

# Teaching Literacy through Movement: A Transformative Partnership

*By Amanda Howerton-Fox, Michelle A. Veyvoda, Hannah Park, and Julia Silvestri*

Recent inquiry has promising implications for ways in which sign language and dance might transform English language arts education for signing deaf children (Napoli & Liapis, 2019). As two forms of visual communication, dance and sign language can inform and enlighten each other. In fact, for some deaf children, dance may serve as a bridge between the unmoving linear language of print and the dynamic, layered language of sign.

At the New York School for the Deaf, Fanwood, students participated in a school-based community arts program designed to use creative movement to enhance deaf and hard of hearing children's literacy skills. This program brought together professionals from a variety of disciplines, including deaf education, speech-language pathology, and dance education. These professionals, with a team of teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators, developed and implemented an innovative curriculum that has the potential to transform the way deaf and hard of hearing students from across ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds experience literacy instruction while increasing access to dance education.

Here are some of the activities we tried, the lessons we learned, and the questions we still encounter.

## **The Benefit: Dance for Those Traditionally Marginalized**

Numerous benefits have been associated with arts education for children from various marginalized groups, including students of color, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and students with disabilities (Caterall, 2009). Some of these benefits include positive self-esteem, self-identity, confidence, sense of purpose, and sense of individuality and uniqueness (Andrus, 2012; Dorff, 2012). Unfortunately, for children with special needs and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, access to arts education can be difficult. Financial constraints, lack of transportation, and communication barriers are among the reasons that these children glean less access to the arts than their more fortunate peers.

For deaf children who communicate through American Sign Language (ASL), innovative

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*Photos courtesy of Amanda Howerton-Fox*



**Above and left:** The arts education program developed at Fanwood allowed deaf and hard of hearing students to experience dance as both an art form and a mediating tool through which they could learn literacy concepts and improve understanding of specific grammatical features.

pedagogical approaches that link arts education to content instruction can be even harder to access. Through the program we developed at Fanwood, deaf and hard of hearing students experienced dance as both an art form and a mediating tool through which they could learn literacy concepts and improve understanding of specific grammatical features.

### **The Inspiration: Interdisciplinary Conversation**

The curriculum was a partnership of this article's first three authors who are professors in the fields of education, communication sciences and disorders, and fine and performing arts at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., and the fourth author, then director of Special Programs at Fanwood, a regional school for deaf students. As with many interdisciplinary projects, this partnership emerged initially from a collegial conversation between two faculty members, Dr. Hannah Park and Dr. Michelle Veyvoda. Park, a professor of dance whose career has focused on

curriculum development, community engagement, and somatic practices, expressed interest in applying her method of somatic movement practices to English language arts instruction with signing deaf children. Veyvoda, a speech-language pathologist who teaches courses in speech-language pathology and ASL and has worked with deaf and hard of hearing children for over 10 years, was intrigued. Veyvoda agreed to contact the nearby Fanwood school, where Dr. Julia Silvestri was serving as director of Special Programs. She also engaged Dr. Amanda Howerton-Fox, another colleague who is a certified literacy specialist and teacher of the deaf. All parties eagerly came on board, and an innovative partnership was born.

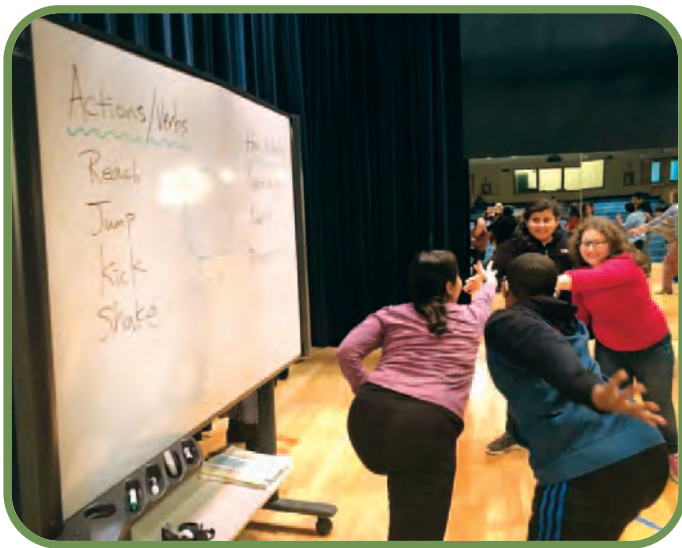
### **The Partnership: Setting Goals and Learning**

Once the partnership between Iona College and Fanwood was in place, the next step was for the interdisciplinary parties to learn from each other. Park, who had not worked with deaf or

**Hannah Park**, PhD, associate professor, director of the dance program, and artistic director of the residential dance ensemble at Iona College, N.Y., holds a doctoral degree in dance education from Temple University. She is a somatic practitioner certified in Laban Movement Analysis, BodyMind Dancing®, and yoga.

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**Left and below:** At the end of each class session, students and their teachers returned to the white board to revisit the grammatical concepts they had explored.

dance.

In each session, Park, assisted by an ASL interpreter, began by leading the students through stretching and warm-up exercises. Park then described how the students would explore a particular concept (e.g., adverbs, prepositions, plot, character traits) through movement, and she would model this for the students. Each lesson focused on a single literacy skill, but students would often make connections to other skills during their discussion (e.g., noting how adverbs help them show a character's traits). Then—to rhythmic, percussive music—the students explored the movements themselves. Each session ended with teachers and students back at the white board, guided by Howerton-Fox or Veyvoda, sharing the movements they had used for each grammatical concept and making explicit connections between their movements, the concept, and the text.

hard of hearing students before, brought her knowledge of the somatic method and the elements of dance to the partnership. Howerton-Fox, Veyvoda, and Silvestri brought their knowledge of language and literacy instruction, sign language, and deaf education. Silvestri selected four classes at Fanwood—one each from grades three, four, five, and six—and those teachers shared information about the students—including their diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, hearing levels, types of listening technology, strongest mode of communication, and learning styles. Silvestri and the teachers at Fanwood also determined the curricular goals they wanted to achieve and communicated them to the team.

These goals were to:

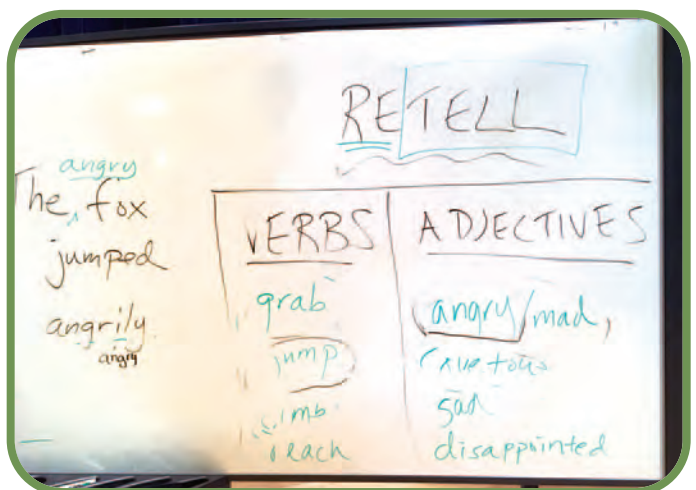
- Increase students' ability to identify plot and character traits through shared reading of English language text interpreted into ASL
- Increase students' understanding and use of adverbs and prepositions in ASL and written English
- Expose students to dance and movement as self-expression and sociocultural connection

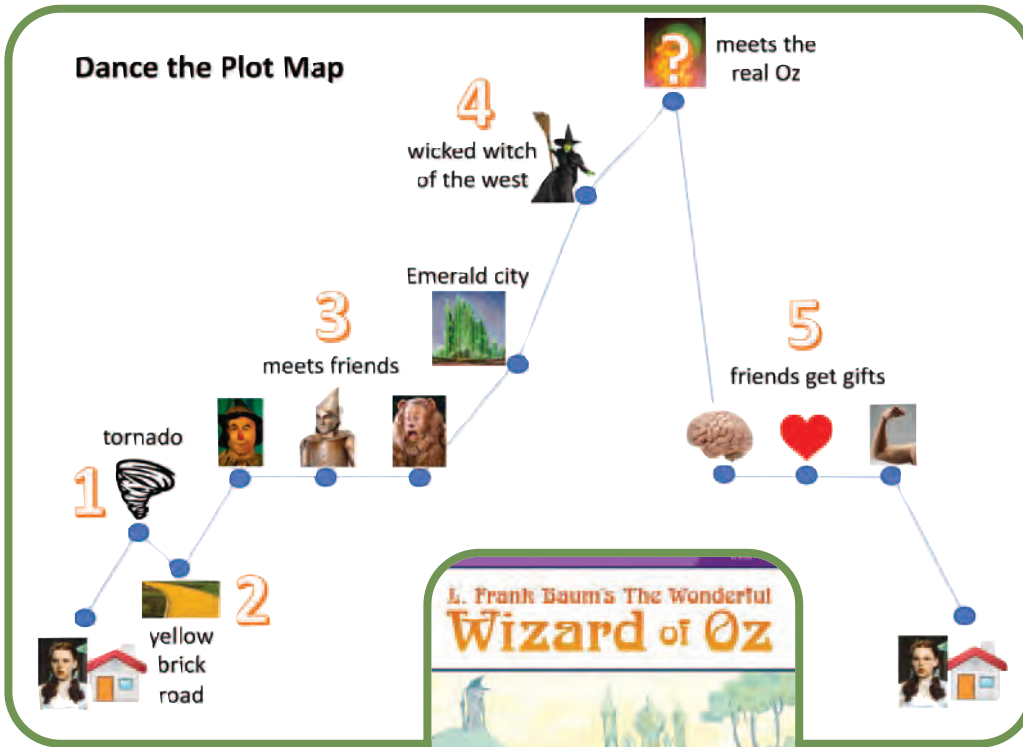
### The Program: Warm Up and Stretch

Our team developed a creative movement program to enhance the students' concepts of movement that corresponded to selected literacy skills. Movement was used as a metaphor for grammatical concepts, such as prepositions and adverbs. For example, the elementary school students would use their own bodies and the bodies of their partners to explore spatial relationships and then name those relationships with relevant prepositions (e.g., in, on, through) in both English and ASL. They would explore the "how" of each movement to understand adverbs (e.g., angrily, sadly, lazily), and they would investigate plot and character through the narrative arc of

### Developing Literacy Skills through Movement

*The Fox and the Grapes*, Aesop's timeless tale of a fox who feigned disdain for hard-to-reach grapes after realizing his inability to attain them, was chosen to introduce the connection between movement and vocabulary, with a focus on adjectives, verbs, and adverbs as parts of speech with different functions in language. In this four-week introductory unit, the students were exposed to *The Fox and the Grapes* through an interpreted read-aloud. They then began to focus on the vocabulary in the text and how it could be interpreted via movement. They learned new verbs, such as *hang*, *twist*, *jump*, *grab*, and *climb*, by connecting the print to corresponding movements on the stage. They learned adjectives, such as *disgusting*, *covetous*, *determined*, *angry*, and *patient*, the same way. By using the movement of their bodies, the students practiced (to a count of four beats using rhythmic, percussive





**Left:** Park, Howerton-Fox, and Veyvoda explored the plot of *The Wizard of Oz* with the students by developing a plot map of the story and having the students dance through it.

their movements became fierce when they became the Lion.

To explore prepositions, each student worked with a partner, and as a twosome, they used their bodies to show relationships from the text. For example, when students had to use the preposition *to*, as in the phrase “ran to the cellar,” some students would represent the cellar and stand stationary while other students ran *to* them. To illustrate the preposition *with*,

music) *reaching* up to catch grapes and *jumping* and *twisting* their bodies to catch grapes. Then, by changing the “how” of their movements, they explored adverbs. For example, after doing a sharp, *angry* dance, they were introduced to the adverb *angrily* to describe the “how” of their own and the fox’s movements.

Seeing the success of the initial unit, the classroom teachers chose *The Wizard of Oz*, another cultural epic, to teach a follow-up eight-week unit on prepositions, plot, and character traits to the same four classes of students. An illustrated, abridged version of L. Frank Baum’s classic (Hautzig, 2013) was chosen for this unit to ensure the language would be accessible to the students and that we could read the complete story during the course of the unit. To begin the unit, all four classes gathered in the auditorium for an interpreted read-aloud of the text. Then Park, Howerton-Fox, and Veyvoda explored the plot with the students by developing a plot map of the story and having the students dance through the map.

To explore the concept of *character*, the students first created name signs for Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow. As is culturally appropriate, they chose each character’s name signs based on their personality traits or appearance. They also developed movement patterns and moved in ways that embodied each character. For example, they hung their bodies limply to represent the Scarecrow, they stiffened their movement when they became the Tin Man, and



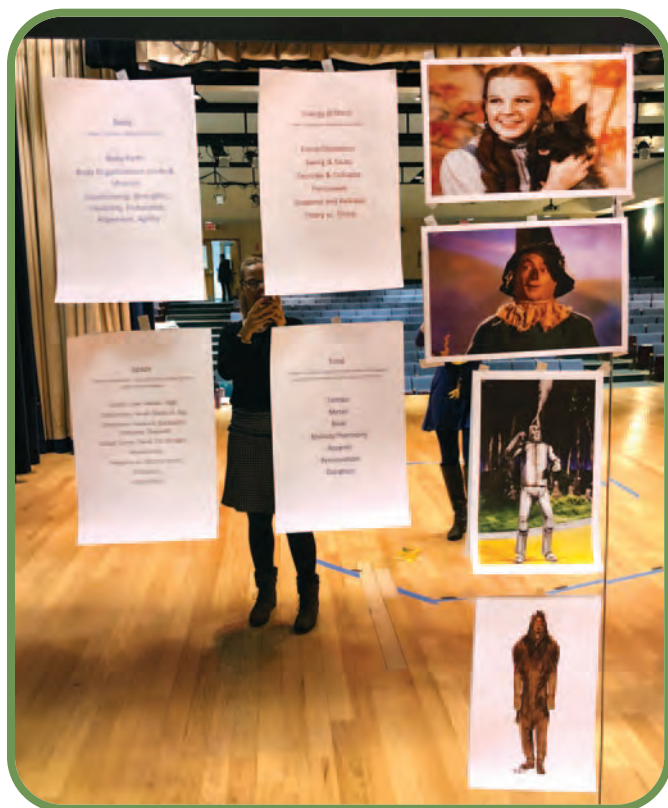
as in the phrase “with the dog,” both students might travel together through their space as a unit. At the end of each session, the students and teachers returned to the white board to revisit the grammatical concepts they had explored and to connect their chosen movements to the prepositions they encountered in the English print.

### The Challenges: Lessons Learned

Teachers were excited by the students’ use of targeted vocabulary during the sessions. They reported that, while they had initially been skeptical of this teaching methodology, they saw clear connections between dance and literacy, and they were pleased to observe the students’ confidence growing over the course of the semester. They appreciated that each session ended at the white board, with Howerton-Fox or Veyvoda making explicit connections between the movements the students had explored and concepts in the text.

Another important outcome of this partnership was the opportunity to explore some of the challenges involved when a hearing artist was partnered with signing deaf students. Working with an interpreter in a movement-centered class involved some unforeseen challenges. Often, Park called out instructions or directional changes while the students were already in motion and they were not watching the interpreter. We were fortunate to work with an interpreter who was also a trained dancer during a few of the sessions, and Park and this interpreter were able to work together more smoothly.

Other challenges that Park and the team had to work through included learning to allow wait time for the interpreter



**Left:** Students developed movement patterns for each character in *The Wizard of Oz* and moved in ways that embodied those characters.

we not only saw the students improve their skills at breaking sentences, words, and stories into parts so that they could understand them more completely, we also saw transformations in their confidence and pride. Our students were excited at their growing ability to engage successfully with the movement curriculum.

Participation in the program also deepened the authors' understanding of how movement can be used as a metaphor to represent literacy skills. We learned about the challenges of partnering a hearing, non-signing artist with signing deaf students, and we were able to critically evaluate the role of a sign language interpreter in a movement-related curriculum. Finally, and most important, we saw the role that dance can play to transform and improve English language instruction for deaf and hard of hearing students.

to sign, learning not to talk while simultaneously modeling movement (which would have required the students to watch her and the interpreter at the same time), and learning to trust herself to try using some of the signs she had been taught by the interpreters or the rest of the team. This echoes the recommendation of Seham (2012), who in describing inclusive dance education programming writes that teaching-artists should receive training in how to work with students with disabilities and how to adapt and transfer instructional methods and dance styles to the population they are teaching.

There were challenges associated with acoustics and communication modality as well. The percussive music had to be loud enough for the students to hear, but that meant that when Park shouted over the music, her speech was distorted. A learning curve was also needed for Park to use the FM transmitter, to work with the interpreter efficiently, and to learn to use natural-sounding speech rather than increasing her volume or exaggerating her mouth movements. For these reasons, the value of a team-based partnership with a school for the deaf cannot be understated. Fortunately, Howerton-Fox, Veyvoda, and Silvestri, as well as interpreters and other school personnel, were on site to identify ways in which Park could more effectively communicate with the students. Without the various areas of expertise, knowledge, practice, and experience represented by the three team members, this project would likely have had very different outcomes.

While partnerships between deaf schools and hearing artists can be challenging to execute, they can be of great value to deaf and hard of hearing students from across linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the course of our work,

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