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Dance education and social cohesion: A critical approach

(Keynote address)

In South Africa, we dance! We dance to build community, to establish identity, to show solidarity to enable collective healing and promote ideas of hope in times of crisis (#Jerusalemachallenge). South Africans also dance in protest: We dance for freedom, equality, basic human rights, the right to education (#feesmustfall), basic public services, fair wages and a better quality of life for all (Glasser, 2000; Bakare & Mans, 2003; Onyeji 2004; Kothari, 2006; Smith & Riley, 2009; Edwards, 2010; Wanyama & Shitubi, 2012). In contemporary South African society, dance has communal, cultural, public and political connotations. My research interests relate to the potential of dance education to promote social cohesion in a culturally and politically diverse (post-)conflict society.

This plenary session regards the critical challenges encountered during my investigation into dance education as an agent of social cohesion. Although the session will focus on dance, it raises fundamental questions that resonate across all arts disciplines. The following three topics will be addressed: (i) how to decolonise arts education for the multicultural classroom; (ii) negotiating dignity, equality, hegemony and aesthetics in the multicultural classroom; and (iii) the value/caveat of a “habitus exchange” during intercultural arts interactions.

If we as arts educators fail to interrogate our own praxis, the arts may indeed become an agent of hegemony and separation as we paralyse its power to symbolize ethno-cultural and other identities, and debilitate its capacity to create experiences of dignity, equality and freedom in the classroom. Indeed, the consequences of ignoring such critical issues may reach beyond the classroom, eventually hampering the arts' potential to contribute to processes of social cohesion in a country that promotes "unity in diversity".

Keywords: dance education, peace education, cultural diversity, cultural exchange, aesthetics, habitus