



What does inclusive dance look like in early childhood?

Episode 2 – May 2021

SPEAKERS

Jochelle Pereña, Jessica Kershner, Heather Stockton, Aiano Nakagawa

Heather Stockton

And a three, and a two...

Jochelle Pereña

Welcome to the dance inquiry podcast. I'm Jochelle Pereña, a dance teaching artist and Professional Learning Manager. And I'm joined by my co-host–

Heather Stockton

Heather Stockton, a dance teaching artists who teaches special ed and inclusion in Oakland Unified School District.

Jochelle Pereña

We're both with Luna Dance Institute, a dance education nonprofit in Berkeley, California, with a mission to bring creativity, community and equity to every child's life through the art of dance. The Dance Inquiry is a podcast featuring conversations between artists educators around what sparks curiosity, creativity and consciousness in their teaching.

Heather Stockton

In these inaugural episodes, we'll be focusing on access and disability issues in dance education. For this episode, we invited two teaching colleagues, Jessica Kershner, and Aiano Nakagawa to tell their story about how they partnered together to bring dance into an early childhood inclusion classroom in an Oakland public school. Before we launch into it, let's talk about a few terms that Jessie and Aiano mentioned.

Jochelle Pereña

They talk about SI. That's Luna Summer Institute, a yearlong professional development experience for teaching artists and classroom teachers focusing on the art of teaching dance. Jessie and Aiano are both SI alumni. And they mentioned Patricia Reedy, who's Luna's founder and who facilitates the SI along with Nancy Ng and myself.

Heather Stockton

They also mentioned inclusion classes, and an inclusion class is when teachers integrate special ed with general ed so that the students are learning with each other.

Jochelle Pereña

ECE, this stands for early childhood education, and PD, which stands for professional development.

Heather Stockton

Yeah, I'm excited to share this conversation between two teachers and their collaboration and partnership and ultimately, how dance impacted them both and their students. So let's get into it.

Jochelle Pereña

Let's get into it.

Aiano Nakagawa

My name is Aiano, and I was a teaching artist at Luna from 2017 to 2020. And during that time, I got to work with Jessie Kershner in her classroom. Also my pronouns are she and they. Currently my relationship to teaching has been mostly virtual. I'm teaching a dance class over Zoom with a bunch of people I met over Tik Tok, and it's called Big Bodied Babes Dance, and it's a like in-home space for big bodied people to get to move and dance and be in their bodies. And I'm working with a group of teens, and then a really, really small group of three year olds that are in my pod, and we're just dancing in the park together.

Jessica Kershner

Hi, my name is Jessie Kershner. I teach preschool inclusion class in Oakland Unified and Aiano taught my class dance for two years through a couple different grants that we received to work with Luna, I just returned back to in person teaching or hybrid, but I've been Zoom teaching for the last year or so, yeah.

Heather Stockton

Thanks, you two, for introducing yourselves for our audience. So you kind of mentioned this already, Jessie, I want to ask how you know each other.

Jessica Kershner

I first heard about Luna actually, probably five or six years ago, when someone from the organization came and did a workshop for special education teachers at Burbank It was mostly the Brain Dance that we learned, and I was super excited about it. And then I didn't have any contact with Luna for a couple years. And then I had this opportunity for this social emotional learning grant and thought about the Brain Dance again, and thought about Luna. And yeah, it ended up covering a 10 weeks series of classes for my kids. And that's how I met Aiano, and she came in and taught those classes. And it just, it was wonderful, and I just wanted to keep working with Luna and with Aiano, and finding any way I could to like figure out the funding for that and, and keep that going.

Aiano Nakagawa

Yeah, so I think like a really important distinction too, was that this was really teacher-initiated. I had taught dance classes in classrooms where it was not the classroom teacher's choice to have dance, but it was this like higher up administrator or director, whoever who was like, we're gonna have dance classes. And I had worked with teachers who were very apprehensive about dance, who, I guess didn't necessarily see or immediately care about the benefits of dance in the classroom. And so I had kind of been I've ... traumatized is a hard, maybe too big of a word, but I had had not so great teaching experiences in the classroom because of that, because it can be really hard when the classroom teacher is not on board. But Jessie was like so on board, and it was immediately just so easy together. And I feel like we found a really great groove, and we found that we had very similar teaching philosophies and ways of interacting with students. And so it felt like this opportunity was just like, ripe for possibility and felt really abundant and generative and had a lot of possibilities.

Jochelle Pereña

So it started off with that first kind of experiment. And then can you paint the picture of how that how that grew? And what it ended up looking like?

Jessica Kershner

Yeah, so then, kind of the last minute at the end of that school year, I found out about the Art Incentives Grant through Oakland Unified, which had never been used, I guess, for a preschool class before because there's only a few classes onsite, and it's supposed to be a kind of a school-wide grant. And so it was a little confusing about how to make it work for preschool. But we ended up deciding to have our site, Acorn Woodland, and then Bella Vista, which is another site that our principal oversees, combine and use that money to bring dance to both of those schools for the next three years after that. From there we added more, both the other classroom at my site, and then I believe there are four classrooms at Bella Vista. So yeah, we just kind of were expanding that last year. And then it looked very different this year. But, but that's kind of how we continued on.

Aiano Nakagawa

Yeah, so also, I want to mention in the second year, Jesse was part of the Summer Institute cohort, and so we had a lot of opportunities to work together and have meetings and check-ins. And so I also got to learn more about what Jessie's goals were as a teacher, and then I got to share my goals as an educator as well. And something. I'm pretty sure that I shared this with Jessie, because I share it with almost anyone because it was such a profound question that Patricia asked me when I was in SI, but it was this question of "what are you socializing your students for?". And so we really got to have conversations around what we wanted to be socializing the students for. And we both, Jessie came to the Practitioner Exchanges, and in those places, we really got to kind of dive into what it means to be teaching all students who are black and brown and to teach students who, to teach students with disabilities and to teach students whose first language might not be English, or who are not verbal, and all of those ways in which communication can happen, and the benefits of dance. And it was very clear in those, that first 10 week like pilot program, there was one student in particular that Jessie pointed out in the classroom. I actually don't know what he was like in the classroom, maybe you can speak more on that Jessie. But in dance class, he was just like, a superstar student and was just like, flying all over the place and just like, so smart in his body and became a leader in that setting. And I had only seen

him in that context and so I thought, that's what he was like, everywhere. And then Jessie had told me, actually, that's not how it's like in the classroom. And so that was really beautiful to witness, that we could create this other space within the classroom setting where students who may be in like reading or writing or circle time, or whatever the other parts of the day were, hadn't been able to like step up as a leader, there is a space for them as well.

Jessica Kershner

The student that she's mentioning is like, always comes to mind when I think about the benefits of dance in the classroom. In general, a couple of students who have difficulties with language for various reasons, and the student she was talking about, had a lot of articulation issues and was, which was causing a lot of frustration for him because he had a lot to say that he wasn't able to fully express. And just watching him in dance was incredible, because his confidence and the like joy that it brought him was just like radiating and it was, it was really, really beautiful to watch. When I think about what dance has done for my kids, like that, at the top of the list is definitely that, like joy and confidence and just ... it's the joy I guess! Like the happiness that it brings them in their ability to express themselves in this new way. So I think that that was really powerful. And yeah, I learned so much from my own oh, being in the dance classes. I think I was very uncomfortable with dance when I first started. I didn't know what dance in preschool was supposed to look like. In quotes, I guess, "supposed to look like", right? And so I had a lot of like, nerves around like, is this right " Are we like, are we doing this right? Am I helping right? Or what can I do? And I think, yeah, just talking with you Aiano, helped me see the big picture of and like, I mean, my classroom, in general, I think it is a little chaotic, or that would be the outside opinion, right? Like I have a high tolerance for noise. And it's like, it has a noisy, messy feel to it. And I'm fine with that. Because I, I know what my goals are. I know, like, I see what the kids are learning and doing and the relationships they're building. And so it was like a, I don't know, I don't know, I feel like you helped me figure out what that meant in dance so that I could like, embrace that noisy, messy joy, in dance as well. So I feel like that's I learned so much from you, from that.

Aiano Nakagawa

What ended up happening in that process, I feel like that first 10 weeks, was very much like dance happened in the cafeteria. And it was still kind of separate from the classroom. And that whole question that you just asked about what does dance look like in ECE. And specifically, in an ECE classroom, I feel like we really got to explore that when we had this longer opportunity to work together in the next year. And I remember, like right before COVID shut everything down, I had come into the classroom one day before dance class had started, and you had changed the geography of your classroom within it and the way that space was set up. So now there was like a circle time area, there was an arts and crafts area, there was a dress up area, a block area, and now there was also a dance area. And so that was built into their free play. And they were moving through, they were playing, they were rolling, they were like dogpiling. And it was so beautiful to see that integration happen. And also, like, children are dancing all the time, especially in early childhood. And so being able to see them experimenting in their bodies and name that as dance. And for them to be able to develop that language around it is also, I think, such an important part of dance in early childhood. And then hearing that, also, I got to be part of some of your circle times sometimes, and seeing the way that your circle time songs evolved from like everyone sitting in the circle or wherever they sat and like reciting back, to it turning into like a full embodied experience where the songs had full movements and people moved around. And you did this

great transition where after circle time, when people could move to the next stations, you let them choose a dance move that they were going to do to it so they could roll away to it or skip away to it. And that was just such a beautiful example about how it can live in the classroom.

Jochelle Pereña

I love these memories. Both of you kind of alluded to this, but maybe you can reflect on it a bit more. What did you what you learned from the children and observing the children?

Aiano Nakagawa

I think it was also a big learning lesson for me as well. I, actually Jochelle came in and taught a class and I was able to be the observer because, as much as I try and be like as present as possible and observing all 25 children at the same time, or however many are in the classroom or in the cafeteria dancing with me, it's definitely challenging, you know, to like have eyes on everyone to see everything happening. And so when Jochelle taught, I really got to see them interact. And me as a dance educator, I had questions because there were other teachers who would not scold but kind of like reprimand children if they were crawling under tables or doing other things that weren't necessarily following my quote unquote, "directions". And I had this conversation with Jochelle after, and Jochelle was like, "Well, they're still crawling, they're still doing a dance." And because we were in the cafeteria, all the tables were pushed to the side. And that was like the off-limits zone kind of, and so of course that is so tempting and so alluring, because it's off limits. And so instead, after having that conversation with Jochelle, and because I had such supportive classroom teachers, I was able to bring those tables into the center of the class. And we were able to do over, under, and around curriculum that the kids loved. So I think it was also for me, even furthering my definition of dance and furthering my understanding of how children participate, because I'm totally in the camp of watching and observing is participating. Also, like crawling under tables is participating, and like creating your own little running circle in the corner is participating, and just knowing that it's going to look different in every child I think is really, really important. And I, even after all these years of teaching, have to continue to remind myself that.

Jessica Kershner

Yeah, it's so funny I know because that's another example I think of all the time. We haven't talked in like a year and we're like on the same page! But I feel like the phrase "emergent curriculum" is used at Luna and I think that that's really my philosophy in teaching in general, like taking it from the children. And I always think of that example because they're gonna climb under the table. And I remember feeling like, "They're not listening, like we want them to listen, right?" And then when you just brought the tables in, and were like, "Okay, now it's part of it." And I think there was some game where they had to get under the tables as fast as they could, and they loved it! And they were like, all fully. So just, I mean, grabbing a hold of what you see them doing and taking that, and developing your curriculum from that, is just so powerful. And I think, when they they did that on their own too, as I started to, like turn on music at times during free play, and so they started to dance. And then there got to be a point where, like, if I didn't turn it on, someone would ask for it. And be like, "Did you forget about? We're dancing now do too!" Yeah, I don't know, I just I think that's what I learned the most from them is how that like feeling of ownership over it. And like feeling like it's coming from them and we're watching and,

and taking what we see them doing and using it in how we build our curriculum is really, is really powerful.

Aiano Nakagawa

So it was also really important that Jessie was present for the classes. And she was, and she was modeling what was happening. And even when kids were like running in all different directions, Jessie continued with the prompt, and they had someone to like look to and tether, that they trusted. And I was able to build trust with them over time. But it was just so important having somebody who was their main caregiver in the room with them. And at the end of most classes, there was a time where Jessie could say what she saw. And that really allowed the children to like have that moment of like, "Oh, my gosh, Ms. Jessie saw what I did!" And for them to, like feel seen and to have that connection validated. I think a really big part of my learning curve, and was something that I had to think about when I - because I just started this tiny class with three three year olds who were in my pod. And I totally forgot about the importance of setting the space with a welcome song. And so having a routine that repeats, and having a consistent song that they know, "Okay, when we come into the cafeteria, we're going to sit in a circle, and we're going to do our welcome song." That was really important and that totally was a game changer. Because before when I would just jump right into the Brain Dance, we never got to settle together. And I also, it also gave me a time to kind of read the room and feel what was happening. And there were also times like, because every single child in that classroom has a different sensory need. Some are like hypersensitive, some are hyposensitive, there was never a way to fully ... I don't know, I don't want to say there was never a way to fully accommodate everybody. But there was definitely ... I don't know, now I'm like running into all this like internalized ableism. Because I tried my best from my understanding and like, sensing what the child needed and asking what the child needed, to meet those needs. But there were times, there was one kid who was who really liked the fire truck song, but was scared of every other music or like was scared, he said he was scared of dance class. And so for those first like five classes I was there, he just he stayed next to Jessie and cried. And that was I think what he needed. But then on the sixth class, he was like fully participating and was had all these ideas, but needed to go through that process on his own. So I'm thinking about that a lot. And also working with Jessie because Jessie spends the most amount of time with these children. And so getting to know each of them without needing to know their diagnosis or anything like that. Jessie built or created different visuals for the children to have, and that was part of utilizing Universal Design for Learning, which is really important in this context. And having options of sometimes we do have loud music, and sometimes we have no music, and sometimes we have the drum, and just having lots of options available. So every child can get their needs met.

Heather Stockton

But what happens when you have all of that, and it just still doesn't feel like it's it's working?

Aiano Nakagawa

Totally. I think that happens in any dance space. And the other thing that I really have to remember too, developmentally is the majority of these students were three and four, I think. And that was really, at Luna there's a saying three is all about me, and four is really about power. And so having those developmental understandings and building them in. But there definitely were times where like Jessie and I were the only ones doing the prompt and everyone else was doing their own thing. And so in

those moments, what I would do because they still are moving, it's not like they like check out and like start scrolling Instagram or something, you know, they're like, they're still moving. They're still engaging in some way. And so it's in those moments that I have to recognize that what I'm doing is either too easy, too hard or just not interesting. And, or maybe it's just not the right day, because who knows, I could try the curriculum the next day, and it could be great. But I think that's where this thing of our own emergent curriculum comes in too, that Jesse was talking about. Is I, because I think emergent curriculum can happen in many ways. And one way is to build, like, preset curriculum based on what has been emerging in the classroom. But then there's also those moments of like, immediate, emergent curriculum, where I'm like, "Okay, everyone is running in circles and screaming, so why don't we do a running dance in circles, and then we try doing freezing in it." Sometimes you just got to throw the lesson plan out the door, because it's not working for that moment. And that's where I have to just like depend on my intuition, and trust, my own creativity, to be able, and my connection with these students to be able to tune into what they need in that moment. Because maybe they just need to run or maybe they all need it to roll. That's the other thing, is that I trust their bodies to tell me what they need. And so it's about me listening, in all the ways that I know how to listen.

Heather Stockton

Jessie, can you just demystify, as a classroom teacher teaching inclusion and starting to integrate dance into your classroom? And what does, what does that even look like?

Jessica Kershner

I don't think of myself as much as an inclusion teacher anymore. I don't know I ... So I went through in my like, own personal career, I co-taught for some years, and it felt very separate. Like these are, Ms. Jessie's a special ed teacher, and these are her kids with IEPs. And then there is the gen ed teacher and the gen ed kids, right. And that was part of why I got my, well, a big part of why I got my permit so that I could have both roles. So now, I am just the classroom teacher for everyone. And it's, I mean, I have all of the responsibilities of a special education teacher, so I still see myself in that way. But I don't know, I try and think about it less about like accommodating for, or making accommodations or modifications for the kids that have IEPs or that need that, and more about creating a community and environment that's just open and able to accommodate and meet the needs of all kids in it, rather than creating a space and then making accommodations. So yeah, I don't know, I think in dance, I, for me, my concern, I guess, and the thing I keep coming back to and thinking about is the balance between like, the freedom to like move their bodies and do, follow their instincts and what they need, and then also the boundaries that they need. And the safety piece, especially the first year, I had a class that had a lot of energy, and a lot of ... I was, I guess I was just concerned about the safety piece and like how to bring those together and find a balance between that like giving them that freedom, and then also just making sure no one got hurt. Working with Aiano we were able to like, figure out different ways, you know, using visuals as reminders of like, how we can be safe with our bodies and move our bodies in a way that like isn't gonna hurt our friends. That balance for me is something that's always on my mind. And I think that's with any classroom, but especially when you have a wide variety of needs in your room.

Jochelle Pereña

Jessie, you talked about it, and Aiano described how your classroom changed when dance kind of came into it. And I'm curious for both of you, like how did teaching dance or being a part of dance, how did that change your teaching, Jessie? And then teaching inclusion, Aiano, how did that change your other dance teaching elsewhere?

Jessica Kershner

It makes me think, going back to the question Heather, you had about like, what do you do if like, you're just in the middle of something, and you're like, this is not working. And I feel like my knowledge of dance was so limited when I first started, and I didn't know what it was going to be and what it was going to look like in the classroom that I had like those feelings, like, "Is this right? Or is like, is this going okay? Or like, should I be doing something different right now?" Here's what it is. I guess it's like reevaluating what it means for that class to have been successful. And like in the moment, it may feel like, I don't know if this is working. But then afterwards, we go outside to play and they set up a freeze dance on their own and without music and without any help and I'm like "Oh!" So, even if in the moment, it seems like, oh, we're getting a lot of running and not a lot of like, following directions. But that's not the point of what we're trying to do, right? The point of dance isn't to get kids to follow directions. And if they're experiencing it, however they're experiencing it, but then they like hold it in them, and then use that knowledge and new information and new ideas on how to move their body in a different, at a different time or in a different place, then it was successful. And so I guess it was, I feel like that has transferred over to my teaching, in general, a lot more. What is the point of what we're doing? And like, the point is not for them to be doing what they're asked to be doing, in none of what I teach, right? And so like, you might not see success right away, it might be something that happens the next day or the next week. So like my understanding of that progressed a lot throughout my experience with dance.

Aiano Nakagawa

For me, it just reiterated this desire for all of my classes to be as accessible as possible. And I think about what Jessie was saying that it's not about creating, like sub environments for children with special needs or children with specific needs. Because at the end of the day, every single person has a different needs. Even if all these people are, quote, unquote, "neurotypical," each of their brains will still be different. Every single person has a different background, different brain formations, different attachments, like all of these things. And so being able to create an environment that is, I don't know, now I'm thinking about like, I want to say like it can translate into, like any environment, but I'm not trying to create like a one-size-fits-all thing. I'm trying to create a space where everybody who's present can come forward in their fullest, most authentic self. And so that felt really important in the ECE inclusion classroom, because part of what my goal was in socializing these students is for them to all be able to share a space together, and there not be this like sense of separation or sense of difference in a bad way. But difference in a "every single person in this room is different." And every single person, you know I used to say like, "there's 15 people in this room, I want to see 15 different ways that you can all make a big shape." Like that's what I want to see. And that's what I'm trying to support as an educator.

Jochelle Pereña

Well, I, so I've been dying to ask this question for a while. So I know when we first met you ,and as you said, you were a little bit hesitant about dance for yourself. And you were quick to say that you were not a dancer, yet you really dug into building this program, and, and I'm really curious why? Why dance? You know, you said it started with that little seed of, of what happened in that PD workshop at Burbank, and with the Brain Dance. But yeah, why? Why did you stick with it? And why - for a three year grant, even.

Jessica Kershner

I have always loved dancing alone, where no one can see me. And I guess I just had a lot of self-confidence, or self-judgment issues around my own dancing and body from a very young age. Like I just remember, I mean, everyone probably has this experience to some extent, but you're like my first middle school dance and just being like, I can, I'm gonna eat all the chips because I cannot go out there and dance in front of other people. I think my purpose, or one of the main like sparks that made me want to continue to bring dance to the class is to have the children I work with not have that like inhibition and fear around it and just to feel like free and safe and happy in their bodies and in their movement. And to just get to express themselves that way without that self-judgment because I feel it that comes really early in life, way too early in life that we're like, conscious of what other people may think or put our own ideas on, like what other people may think and I just I didn't want that for, for my children that I work with. And so I think that was a big part of it. I also, I mean, when I did the Summer Institute, and on the first day, we had to create a dance and perform it in front of people, it was a big thing for me to dance in front of other adults. It was a combination of a way that like pushed myself into something that made me uncomfortable and would allow me to better my practice and also to try and help my kids escape that societal perception of like, what I don't know of what we should, how we should be moving our bodies or what like what dance looks like. And yeah, I just I didn't want that, like that feeling where you're standing on the outside and not jumping into dance, because you're nervous about what other people are going to think. Like, I just jump in, because it's fun, and look how much fun they're having!

Jochelle Pereña

It's a big deal to feel free in your own body. To feel like you're empowered enough to not worry about any judgment.

Jessica Kershner

Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Heather Stockton

And to learn that, at such an early part of your life is, yeah, really wonderful. Okay, so you both had been teaching for together for like, a couple years, you'd established this partnership, you found your groove and collaborating with each other and teaching, you know, collaboratively, and side by side. And then, dun, dun, dun: Spring 2020 hits. COVID shifts everything. Tell us about that.

Aiano Nakagawa

So, at least from my perspective, as a teaching artist, I mean, I thought it was gonna be like a two week shutdown, I think like everyone else, or three weeks, or whatever it was. And at the time, was like,

great, we'll make videos. And so started with creating ECE video content with books and different songs and Brain Dance. And I had reached out to Jessie to see if she needed support. And she had sent me some of the videos that she had been making for her students. And I was like, that's like a full-on dance class, like you have fully integrated, like you are, like soaring off in a way. It was so beautiful to witness. And that was really special to get to see that because I'm not usually in a classroom during those times or for those lessons. But to see how gracefully and beautifully and deeply integrated dance was within the curriculum was just so satisfying as the teaching artist in that classroom.

Jessica Kershner

Well, and I remember, I made a couple videos for kids. And then you also made some videos for the teachers to kind of dive into more, I think, the one that I remember the most was the storytime one. And like what storytime, dance storytime can look like. And when we were first trying to figure out like what Zoom school looked like, I had one, I had one or two videos a day for my kids. And one a week was usually some sort of like gross motor, either exercise or dance or something. And so I started doing storytime dance as that activity, which was really fun. And I would get like videos back from families of the kids of them dancing along with me with me, like up on YouTube on their TV, and then them like dancing along with me as I was reading the story. And yeah, so I found it really helpful to have those videos from you, Aiano. And to dive into that, like, what can this look like? How can I make this more exciting and more like, full body experience while I'm on YouTube reading stories?

Aiano Nakagawa

I'm curious. I mean, it's no secret that COVID has changed so many people's lives in so many ways. And I think about again, always coming back to this question, what are we socializing our students for? I think about, after a year of having to have distance, what that looks like as we come back together. And knowing that tactile touch is a core human need for development and for relationship building, I'm personally just curious about like, how dance can support, can support this reintegration. But that wasn't my original thing that I was going to say. Because I originally was talking, going to talk about how Yes, COVID has changed so many things, and it feels like there's so many more immediate things about like, just socializing to get back in the classroom and just re-establishing that routine, because it's been gone for a whole year, which is, for some of these kids, like almost half their life or a third of their lives. So I'm curious, one if you have new students who have never been in live school, and the students who are returning and what that has been like, but also, does dance still feel like a central part of your curriculum like reading and math and science and other arts and things like that?

Jessica Kershner

Yeah, I mean, I feel like the fact that we had two years' worth, or almost two years working together and me learning about dance and like how it can look in ECE, set me up in a way that I was able to was able to continue to integrate it into the class, even with this big change. And for the kids that were returning from last year, it was already in them and they, so like they will request it. I, I was reading a book during, I think I was reading a book, something during circle time. And I had this little girl with her face as close to the screen as she could get, and she just kept being like "Freeze dance. Freeze dance." Over and over again. And I was like, "It sounds like we want to dance! Like, you can move your body while we read the book. And then we'll do a free dance at the end." And she was like thumbs up. I'm good with that. So like, and I, there's been lots of moments where the kids have requested dance. I

did one-on-one Zooms with my kids for the first half of this year, once a week. And sometimes, like I'll have a student just be like, "Can we dance?" "Yeah, we can definitely dance. Like, tell me what song and we'll dance together." And it felt like this way to make a connection that was like beyond the just like, we're sitting here talking to each other on Zoom. So I thought that that was really, really powerful. And, and yeah, we've already, I mean, we've been in school for three days in person as last week. And we have already done lots of dancing. They're not supposed to share materials, and you know, there's all these new things that we're, guidelines that we have. But they each have a little baggie of their like dance props, and they can like take them out and use them whenever and just this Friday, I had a student who was nervous about coming in for her second day. And she had been dancing a lot the day before. So we like brought out one of the ribbons and bells. And we're like, "Oh, do you want to come out and dance?" And we turn the music on, and she was a little shy at first, and then she went about her day. So it's been like, a good tool to like, I don't know, kind of get, get through that like difficult, like it's such a big transition. And so just giving them that time to dance and move feels like it's a it helps when it when there's those hard moments. I am, I would say not specific to dance, but just in general, I am so impressed with their, it's only been a couple days, but their ability to make this transition like they are not good at social distancing at all. But that is because they are so social and so excited to see each other, they want to be as close as possible to each other. And they're like, they're not supposed to be sharing toys, but they're sharing toys. They like they haven't interacted in person with each other ever, some of them and some of them in a year. And they've they formed relationships with each other on the computer, which is, would have been unimaginable to believe that that was possible. And to the point where you know, they're not all at school at the same time. And so they're asking about other kids that they've never met in person that they've only met on Zoom like, "Oh, where's so and so?" So I am constantly just impressed by how resilient and adaptable they are. And yeah, I definitely am trying to use as much dance and music in the classroom as I can. And I think it's been, they've all started dancing as soon as I turn on music. So it's like, it's been a really beneficial part of our part of our day.

Jochelle Pereña

Well, Jessie, do you have any questions for Aiano? Or do we just want to open the space up to you two ask questions of each other?

Jessica Kershner

I feel like it ended so suddenly, right, that you were like one week you gave classes, we did classes. And then the next week, it was over. And like having outside people come in to teach dances ever, I don't know when that's going to be an option again. I don't know, I guess if you have any, since that isn't going to be an option in dance, it's going to live less as a standalone class and more as an integrated part of our day, do you have advice or suggestions on how to continue to help that grow?

Aiano Nakagawa

I think the biggest thing right now is just trusting yourself. You've really got this. You, in such a short period of time, I feel like were able to integrate all these ideas of dance and you were so open to it. And I think that's a really huge thing. Yeah, I think just trusting yourself because you have everything you need. And we're all here too, for like questions or ideas. But I think you've got a really great foundation and have already, from what it sounds like and from what I've seen, have shifted your teaching to fully integrate dance.

Jessica Kershner

Oh, thank you and think I'm like so grateful that we got to work together when we did because I learned so much from you.

Aiano Nakagawa

Me too from you. Lovely.

Jochelle Pereña

So Jessie, it sounds like dance is here to stay in your classroom?

Jessica Kershner

I think so!

Jochelle Pereña

Did you think that would be the case when you first started this project?

Jessica Kershner

You know, I don't. I didn't really, I don't think I had an idea of what it was going to look like. I kind of, I kind of thought like, oh, we'll do 10 weeks. Someone will come in and teach classes, and then they'll get that like dance class experience. And then, you know, we'll continue on with whatever's next. But no, I did not think that it would get to this point that I would like attend the Summer Institute and dance myself and like, get this three year grant to keep bringing dance to more teachers at our sites. And yeah, I don't think I ever could have imagined that I would have kept going this far. So but it's, it's wonderful. I'm loving it.

Jochelle Pereña

One of the things I love about this story is that it started with this, this small seed, but that you both really spoke to the consistency of it, like how important it was for Aiano to be there regularly and get to know the children and to make a connection with them. And that, over that time, children who were just processing a new experience differently had an opportunity to jump in, and they needed that time. And now they have even more time. And that dance has, has just been a way for them to connect with themselves through all the transitions of this year. And I'm curious to see how it will unfold in these coming weeks for you as you finish up your year, how, how - and I love that they keep asking for dance, and they're just they send you the messages: "Freeze Dance!" They tell you what they need.

Jessica Kershner

They, they definitely do. So it's, it's perfect actually, because it's like if I don't, I guess that's the other piece right there. Like, my body needs this, or I need this. And just, so if I forget, then they'll I feel like they're in a space now where they're like I can tell Ms. Jessie if I need to dance.

Jochelle Pereña

Wow, I love listening to this story. This is such a dynamic and exciting partnership between a dance educator and a classroom teacher. And as we talked about, the true impact of bringing dance into an

ECE inclusion classroom could really only be revealed because of Aiano and Jessie's collaboration, and because of the duration or even the longevity of dance. From the time it started with that 10 class pilot and peer coaching, dance never stopped! Even when the pandemic hit, even when schools went virtual, even when Aiano wasn't there leading class. Dance has become part of the culture of Jessie's classroom. And now it's extending.

Heather Stockton

Yes. You know, I heard Jessie has been acting as a lead teacher and coach in some of the dance education workshops that Luna's offering for district teachers.

Jochelle Pereña

Yeah, Jesse really believes in the value of dance for her students. And she invested in it to the point that it's now integrated into her teaching and then to her as a person and an advocate. It's a part of her, just as considering accessibility as a part of Aiano and her identity as a teacher, advocate, and individual. And so the long-term impact of this dance teaching partnership is really continuing to reveal itself.

Heather Stockton

You know, coaching and PD for teachers and teaching artists as a part of the dance in schools program feels really essential, not only so they build collaboration in their co-learning, as Jessie and Aiano did, but the classroom teacher has the support to grow and skills and leadership so that they can advocate for dance.

Jochelle Pereña

Yes, advocate for dance beyond the life of the grant! So Heth, this was something that really came up for me in listening to their story and I'm still teasing apart all the pieces, so I'm fumbling around with it a bit. But because this is an inquiry podcast, I thought I'd bring it up here in, in the spirit of inquiry. So, you know, it struck me that this project came about because of, first because of a small grant, and then because of a much larger grant. And I recognize that so many beautiful opportunities arise from short and long term grants. But when we think about equity and access, they can really only bring dance to a finite group of kids for a finite amount of time. So what happens when the grant funding is over? When that term is over? What happens to dance and what happens to those kids' experiences or the kids that come after? And in Jessie's case, you know, as we just articulated, PD and coaching was really integrated into her experience and that was partially funded by the grant. So that dance can live beyond the grant. I mean, she said it herself dance is really here to stay. But you know, I'm really thinking about equity, inclusion, access, if that aspect of sustainability for a dance program isn't integrated in, and if there aren't supports for what happens when the grant money is over, is done, the impact is so limited. And the number of kids, as I said, that would get dance is limited. And the potential of of the beauty of dance is limited. Um, and really, not all kids, you know, grants can't fund all kids in dance. They can't fund, in this state, in this city, in this country. So I also have questions about whose responsibility is it to be holding equity and access in the arts, and dance specifically? We can't completely rely on on grants that just start funding short term projects, how, I think we all have to hold sustainability in mind and also consider what can live beyond the grants. And when I say all of us, I'm thinking, you know, the arts advocates and the teachers, and at the district level, administrators, how can we really think about

holding dance as part of education for all children as a, as integrated in and not just reliant on project to project grant cycles?

Heather Stockton

Yes, yeah, I get, really getting into more of root thinking. Like this makes me think of planting a seed and like having everyone, like you said, on all different levels, nourishing those seeds, so that it can really live on and make a greater impact. Yeah, that's

Jochelle Pereña

Yeah. And then feed itself, you know, come to flower and fruit and then seed, and then there's, there's more seeds.

Heather Stockton

Yeah, I yeah. No, no, I never thought about that before in this way. And I feel like that is really, it's really profound to think about. And I wonder if we can, like, get into this question even deeper, for like, for a whole episode, because I feel like there's a lot there to unpack.

Jochelle Pereña

Yeah, yeah, I think you're right. Let's come back to it. Let's keep mulling it over. Something that was really special about the stories that Jessie and Aiano told from teaching is the richness of them. I felt like they were really able to observe the children, each other and themselves. And in their storytelling and remembering they were able to reflect on their emotions and expectations, their challenges and surprises. And that takes a certain kind of trust in their collaboration.

Heather Stockton

Totally, yeah, they seem to have created a language together that was based on their shared values, and built over years working together. It really points to the relationship, the strength of their partnership, and the fact that dance in the classroom was not transactional.

Jochelle Pereña

Mm hmm. Yeah. So to suddenly been split up in a way by COVID, it was a big deal. And they hadn't spoken to each other for a whole year.

Heather Stockton

Yeah, I know. I think, I think this conversation of remembering, celebrating, processing, acted as a point of closure for them.

Jochelle Pereña

And through it all dance continues.

Heather Stockton

Yes. And so will we. So thank you for joining us again for another episode of the Dance Inquiry Podcast. Stay tuned for more episodes as we amplify stories of dance in special education and inclusion. Bye!