

Erin Butcheck is a dance educator in the Cleveland area. She has worked with school children of all ages and techniques at Louis Agassi Elementary School, Lakeland Community College, and during various other residencies with the Dance Theatre Collective. She has been with the Schools in Motion Project for two years. This project integrates creative movement into classroom curriculum. Some units have included: mapping, sound, math, simple machines, habitat, and economics. During this interview we discussed her discoveries as part of the Schools in Motion Project.

At Louis Agassi you teach creative movement based on curriculum. How do you make that connection? Do you create your own lesson plans . . . do the teachers tell you what to do . . . or do you get your lessons from reference books . . ?

All of the above. The teacher gives me the curriculum and I look at it on my own. I'll use anything from my past work and past influences. The curriculum comes out of past activities or the classroom teachers brainstorm and give clear direction. They know how the class works. A good reference book I use is "Finding a Balance - A Curriculum guide for elementary educators" by Jan Hyatt. I'd name Jennifer Keller and Lisa DeCato as some of my influences. I ask Lisa a lot of questions! I definitely look to mentors, those I respect as teachers.

How do you handle discipline problems?

I think its important to see if you can change behavior by offering suggestions. Redefine your directions. Maybe you weren't clear the first time, and maybe they didn't understand. If they misbehave because they're bored, I give them a special challenge. If that doesn't work, I'll take them out. I'll tell them what specific behavior I'm looking for. But I always try to address any behavior problems as a class first.

How do you keep the children from becoming disinterested?

Older ages might have a problem, but 5th and under are excited to participate, although, some kids are afraid and shy. I'll ask if they have a special friend to lead them through class. Or they can decide what they want to do and what movement they don't want to do. Sometimes those kids are more willing to move when everyone does the same thing. Sometimes you just have to relate to them and find the thing they are interested in.

How do you decide what the children are capable of doing? Do you assess them somehow, or can you tell their coordination by their age?

I decide by a general feeling I have. I sort of know based on their age what they are capable of. But I'm usually teaching kids to make up their own movement, so no technical thing is necessary. During ballet classes I teach technique in a way they understand and I build on that.

What is the largest class you would suggest one person to teach?

Space determines that and also what you're doing. I'll adjust my class based on how many kids will be there. For example, if there are a lot of kids I'll choose something more structured. In the schools, you don't have a choice. But they usually give me 30 kids with assistance from their teacher when I work with them. If it is me by myself, without their classroom teacher as my assistant, that's bad. Because the kids feel the need to readjust and see what the limits are with me alone. Now, in my ballet classes at Lakeland I've taught 15-20 younger kids by myself. Fifteen in a studio setting is a nice number. But in the schools, the number is already set. Although, the teacher assisting really helps. Also I think it helps to concentrate on the positive behavior and ignore the bad. I had an experience when I was teaching in the schools where this one kid would run around and throw him-self into the wall, over and over again. I was shocked that the other students didn't pay any attention to him. I pretended to ignore him too. The other students seemed to be more interested in what I was doing than what he was doing.

Either that or they were so used to his ways that it didn't get their attention anymore.

Do children need a warm-up and cool-down?

Yes, the warm-up helps them to refocus and go from their teacher's classroom to my classroom. The cool-down is to get them ready to go back to another classroom in a non-excited state.

What is most important to you about teaching dance?

You serve a function in the kid's lives that is bigger than just being a dance teacher. It is an important role. You need to think about how much they'll love doing it. I didn't know how important I would be to the kids. They hug me and are excited to tell me what is happening in their lives. Is it dance or is it me? It is probably a little bit of both.

Is there anything else you would like to add? -Something you've found out while teaching that could help other teachers.

When you are watching kids and seeing some behavior you don't want, take a look at your lesson and how you are presenting it. Sometimes you need to take small steps to get to that place. Don't be quick to judge the kids. Remember how long it took you to get to that place or idea.