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SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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If you visited our two-teacher school each Monday and Tuesday at 10.45 a.m. during the winter term, you would see 36 children from Standard 2 to Form 2 very happily engaged in learning Scottish Country Dancing as part of their Physical Education programme. This is the second school of this size where we have included this activity in Phys. Ed. and though we have been here only since the beginning of the second term and have really just started our full programme, the results are so rewarding that I hope our experience may tempt other interested teachers to try Scottish Country Dancing in their schools.

It began about three years ago, when we were at a Maori school in the Bay of Islands. Faced with the task of the necessity for a complete rejuvenation of the school programme we had worked out a system of Ability Grouping for all formal subjects including Phys. Ed. The Phys. Ed. programme was designed on a two-year basis to include the skills of the major seasonal sports, not just rugby and basketball. Our visiting Phys. Ed. specialist (Mr R. Mataira) suggested that we include Folk Dancing in the winter activities, but I was not very keen because I knew so little about Folk Dancing and the children were large-footed and rather clumsy in their movements. However, we decided to try two or three dances as an experiment, and if these were not successful to concentrate our winter activities on ball-handling. Mr Mataira "found" two suitable records for us and battle commenced.

The first dance we set out to learn was "Sellingers Round" and very soon we found we had to teach the children to count; to learn left from right; to run to counts and many other things. We tried "Black Nag" and after five or six lessons decided that it was hopeless. On the reverse side of one of the records was a dance called "The Durham Reel" with a bright tune called "A Hundred Pipers." The rhythm of this dance was sharper than the others we had attempted and we managed to find the directions for the dance in an old T. Coll. booklet. I decided to try once more and analysed the dance to find the basic steps and movements, then away we went. First we did skipping practice for ten minutes then slip steps to the right; to the left; then casting to skips to the right then to the left. The children appeared to enjoy this type of activity and were able to skip rhythmically much easier than they were able to run to music. Next lesson we did the dance to counts and then to music . . . it was definitely much better than the previous attempts and the children's reactions were more favourable. Well we had learned one dance . . . but where to now?

I happened to have a record of "The Dashing White Sergeant" in my collection, the children liked the tune so we decided to try to find the directions for this dance; eventually these were found in the first book of the Scottish Country Dance Pocket Books. When we read this wee book we found many strange terms "reels of three," "pas-de-Basque," "strathspey," etc., and we decided to find out all about them, so we bought The Book! This was "Won't You Join The Dance?" by Jean C. Milligan, and it proved to be a wonderful little volume well set out and with clear directions and good diagrams.

Using this book as our manual of instruction, we taught "The Dashing White Sergeant," and practised the reel step (skip change of step) and Pas-de-Basque. This was just as much a practice for me as for the children; it was almost a case of the blind leading the blind; except that I had The Book and could have some extra practice in the weekend. By now we had all become quite keen, and children could be seen hopping and skipping around and trying Pas-de-Basques at all odd times and in queer places; sometimes with disastrous results; like the time a girl tried to carry a tray of mixed Tempera paints and reel step across to the infant room . . . it showed she was keen on dancing if nothing else.

Some children showed great ability very quickly, some showed a much greater appreciation of the rhythmic qualities of the dances; but they all showed great keenness and even the most clumsy joined in the dances willingly, including the boys. After we had mastered the basic reel steps and learned three dances using them, we tried the strathspey steps, both travelling and setting. These were quickly mastered and two dances learned. Then we decided to try a dance we considered to be rather difficult, the Foursome Reel. This dance begins in strathspey time for a set number of movements, then the rhythm changes to a reel for the same number of bars and so on. Much to our surprise four or five sets could do this dance really well at the end of the first lesson.

By this time other schools near us were becoming interested in our progress and we visited two of the nearest and showed them what we were doing and taught them some of the simpler dances. We had been visited by various Phys. Ed. people and great interest was being shown in our progress. We had now worked out a pattern for each dance lesson which we followed fairly strictly because it happened to suit our organisation.

This was the pattern for a half-hour lesson:

1. Basic step (reel or strathspey) to music . . . three minutes.
2. Dance formation practice (this movement will be included in the new dance to be learned during the week) to counts then to music . . . twelve minutes.
3. Part or all of the new dance (depending on difficulty) to counts and music . . . seven minutes.
4. Last dance learned (revision to music) . . . four minutes.
5. Any other dance known well . . . four minutes.

It will be seen that this is a very energetic half-hour, but the children were able to complete the lesson without difficulty. So we progressed, learning dances chosen at random from the Pocket-Books and for which we had the music.

One of the most delightful factors about the music we soon found, was that there were dozens of tunes to choose from and each tune had its own special dance, and so there were dozens of dances we could do. I bought an L.P. record called "A Jimmy Shand Dance Party" with five dances on each side, including "The Boston Two-Step" and two waltzes. We learned each dance in turn, and in a few weeks we were able to dance the whole record. Again we found that there were different instrumental groups recording Scottish Country Dance music, so we were able to compare the different presentations of the various tunes. Some of the tunes were of Scottish songs with an historical background. These we learned to sing, and one day we were visited by a piper in full uniform from the Kaikohe Pipe Band.

Eventually, we had reached a stage where we were often beginning school at 8.30 a.m. with half-an-hour's dancing, and we extended it into the third term, taking one period of dance each week.

At the beginning of the third term of last year we were able to see three films produced by The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, Edinburgh illustrating a jig, a reel, and a strathspey. The technique used by the dancers in these films is superb, and we were shown how gracefully the dances could be done. Also, we noticed several things we were not doing correctly; such as the position of hands. The children were quick to notice these points and corrected themselves and each other without any direction from me; so that when we did our next dance lesson the improvement was amazing. Miss Nancy Romans from the Education Department visited us soon after this, and was quite astonished at the standard of the children's work; and also at the way the Standard 2 children were able to do the same dances as the older children.

Finally, in September, we were invited to visit Auckland to demonstrate Scottish Country Dancing and other aspects of our Phys. Ed. programme during the Auckland Education Board's celebrations in Education Week. This was the most wonderful experience for our children, many of whom had never been away from their local area. In Auckland we presented our programme at Training College, Mt. Roskill Intermediate School, the Maori Community Centre, the public display at Albert Park, and finally, at the special request of the chairman of the Education Board, at the Education Ball.

After two years using our Phys. Ed. programme we could make some observations especially with regard to Scottish Country Dancing for primary children. These we can consider from three different angles. . . .



"Barefooted Maori and Pakeha children demonstrate a lively reel."

Physical

1. The physical activity involved in Scottish Country Dancing is of great benefit to children. There is a marked improvement in posture, balance, carriage.

2. The rhythmic movements employed in Scottish Country Dancing greatly appeal to children and they derive much pleasure in moving gracefully to music.

3. They acquire a springiness; a sense of being able to move off the toes quickly when required; and this is reflected in ALL their other games.

Social

1. The social contact between children of different sexes, races and intelligence is accepted quite naturally in the course of Scottish Country Dancing.

2. Children display qualities of leadership and co-operation within their dancing sets towards each other.

3. Boys especially adjust themselves socially much more readily through Scottish Country Dancing than through any other activity in the Phys. Ed. programme. They very quickly learn that in this particular activity strength and speed are no asset.

4. There is a general improvement in manners because the boys have to learn to assist their partners in making turns, to lead their partners down and up, etc.

Mental

1. To do Scottish Country Dancing, a dancer must be mentally alert at ALL times.

2. The necessity for accurate counting of steps, and for visualising and anticipating movements is a wonderful mental stimulus.

3. There is a definite carry-over of the mental exercises involved in Scottish Country Dancing into other school activities, especially arithmetic.

So you see, this is not just a physical activity, and I cannot emphasise the other aspects too strongly.

Some other points of interest are . . .

1. Judged by our Scottish Country Dancing standards the folk dances in the books issued to schools by the Education Department are much too easy. We have all our Standard 2 and 3 children dancing "La Russe" which is a dance for Forms 1 and 2 in the department's book.

2. Jimmy Shand plays a type of music to which anyone should enjoy dancing.

3. Once the basic steps and formations of Scottish Country Dancing have been mastered there are over a hundred dances to choose from. . . . you can do the lot if you like.

4. There are plenty of records for Scottish Country Dancing available.

5. In many New Zealand towns there are active Scottish Country Dance Clubs and any children taught these dances before they leave primary school will always be assured of a welcome in these clubs, and they will be able to take part in the dances. Usually by the time they have reached secondary school, most children are reluctant to begin to learn dancing activities, and so many never bother. If they have already learned some form of dancing they have a much more natural approach at this age.

6. I believe that no Phys. Ed. programme is complete unless it contains some dancing.

7. There is one fact which is vital to the teaching of Scottish Country Dancing and that is this . . . you have to KNOW before you can SHOW. . . . And you can't teach unless you can SHOW.

Since the beginning of this term, we have been at this school which is a board school and has only half-a-dozen Maori pupils on the roll. Naturally, Scottish Country Dancing is included in our Phys. Ed. programme and as I said at the beginning we are actively engaged in learning it. The children here have had no dancing of this type before and the general standard of their Phys. Ed. work is poor; so we are able to observe the effects of our programme on them. Already, after only five lessons they can do two dances and most of them can do the reel steps and Pas-de-Basque quite well. We are noticing many of the things we saw at our other school being repeated, noticeably the keenness of the boys to be able to do the steps and dances. Some children are born with this type of activity in their feet . . . you can see them after only one or two lessons; and if teachers in country schools do not give them the opportunity to discover this, the chances are they never will. The parents are very interested in our work (some are

of Scottish descent) and when we have reached the standard necessary to present a public performance I am certain that we will be able to entice some of them into a set, perhaps to dance "The Dashing White Sergeant." Scottish Country Dancing is great fun, is a wonderful social activity, and a pleasant way of taking exercise . . . and ideal for children of all ages.

So in the words of an expert in Scottish Country Dancing, Miss Jean Milligan, "Won't YOU join the dance?"

References:—

1. Milligan, Jean C.—"Won't You Join the Dance?"
2. Anderson, A. and Duthie, J. M.—"A Complete Guide to Scottish Country Dancing." McDougall's Educational Co. Ltd., Edinburgh.
3. Scottish Country Dance Books (1-17), containing music and instructions. Patersons Publications Ltd., London.

CORRESPONDENCE

Sir, Whilst I am in agreement with most of the arguments put forward by Robin Newick in her justification of Creative Dance, I do think she over-emphasised one point. By all means create a dance or dance-drama, but at no time should there be a specific aim to produce a public performance.

I think it is far too easy to lose the import of Creative Dance by developing towards a staged presentation. I do not imply that it is wrong to communicate to watchers the ideas and emotions contained in the pattern and drama of solo or group dance. But I do believe that the benefits of Creative Dance are acquired by participation and not from observation. This applies to the work of children and adults who have not undergone rigorous Dance Training.

May I say how surprised I was to see, or rather not to see, any mention made amongst the books of reference, to the works of Rudolf Laban. As my own experience and knowledge of Creative Dance has been derived from courses guided by Laban, or his pupils, I had hoped some mention of his books would have been made. No doubt there is a good reason for not including them.

I do feel that consideration of Laban's ideas on Movement should be made. His conception of Movement as an Art, his analysis of Movement, his ideas on basic training, and even his notation of movement have much to offer the teacher. An acceptance of some of Laban's ideas will eventually be made and then we will move into a wider more rewarding field of Physical Education.

Once children have been made aware of "the flow of movement," they unconsciously apply their findings to all forms of physical activity. To make them aware is no easy task. Laban can help us to do this and more, but meanwhile we can let them Dance.

Yours faithfully,
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