

# ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

by

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*Character Education is not to be an add on; instead it should be integrated as much as possible into the existing curriculum....character is developed in schools through its climate, curriculum, co-curricular activities, services and daily interaction with others. —DeRoche and Williams (1998)*

**J** teach dance as if it is the most important class a student can take. Not everyone grasps life's important lessons just by wandering into old age. Middle school education is a concentrated effort to supply this type of learning to children right along with the reading skills, math and everything else they encounter as part of their school day. As the dance teacher I've been re-introduced to many of the concepts of middle school philosophy, practice and character education.

The middle school dance program at the Singapore American School is in its fifteenth year. After starting as an after school club in the 1988-89 school year, it evolved into an elective offering for sixth, seventh and eighth graders. It coincided with changes taking place in our move toward an exemplary middle school.

The dance classes allow students opportunities to develop character in at least three important areas. First, they learn *that effort pays off*. My students perform in an informal setting at the end of the semester. Many students find themselves (often for the first time) confronted by having to reconcile their wish to shine or be a "natural" with the reality of the effort it takes to get there.

Second, they learn *the value of being teachable*. For some middle school learners the natural wish to do well is offset by some reluctance to practice, to accept guidance and correction and persevere in an area they may not do well automatically.

Third, they learn *the power of cooperation*. Unlike some competitive situations which mainly reward the individual with exceptional skills, dance students find that personal efforts must blend with the efforts of others for a dance routine to be fluid and pleasing to the eye. This requires teamwork, personal restraint, so as to not clash with others around them and acceptance of the fact that in any class, various levels of ability will exist.

Here is an example of a classroom situation: My dance classes are comprised of students of all levels, from beginners to advanced. Students are taught a short dance routine. I then place them in groups of three to four of varying abilities. Their task is to add to the choreography and show it to the rest of the class. This demonstration will be followed by constructive critique.

Before the students start working with each other, I give a little speech on how one must use diplomacy and tact when working with groups. If somebody is not happy or comfortable with a particular dance step or idea, they must come up with a suggestion. Nobody is allowed to say "I don't like that idea or that step". Students are reminded how easy it is to criticize but not so easy to come up with a solution to a problem. Very often, the more experienced dancers take the lead and come up with great ideas but the movements are also very challenging for the beginners.

This is where the struggle begins. Some beginners are reluctant to admit that a few of the steps are too difficult. They may stay silent while feelings of resentment arise. Or they may become critical of everybody's ideas. Other beginners openly admit that they need help and will ask members of their group to meet for practice during break or lunch. Sometimes, the more experienced dancers (leaders) take this into consideration and alter the choreography to make things work smoothly for the entire group. By the time the students have completed their choreography, they are prepared to demonstrate their dances for each other's constructive criticism. This is where I grab the window of

opportunity and teach the many facets of character education through discussions and self discovery.

By the time all groups have performed their dances, they have heard suggestions from me and their classmates that help improve their performance. The groups that do not perform very well hear what the missing elements were in their dance which allows me or a student to point out how much work goes into putting a dance together. Teamwork, being reliable and perseverance are common adjectives used. They all talk about the one or two people who do not give their best or do not show up for practice, behaviors that ruin the experience for the rest of the group. On the flipside, the groups that put on an extraordinary performance hear all the wonderful compliments and they are the ones who get to tell the class what it took to put their dance together. Once again, teamwork, being reliable and perseverance are the common adjectives used.

While character education is taught in this type of classroom setting, it also allows opportunities for me to work with students individually. Sometimes a student will see me privately to discuss how difficult it is to work with a particular classmate. I have had concerned students talk to me about classmates who do not know their right foot from their left. These concerned students want to put on a grand performance and they do not think it is fair they have to work with others who cannot dance well. Instead of giving them a direct answer, I give them something to think about. I ask them to visualize their group doing a dance with complicated steps where three out of the four dancers know and perform the dance brilliantly while the fourth one looks completely lost. I then ask them to visualize a simpler dance where all four people know and perform their dance really well. How would they like their dance to look? Ninety-nine percent of the time, the students choose the latter.

These lessons learned in dance class are lessons that adults sometimes struggle to grasp. For middle school students who are keenly focused on their own development, their sense of self and standing within their peer group, attempting to establish the boundaries of their abilities and limitations often provides as much disappointment, frustration, envy and embarrassment as it does excitement, pride, satisfaction and success. Helping students make realistic and honest assessments of their abilities with the corresponding acceptance necessary to continue working toward

improvement in training of life skills, requires much more than the training of dance skills.

As adults we marvel at the students who seem to have absorbed life's lessons. We call these students "mature", "well rounded", "balanced" or "simply admirable." Most parents hope to see in their children the capacity for fairness and an ability to accept the talents or shortcomings of others without feeling threatened or superior. We look for resiliency in our children, the ability to bounce back when life doesn't throw the best it has to offer in our direction. We hope our children understand that the effort made, not just the result, defines success and allows us to feel proud, capable and competent. Ultimately, we ask our children to embrace a set of values to live by. These values will guide them in making responsible decisions even in the absence of clear rules or adult guidance.

Often it is the least skilled of my students who display the "right stuff," who become the models for others in the class. We need to honor and reward the willingness to try, to make mistakes, to not be intimidated by what they cannot do or by what others do better, to persevere, and to improve. If we honor these virtues, students will profit as well from the model of excellence, exceptional ability and natural talent that other students may display.

Dance then, is not about making it into the front line, or wearing the best costume, or being chosen for the choice solo, or surviving the auditions in order to gain friends. It is about learning what the "right stuff" really is. The "right stuff" is being able to balance competitiveness with teamwork, achieving without dominating, performing well without necessarily being the best, and seeing one's capabilities and limitations while developing the personal acceptance to feel good about both.

When students choose dance as an elective, it is my hope that the steps they learn are the ones they need to make their way through life, along with making their way across the dance room floor.

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