

The Dance Lesson - an exercise in reflective writing

Introduction

These reflective accounts concern a lesson in dance. The teacher, Hanna, is working with Year 8 pupils in the first lesson of the day. The lesson is the fourth in a five-lesson unit of work based on street dance style. She has found that the children have been quite slow to learn. There are two statemented children in the class, Ben and Jade. She has written other notes about her concerns about working with mixed ability groups and enabling the learning of all of the children in the class. Jade and Ben have given rise to some difficulties in her teaching in previous classes, and the situation bothers her. This exercise should be related to Resource 9

A dance lesson (1)

When I took the register today, I saw that there were several absences. This would cause difficulties since the pupils had been creating their dance in pairs. This would mean that those on their own would need to pair up and create a new duet, rapidly learning to co-operate with each other. Generally they were not a group of quick learners, and some had shown that they had particular difficulties in working together. I realised then that I could be in for some difficulties myself and wished I had planned better.

The two statemented pupils – Ben and Jade worried me a bit as I could see that they were both distracted and lively this morning. As we started to warm up, a learning support assistant came in. She acknowledged me briefly and then turned her attention to Jade.

I had decided to do simple fun activities for the warm up – based on walking and travelling at different speeds. It meant that the pupils had to concentrate in order to vary the direction and speed of travel in response to my instructions. It all went well with everyone involved.

I developed the warm-up, repeating exercises and phrases that we had performed in previous lessons. Most pupils joined in and seemed to enjoy the simple repetitive patterns of movement but I noticed that Ben and Jade were already having problems, though a few moments later, to my relief, I noticed that Jade was beginning to settle down and had started to fall in with the patterns of the movements quite nicely. Ben, however, could not copy the movements and his concentration began to wander. Then he started to distract others. I focussed my attention on him and praised him when he did things well. The LSA moved across to Ben, leaving Jade. She talked to him and gave him some encouragement but I could see that he was not able to listen to her.

By now, the rest of the class had picked up the repetitive movements. The lesson was, on the whole, going quite well at this stage. I introduced a more challenging phase by adding two new actions to the sequence and they danced in time to the music. By now Ben had really lost concentration and was running around in the space among the dancers. It was only 10 minutes into the lesson and his very public display of off-task behaviour could potentially throw everything off course again. Eventually, after just catching my eye, the LSA removed Ben from the room. I was not completely easy with this, but I do not know what else I might have done. I

learnt afterwards from another colleague that he had been given sanctions which included a letter home to inform his parents of his poor behaviour. I felt guilty but it was a very difficult situation. I have been trying to think how it could have been different.

A dance lesson (2)

I want to consider a situation that arose in a potentially unsettled mixed ability class where I was teaching dance. The focus of the situation was Ben, one of two statemented pupils. The situation left me feeling guilty and inadequate as a teacher.

I began the lesson with slightly uneasy feelings. I noticed that there were several absences. The pupils had been creating their dance in pairs and with some of the partners absent, they would have to co-operate in new pairings. Co-operation was a problem for some. The children are mixed in their abilities and I had already been thinking that I need to develop strategies both to help individuals when they work outside their friendship groups and also where they need to create new material quickly. I began the lesson with these concerns and thoughts in mind.

I had started the warm up when the learning support assistant came in to work with Jade, the other statemented pupil. It might have been helpful if she had come in just a few minutes before. Generally, however, things went well in the warm-up. I felt that I had got that right with simple and fun activities and because the skill level was low, everyone could join in and enjoy it. It really engaged them and this good start probably helped later when things got distracting.

The next stage also went well for most of the class. It was a development of the warm up using exercises and phrases that had been mastered in previous lessons. Although I was a bit anxious about the lesson, fortunately I was patient and at their own pace nearly all of the class joined in. This too was a useful strategy. It was Jade and Ben who were having problems, though with the help of the LSA, Jade was beginning to settle. Ben was not. He found it difficult to copy the movements, seemed briefly to get frustrated, and then began to distract others, eventually running around in the spaces between the other pupils. The LSA left Jade and went to help him, while I tried as well as I could, to carry on the class, moving into more challenging work.

Ben's behaviour did not improve and the LSA removed him from the room. Later I was informed that he had been given sanctions, including a letter to his parents about his poor behaviour.

I felt I had failed with this situation. I wanted to manage the behaviour of all of the children. There are several things that might have contributed to the situation. I started the class with a sense that I was not on top of the situation because of the new pairings – though in the end, I felt that things might have actually gone better because of that (I could look at this matter another time). I certainly did not need to worry about it. Also the LSA came in late. She probably would not have seen that as a problem but for me it was. There is something about the three-way relationship – Ben, the LSA and me – and, in this situation, the LSA's work with Jade. Perhaps the LSA should have worked more with Ben from the start. Who made the decisions there and who should make them?

There is also something about the situation of dance being public – it is so obvious when pupils are off task. Then there is Ben and his behaviour. I wonder how he felt about it all? Did he want to distract others?. Was he really behaving ‘poorly’ - was his action deliberate, warranting sanctions or maybe just an overflow of energy?

I know a bit about Ben and his inability to hold concentration for more than a few minutes, but dance could be of help to him as a means of using his energy in a productive manner – that is if he could be enabled to stay engaged with the activity. What could I have done better? I want to involve all of the pupils.

A dance lesson (3)

I want to reflect on the dance lesson with year 8, and in particular on the situation that arose with Ben, though I think that there are wider issues to be considered than just Ben. The situation left me feeling guilty and inadequate as a teacher.

The class were doing some work in pairs. I felt uneasy that day because a number of children were absent and some would have to learn to co-operate with new partners who were not necessary their choice. It is a mixed ability class, not always quick to learn or necessarily to be able to co-operate. I had already recognised the need to develop strategies:

- to help individuals to work outside their friendship groups;
- to create new material quickly

Jade and Ben are statemented. As we started to warm up, a learning support assistant came in, specifically to help Jade.

The warm up of simple fun activities seemed to engage all of the class and I was pleased with that. Then I added some of the repetitive exercises that we had done in previous classes. This stage also went well for most of the class. Although I was a bit anxious about the lesson, I kept on top of the feelings. I was patient and at their own pace nearly all of the class joined in. This too was a useful strategy. Managing to get most of the class engaged and listening to the music is really important for this group and I must not lose this point in relation to what then happened. At this stage, Jade and Ben were having problems, though with the help of the LSA, Jade was beginning to settle.

Ben found it difficult to copy the movements, seemed to get frustrated, and then began to distract others. By the time we were 10 minutes into the class, he was running around in the spaces between the other pupils – totally off task. The LSA left Jade and went to help him. I moved into more challenging work in order to keep the other children engaged and active.

Eventually, the LSA removed Ben from the room. I later learned that his parents were sent a note about his poor behaviour and there were other sanctions.

I see myself as having failed to prevent this situation and I suspect that none of us gained from it. I notice that my feelings were made worse by the fact that I felt I had failed in front of the LSA.

She may have felt that she had failed in front of me. (These feelings would be better discussed). The children in the class had had their learning disrupted.

I think about being in Ben's shoes. How would he have seen it? Dance – a chance to have some space and be creative – it started with a bit of fun – so he might have felt that he could enjoy the fun. Ben would find it hard to move from what he would construe as pure 'fun' to a more serious activity. It is possible that the 'fun' works well for children who can change their focus of attention easily – but not for some like Ben who cannot quickly shift especially in the direction of more serious work. Also the other children often laugh at him when he clowns – and since he does not have many friends, such attention from the others is rewarding. They did not actually laugh this time, I think because the music and repetitive movement took up their attention - but he may have thought that the would have done. I suppose that he might have been all right if he was guided by the LSA from the start – but it was Jade who got the attention this time and he has to learn to manage without one to one attention sometimes.

Should I see Ben as a problem on his own or as an issue in the class as a whole including the LSA? I realise that we are only an element in an even larger situation when I consider what happened to Ben when he had been removed from the class. His behaviour was construed as poor behaviour and sanctions were levied. I don't imagine that his parents were helped by receiving another letter about his poor behaviour – they know about it only too well. The sanctions will probably mean that I will have even more difficulties with Ben next time. At least I should have been involved in discussions about his behaviour in my class. I must mention this to the LSA and raise it as a more general issue when we discuss the role of LSA's next time. It is something about getting everything pulling in the same direction.

I did feel particularly uneasy that day. I wonder if it was because I was tired from the late night. Things like this certainly are more of a burden when I feel tired. It is worth remembering that things might have looked different if I had felt fresh.

Anyway, it is worth trying to learn something from this situation and having a strategy better developed for when it happens next time. If I go further with the theme of 'getting everyone pulling in the same direction'.....How could this be achieved?

- It would have been helpful if I had shared my concerns about the group with the LSA to start with;
- It would have been helpful to me if she had come in at the beginning of the class, and we could have both been forearmed with some tactics to work with Ben and Jade
- I need to include in my planning strategies to deal with partner work when one person is away
- Praise motivates those who are working well, I must remember to use that as a teaching strategy
- There is something about the need for me to be involved in the discussion about repercussions of Ben's behaviour. They have consequences for my later dealings with Ben;
- I have concerns about the actual kinds of sanctions levied. I need to follow this up

Exercise developed by Jenny Moon