 Diploma: “Our Dance Pedagogy qualification gives members QTLS [Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills] status – allowing them to teach in the state education sector – and we’ve teamed up with Middlesex University to create a BA in Professional Practice. Dance is often considered a precarious career, so this helps teachers progress in their professional development in a widely recognised system.

“Similarly, some of our qualifications now carry UCAS points, so rather than this being a risky option, it actually contributes to a child’s future.”

However, we can’t lose sight of the fun element, notes Darren: “Of course we’d love to see standards maintained and improved upon, but just as you have kids kicking a football round, it’s great to see them having a go at dance – if they enjoy it, they’ll want to engage with it.”

Sean agrees: “Dance can be all things to all people, from a high-level art form or a special-needs outreach project to a healthy activity or a great social environment. The more we can integrate it from childhood onwards, the more chance we have of surviving government changes and funding cuts, because it will be a fundamental part of our society.” ●

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WEBSITES

www.essentiallydance.com
www.cdet.org.uk
www.yde.org.uk
www.istd.org