

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

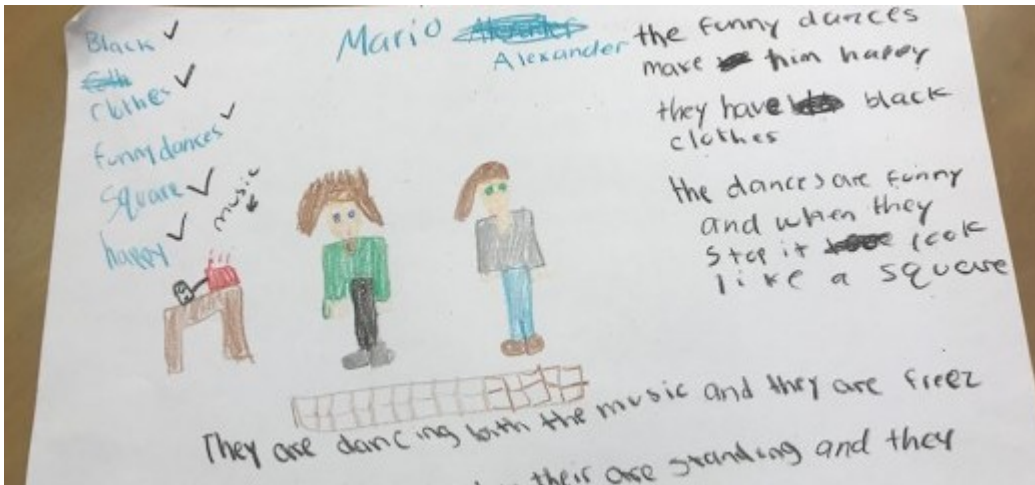


Photo: Carolyn Merritt

## Teaming Up Again: tD and Mighty Writers

by Barbora P?íhodová and Lynn Matluck Brooks

In spring 2018, thINKingDANCE [tD] piloted its first youth program in partnership with Mighty Writers [MW] El Futuro, the South Philly branch of MW, a dynamic nonprofit that teaches writing to youth ages 6 to 17 at five locations throughout Philadelphia. El Futuro serves bilingual students, mainly Mexican immigrants. The success of these fully-subscribed [workshops](#) inspired tD to expand programming for spring 2019. Together with professional dancers Marion Ramírez, Belle Alvarez, and Christina Maria Castro-Tauser (all bilingual), tD facilitators offered four movement-and-writing workshops to El Futuro students. Attendance at the four 90-minute sessions totaled over 20 young people, ages 7 to 13, who enjoyed guided movement exercises and games with reflection, writing, drawing, and discussion.

### Engaging Young Writers, April 6 and 13 (7-10 year-olds)

On the first two Saturdays in April, Marion Ramírez, Puerto Rican dance artist and movement specialist for children, led the South Philly Mighty Writers in experiencing and capturing dance. On April 6, the tD team—Anna Drozdowski, Carolyn Merritt, Barbora P?íhodová, and Karl Surkan—together with 8 children shared warm-up exercises that included passing a ball to introduce ourselves, identifying a color to describe how we feel, and “writing” our names with different body parts. Ramírez then led the group through the basics of merengue, a social dance originating in the Dominican Republic. Despite some initial reluctance, the youngsters soon joined Ramírez’s infectious and playful energy. In Tableaux/Freeze Dance, half of the group danced to music and froze during the silences, as the other half found different ways to describe the postures and movements implied, adding new vocabulary to a “word bank” that the tD facilitators collected throughout the workshop. This bank of English and Spanish words became the children’s resource for creating sentences, imaginative stories, and narrative descriptions. When prompted to capture their experience, the youngsters spontaneously started drawing, adding yet another layer of complex, multi-lingual and -modal communication.

Marion Ramírez afterward reflected, “Como facilitadora de estos talleres yo sentí gran placer en hablar primordialmente en español y

traducir palabras claves en inglés. Habían unas chicas que estaban tímidas y cuando yo hablé con ellas en español se sintieron más cómodas en participar. [I felt great pleasure as a Spanish speaker in doing this workshop in my first language and translating important words into English. There were two girls who were shy about sharing with the group, but when I spoke Spanish to them, they felt more comfortable participating.]



Marion Ramirez leads Mighty Writers dance workshop. Photo: Carolyn Merritt.

On April 13, the tD team—Janna Meiring, Carolyn Merritt, Barbora P?íhodová, and Karl Surkan—joined the children and Marion Ramirez in a writing-to-movement workshop. We started reviewing the last week's writings and pictures; then the children completed "mad-libs" by filling in blanks in prepared sentences. They created their own superhero cards that combined drawing and written description of their superhero's power, element, and stance.

The kids had a blast imagining their superheroes, and when they brought their characters to life by embodying their powers and stance, they elicited a lot of laughter. We then split into two groups, each combining the superhero's poses into a short group choreography. The children seemed proud to present their choreographic pieces to the group.

Marion Ramirez noted, "Lo interesante de estos talleres es que los niños y niñas que participaron viven con dos idiomas y como facilitadora, alternar entre el español y el inglés para traer diferentes aspectos de la vida y experiencia de los jóvenes era similar al uso de las palabras, movimiento, y dibujo como lenguajes de expresión." [What was interesting for me about these workshops is that these children live with two languages, mainly Spanish and English. In this context, all the languages (Spanish words, English words, movement, drawings) were expressing different aspects of their life experiences.]

### **Engaging Young Writers, April 27 and May 4 (7-13 year-olds)**

The workshop on April 27 was led by Belle Alvarez, a Honduran-born, Philippines- and U.S.-raised, dance artist and educator. Together with tD facilitators Jenna Horton, Carolyn Merritt, and Rhonda Moore, Alvarez led the participants in some social-dance basics and in

exploring creative movement through interaction. The highlight was *bachata*, a social dance from the Dominican Republic. Following warm-up exercises led in English and Spanish, the students learned basic *bachata* steps and turns, then added forward and backward movement, and level changes. In the second part of the workshop, the students wrote words connected with what they saw, felt, or did while dancing, and then used these words to build sentences. This was a popular part of the day for many of the students.



Belle Alvarez leads Mighty Writers dance workshop. Photo: Carolyn Merritt.

Dancer, choreographer, and teacher Christina Maria Castro-Tauser led the last workshop of the series, co-facilitated by tD writers Lynn Matluck Brooks, Janna Meiring, Barbora P?ihodová, and Karl Surkan. We started with an imaginary-ball exercise and wrote our names with body parts. Once again, tD facilitators used the movement and improvisation exercises to help students generate a word bank to describe or associate with movements they did and saw. Activities such as forming a live statue instigated much-welcomed giggles, helping to break the ice and prepare the students to learn *merengue*. Working individually and then in pairs, the children were fully engaged in the dance lesson, focused on getting their steps right—and they did!

Christina Maria Castro-Tauser remarked that, “El grupo de estudiantes con quien bailé el cuatro de Mayo tenían muchas ideas para compartir. Ellos participaron en movimientos familiares y nuevos.” [The group of students with whom I danced on May 4 had many creative ideas to share. They participated in new and familiar ways of moving.]





Christina Maria Castro-Tauser leads Mighty Writers dance workshop. Photo: Janna Meiring.

The writing part of the workshop again focused on building sentences and stories from the word bank. As Janna Meiring noted, “cultivating a big list of words during the dance activities and games was really helpful in supporting the kids’ word-recall; the list was also a place to go if they drew a blank during the mad-lib exercise. We took time to read through the words out loud, which further supported their word recall. I could see each student building confidence in both moving and writing.”

Indeed, building confidence—in and *through* moving and writing that incorporated English and Spanish—was the ultimate outcome of these enjoyable interdisciplinary workshops.

By Barbora P?íhodová

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