

**A Different Tune - Presentation by Ruth Churchill Dower  
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**Government policies and their possible implications for  
dance theatre productions and cultural diversity**

Thinking of the **starting points** for cultural diversity, I always think it's interesting to start from the **perspective of the children and young people** we are working with rather than the multitude of policy agendas that underpin our cultural landscape like an enormous **patchwork quilt**. Some agendas overlap on many sides, others don't meet at all, and others yet seemingly coming apart at the seams. It can be very **complex** and even confusing, depending on whether you look at it from the arts, cultural, education, or youth arena.

Yet for me, what is at the core of current cultural and educational policy, and provides the foundations for everything we do, is the recognition, acknowledgment and respect for **children's entitlement** to culture, in all its diverse forms. What I mean by this is the **rights of all children and young people to access, create, participate in and benefit from** cultural opportunities

- especially in art forms like Dance which are raw, physical, intimate, meaningful, and **can move people in the deepest sense**, because it is an art form that **combines fundamental essences of physicality, sensuality, spirituality and culture**, and therefore is one of the **closest to us in terms of who we are**. Really good practice is when this works well because it starts with finding out, and building on, who the child is.

For our part, the cultural and education or children's services sectors must **take responsibility** to ensure that their **cultural provision (or 'offer')** meets **children's and young people's needs** by being **interesting, relevant, responsive and valuable** to them, **underpinning their various social and cultural identities**, building a **sense of belonging and empowerment**, and helping them to **find their 'fit'** within the bigger picture.

In order to recognise and support the complexity of our children and young people's identities, we need to investigate, listen, understand, respect and celebrate who our children are now – not just focus on preparing them for the future. The potential **power of dance provision to transform children's lives** might be obvious to us, but with the mass of **neurological changes** going on inside children and young people's brains, the increasing economic, social and environmental **pressures on many families**, and the rise in **choice of opportunity**, we need to make it as **easy as possible for them to want to be involved**. Therefore the manifestation of a dance entitlement should be **personalised** to the individual child or young person.

We need to ask ourselves big questions about **what we want to achieve** through our cultural education, whether its **through dance or any other art form**, and how we can focus on **celebrating each individual child's identity**, achievements and cultures. How do we prepare creative learning environments that support each individual child's learning styles and fulfil

their learning needs so that our cultural offers can **foster positive learning dispositions** that help bring meaning to their lives?

If our answer is that we want to build strong, expressive confident individuals, critical thinkers, imaginative and inquisitive explorers, then trying to understand how children learn in order to shape the dance experience to help them learn and achieve as much as possible, has got to be the best starting point.

To achieve this, it's important to understand **how young children learn** through making connections. Children do it in their own non-linear and imaginative ways, but still making connections – there are important reasons for this and it's the **basis for all learning**. There's lots of evidence now<sup>1</sup> to show that quality **dance opportunities help to make connections happen** in every area of the brain.

Bernadette Duffy (highly respected early educationalist committed to creative interventions) said *'By encouraging creativity and imagination, we are promoting children's ability to explore and comprehend their world and increasing their opportunities to make new connections and reach new understandings.'* *Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years (1998)*

When a baby is born, its brain is not yet fully developed, but it does have a **growth rate that is almost exponential** – much higher than at any other time in their life. Up to the **age of 3**, children form **trillions of synaptic connectors** (pathways through which knowledge and understanding is formed, and which connect one part of the brain to another to enable that knowledge to cross-reference with and contextualise, other knowledge).

These are reduced to **half that number by early adolescence**, as the brain **constantly prunes** those which are under-used or completely ignored, leaving room for stronger growth of well-used synapses – just as with a rose bush. The selection of **connectors to be made redundant is decided simply on the basis of usage**. Which is why it's so important to **expose children** to dance and creative opportunities from the earliest stages in life, so that the synapses that are **predisposed** towards movement and creative thinking skills (particularly those on the right side of the brain) will survive those pruning stages.

These synaptic connectors hold the **key to each individual child's personality** and are inherently linked with their minds, bodies and souls. It is also now known that child-oriented creative **play-based activities** have a direct relationship on helping a **rapid blooming** of synapses activity, that leads to the formation of well-rounded personalities, good attachment, self esteem and better mental health. This is not about feely-touchy-hard-to-evidence impacts. Its real, its proven and its not rocket science!

There's lots of evidence here for why dance opportunities and approaches to life should be embedded from 0-19 right across all curriculum areas, helping to build well rounded children and young people, with a **sense of emotional and mental health**, a genuine **sense of place**

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. [Young Brains by DCSF](#), plus [Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science](#) by OECD or [listen to podcast here](#), plus [Learning, Arts, and The Brain](#) with chapter dedicated to musical skill and cognition by the Dana Consortium

**and identity**, a sense of **belonging** and of **happiness**, as well as language, sensory and motor skills.

So where does this idea fit within the current cultural diversity and policy landscape?

**Find Your Talent** (the government initiative to help achieve a strong 'Cultural Offer' everywhere) is the **first public policy for culture that requires an obligation to achieve universal provision**, i.e. a cultural opportunity for every single child in the country – it is predicated on access for all. This puts **culture on a similar footing to health and education**, as much a part of free state provision, but without (as yet) a statutory infrastructure, or any way of fully measuring children's engagement with culture, or its impact on their lives.

Our education policy is also moving towards a more holistic view of the child that takes account of their wider world, including their family context, health and social care needs as well as their educational development. This integrated approach policy is exemplified by **Every Child Matters** and the **Children's (and Young People's) Plan**, and is also reflected in the joining up of children's services at national and local authority levels.

Every Child Matters is arranged around five themes, leading to what are considered the most important outcomes for all children in today's contexts: Be healthy; Stay safe; Enjoy and achieve; Make a positive contribution; Achieve economic well-being. **Cultural provision** has a role to play in all five, but probably **makes the strongest contribution to achieving the first, third and fourth outcomes**.

The vision for the healthy and balanced development (physical, social and emotional) of children and young people is threaded through most policies, driven by the government's core objectives of increasing economic productivity, expanding economic and employment opportunities, and eradicating child poverty and material deprivation by 2020. Dance practices have a major role to play in helping young people develop independence, critical thinking and problem solving skills, flexible approaches to working and **resilience to cope with the changing industrial, technological and social environments**.

A new *learning framework* for nought to five-year-olds was introduced from September 2008 called the **Early Years Foundation Stage**, which combines the former curriculum for 3 – 5 year olds and the national play guidance for birth to 3 year olds. The new framework focuses on meeting the individual needs of children and highlight the importance of learning through play. It recognises the need to nurture creativity in the care and education of young children, and has already opened up huge opportunities for the dance sector to interact with early years, particularly through movement as part of imaginative play. Through this, young children can find so many ways of expressing themselves, establishing their own identity, understanding other cultures, communicating in several different languages, building self-esteem and confidence, making friends with other children and adults, and learning all about the world and their place in it.

[DCSF Children and Young People's Plan](#) builds on holistic approach introduced by Every Child Matters, particularly addressing the well-being of 0-5 year olds through focussing CPD on the Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) of young children. Network

frequently identifies and tackles barriers to learning, and supports local authorities in finding out about how to respond better to their communities by training in consultation approaches for young children. Supports the delivery of Local Area Agreements as the Earlyarts network builds cross-agency partnerships, including with culture and education, and facilitates knowledge sharing between them.

[Extended Schools initiative](#) supporting the community cohesion, personalised and informal learning agendas by focussing CPD on communication bridges with families and communities (especially through new technology and social media), and huge emphasis on family learning which resonates across the arts & cultural sector. Also explores approaches to encourage risk taking, imaginary worlds, cultural identities, and so on, through all art forms.

[QCA New Primary & Secondary Curriculum proposals](#) promote the use of creative processes to enhance learners' broader competences, giving them more choice and control over their learning, and raising standards. They promote the holistic and creative ethos of the EYFS in its support for the professionals dealing with transition through primary and secondary education. The Primary Review also reflects clear links between EYFS and secondary frameworks for learning that encapsulate creativity and critical thinking as cross-curriculum dimensions.

[Primary Review](#): has an increased focus on play, curiosity and creativity -The key features of the primary curriculum put forward by this Review are:

- Recognising the continuing importance of subjects and the essential knowledge, skills and understanding they represent.
- Providing a stronger focus on curriculum progression.
- Strengthening the focus on ensuring, that by the age of seven, children have a secure grasp of the literacy and numeracy skills they need to make good progress thereafter.
- Strengthening the teaching and learning of ICT to enable them to be independent and confident users of technology by the end of primary education.
- Providing a greater emphasis on personal development through a more integrated and simpler framework for schools.
- Building stronger links between the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, and between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. in offering exciting opportunities for learning languages for 7-11 year olds.

**Arts Council England's** new national strategy, [Great Art for Everyone](#), 2008-2011. Children & Young People are one of the four core priorities, some regions expressing commitment to Early Years. Plus Toolkits & Regional Strategies for Early Years including [Reflect and Review](#).

**Creative Partnerships** – now under banner of [Creativity, Culture & Education](#) since April 09, with three key focuses on Enquiry Schools, Change Schools and Schools of Creativity. Works through regional delivery agents and current calls are out for creative practitioners, including musicians and dancers.

The [Tony Hall Dance Review](#) in 2007 focused on the need for a national strategy to support dance for children and young people as a part of their daily cultural entitlement. It recognised that the broad range of genres that Dance encompasses promotes a hotbed of creativity as youth clashes with established dance styles to create new hybrid dance forms that point to the future of the art. It challenged the government to understand that in schools dance is taught only as part of the PE curriculum, and therefore is largely aligned with a physical or health agenda rather than any creative or art form.

In addition, the programmes offered in FE and HE were heavily based on western theatre dance, in particular contemporary and creative dance. Street Dance is a popular and high-profile form of youth dance, but as an art form it has yet to be developed as part of the mainstream provision. The same applies to other dance genres and forms such as South Asian Dance and African People's Dance. The Hall Review called for these art forms in communities not currently supported by publicly funded institutions to be better nurtured and funded so that children have opportunities to experience many more different genres of dance that reflect the hybrid diversity communities that make up our nation.

Diversity is the thread that runs through all their recommendations. This issue impacts on training, access and the future vibrancy of the artform. It recognises that there are more styles of dance reflecting more communities than we are currently providing for. The potential richness of dance from many ethnic backgrounds as well as dance styles that are currently beyond the more formally recognised, is an enormous strength which should be capitalised on.

As a result, the national dance agency, [Youth Dance England](#) has expanded its remit as the lead organisation on youth dance and dance in schools, with significant government funding invested in YDE from 2008-11. YDE has become a driving force for dance in the Find Your Talent initiative and is working through regional partnerships with sports and dance agencies to link activity in schools with other dance provision, increase the breadth and range of regular participation in youth dance both in and outside of schools, address key issues such as encouraging boys and families to take part, help young dancers raise their aspirations and standards, and ensure that those with potential from hard-to-reach areas can be identified and their talent nurtured. YDE is also ensuring that dance provision is considered at local level to ensure the style of dance on offer mirrors the aspirations and cultures of the local community. For example a Birmingham-based Centre for Advanced Training has been established focusing on South Asian dance.

Whether you look at the National Dance Strategy, Every Child Matters, Extended Schools, Paul Robert's Nurturing Creativity report, or the Primary Review, there are coherent strategies emerging for the educational and creative sectors to work together to support children's creative capacities:

**Child at the heart** – personalised learning responsive to child voice & meeting individual needs, making learning meaningful and helping children to make a valuable contribution to society – leading to health & wellbeing.

**Integrated infrastructures with better connections across the sectors and collaborative working** leading to joined up delivery and transformational impacts.

**Important role of Parents** and communities to support informal learning and development, plus the impact of this on formal learning if the right balance of enjoyment and responsibility is struck.

**Recognition of impact of cultural opportunities** on PSED plus attainment and engagement, leading to Cultural approaches becoming embedded in every part of the creative curriculum

At the end of the day, what really matters to us is practice – grass roots, hard hitting, thought provoking, people based, bare-bones, sleeves-rolled-up practice. Let's face it, that's what makes the real difference to people's lives. We're constantly inspired and invigorated by those who are passionate enough to join up the dots and make high quality stuff happen. Fantastic. But we also know about practice that, frankly, isn't really raising the quality of our children's lives for a whole variety of reasons, sometimes due to a lack of clarity on the right journey through the policy landscape. So it's up to us to use the tools and skills at our finger tips, in this case Dance, to challenge, question and inspire others to make a difference. It's up to us to help children tell their own stories through dance, in their own languages and with their own voices. It's up to us to enable them to explore their own cultural diversities in the richest possible terms.

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