

Around the World with Haba

Learning Different Cultures through Music and Movement

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Abstract: According to a study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, play and down time may be as important to a child's academic experience as reading, science and maths (*Pediatrics* Vol. 123, 2009). It has been shown how movement education and physical education improve mental sharpness. Play or any sort of movement increases the level of neurotransmitters that help the brain to be in a better state of equilibrium and as such help in learning. But play or any sort of physical education at schools today is playing ball, and not everybody likes or is good at playing ball. Education today is also very unidirectional. It works for some but doesn't always work for others and it definitely doesn't do much to encourage creativity. Learning and play today are treated as separate entities but learning can be much more fun and hands-on if learnt through play.

Key words: *World Cultures, Music, Creative movement, Dance, Character, Interactive multimedia installation, mood regulating transmitters.*

1. Introduction

An hour of play makes you smarter by a day. Researchers, scientists, biologists have proven how play is a profound biological process. Through various papers and books written by psychologists, psychoanalysts and educationists, it is shown how play or any physical movement helps shape the brain. This in turn helps children be more positive psychologically, physiologically, help in concentration and thus learn and retain information better. It is play that enables us to innovate, problem-solve and be happy (Dr. Stuart Brown, 2009).

This is said to happen because of the big three, Serotonin, Norepinephrine and Dopamine which have been the center of attention for a while now. These are mood regulating neurotransmitters. Each of these control a certain emotion in the brain and although only one percent of the brain cells, they still are a powerful influence. Play, exercise, dance or any sort of physical movement increases the level of neurotransmitters in the body which keeps brain activity under control, influences attention, perception, motivation and learning. In short, with exercise or play, you see an increase in neurotransmitters which are hormones related to mood regulation and attention and in general help the brain to be in a better state of equilibrium (John J. Ratey, 2008).

2. Learning through Creative Movement

There are two aspects to education, one, the capacity to take in, to become impressed; the other, the capacity to give out, to express. (Annelise Mertz, Joseph Roach; Southern

Illinois University Press, 2002.) To learn or to receive informs the mind, educates the mind but to analyze and express what is received requires a far more attention and coordination of the brain. Mere perception and comprehension of knowledge are not sufficient for the fullest development of the mind. To know is the essential first step, but it is the expression of what we know that develops character and a sense of values. (Annelise Mertz, Joseph Roach; Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.)

Movement is one of the first means of expression. It is through movement that even before a child can speak, he learns to express his mind. It is through play, dance or any sort of creative movement that a kid learns naturally how to express. These talents of self expression unfortunately die out in the grown up world.

Movement education has shown to be an optimal way to teach kids especially kids with learning or mental disorders. *Autism: the Musical*, a documentary made in 2007 shows an outstanding example of five kids suffering from a disorder of neural development, that with the help of learning with music and movement, have their very own musical stage performance.

Research also shows dance is good for kids not only physically but it also encourages mental and emotional development. Dance can not only keep kids active and fit but also help develop imagination and enthusiasm which play an important role in learning and growth of a child (Anne Barlin, 1971). Thus, dance when treated as creative movement is just as good as playing ball and more. It is not only learning physical “skills” but enhancing creativity that stimulates parts of brain. How can dance be treated as creative movement to help in a child’s physical, mental and emotional development? Dance can also be used to teach kids many things like languages, maths, science, social skills, cultures, etc. Dance also provides for experiential learning which other form of communication do not.

3. Different Dances tell Different stories across the world

Dance is seen to have existed all through the humankind for millennia. Folk dances from all around the world come from stories, the way people live, what they do, a dance to celebrate, a dance for fun, a dance to pray. Whatever the reason they tell stories of people from a certain country, from a certain region with a certain environment. These stories can teach a lot. They teach us history, cultures, geography of our planet, etc. If these stories are told right, through the dances, can be a fun and interactive way of teaching kids a lot about different cultures. Especially since kids learn the best through movement, interaction and participation.

Children at an early age are curious of why others look different from themselves. They are curious of cultures other than their own. Teaching them about cultures at an early age leads to greater self esteem and respect for others. Research has shown that for every child, racial awareness is a step-by step process and as racial awareness changes, so does the level of any self-esteem that is rooted in race (Davidson, F., & Davidson, M.,1994. Changing childhood prejudice)

4.Around the world with Haba

There has been some research showing the benefits of video games in building concentration for kids. Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) is an arcade game where a player must take the dance steps in the specified order within a short timeframe. Although not an academic program, this game has shown some positive benefits especially with ADHD kids, helping their concentration, timing and sequencing (Tammy McGraw, Krista Burdette, Kristine Chadwick; AEL, 2004) This is just an example of some of the research that shows how new age technology can be more than entertainment and be beneficial for children.

With a view to use these concepts to impart interactive education to children we created a character called haba. Haba is a host of series of media called "Around the world with Haba." Haba is a character that introduces kids in the age group of 5-10, to different cultures through music and dance. Most of the dance related videos don't work very well as they are unidirectional and do not involve the spectator in the story. The mission behind Haba's series is to create specialized content which is then specifically played through interactive multimedia installations.



Figure 1: Example of “Around the world with Haba” series

Around the world with Haba is an experience that begins with kids assembling around the Haba's Tree (kiosk installation that shows the videos). It is a 10 minute experience that kids go through around the Haba's tree. The first part involves “learn” phase, to become impressed and the second part “play” phase, to express. In the first half of learn phase

kids are introduced to a particular country and specifically a particular part of a country. For example, Haba goes to the west of India. Here he meets the fishermen folk. These fishermen folk sing and dance at every start of the season to pray to the sea-gods so as to get a good catch for the season. This is the *koli* dance. Haba learns about these fishermen folk and learns the *koli* dance from them. He then teaches these dances that he has learnt from across the world to children.



Figure 2: Haba’s tree, Interactive multimedia installation that shows Haba’s series

In the second part of “play” phase, children are challenged with a game that uses the information they have just learnt through movement. For example, spots of light are thrown on the floor which are attached to firewire cameras. Every time a kid steps on the spot by which blocking the spot, the firewire cameras detect this move and convey it to the running media. Every spot blocked translates into a fish caught. As such the kids are involved in the story and are using the information they just learnt into a game. They are now catching fish to see if their *koli* dance have made the sea-gods happy.

Thus in a span of 10 minutes, one goes through a wholesome experience of learning about a particular culture through active movement. Kids in these 10 minutes learn about a particular part of the world, about the people there, their livelihood, the music and

ultimately a form of dance from that region. These installations (Haba's trees) are introduced as exhibits at museums, schools, malls, etc. They are sturdy, modular and can be easily assembled. They help introduce the media in a fun and interactive way.

Due to the high use of technology and LCD screens in the installations, consumer electronic companies can be potential candidates to ask for funding. Consumer electronic companies have a need to advertise and they also have a reputation of giving funds for children's museums and schools. Other than that funding sources can be through music record companies, grants and foundations and possibly tourism boards.

5. Going Live!

The content was shown to kids in a focus group assembled at Betty Plasencia elementary school, Los Angeles, California. The children in the focus group were predominantly of the Latin origin. They were shown a video of Haba's travel to India and exposed to music and dance that was different from their own. The children showed enthusiasm not only in following the steps of the dance and learning about India but also in the stories of Haba's other expeditions. Their curiosity to see Haba in different countries like Africa and Australia and Thailand shows great potential in the program. They were excited to learn a new language and learn about a foreign land. It was this curiosity that will help them retain what they learn better and open their mind and perception to new things. One of the highlights was when a kid asked me if Haba could take them to Timbuktu!



Figure 3: Focus group at Betty Plasencia elementary school, Los Angeles, USA

5. Conclusion

Cultures have been taught for years through music and pictures. If you add dance with music and pictures it is more fun and engaging. When kids are involved in the story and made a part of it, that's when it gets more interactive and that's when they start remembering it better.

“Around the world with Haba” is a series that shows Haba’s expeditions around the world and introduces them to kids. Kids learn from Haba and are then challenged with games that make them use what they have learnt.

Dance is a way of expressing, a way to use all senses to recreate. When anything is learnt through movement, it is understood better, retained better. Dance is one form of movement that helps this learning. There are all sorts of creative movement that can help children and dance is one of them that unfortunately is treated only as art and on the sidelines of learning. Dance as a form of art helps children in understanding their body, spatial awareness, build confidence and respect others. But if dance is treated as creative movement and integrated with education and learning, it can also help kids understand concepts, retain, analyse, evaluate and recreate in more than one way possible.

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