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Bode, Hannah

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Where is Dance in Our Schools?

Dance holds the power to contribute to lifetime student success, and it's up to us to start advocating for more recognition

by Hannah Bode

I often pause during ballet class, look around the room, and remember how lucky I am to study dance at such an incredible university. For so long, this was my dream. In high school, I attended every ballet class with the motivation of one day becoming a dance major. While I maintained a strong work ethic as a younger student, I also recognize that I am able to study dance at a university because of the opportunities I was afforded. I studied classical ballet at a welcoming and supportive family-owned ballet school. I was able to attend dance intensives that opened my eyes to additional dance styles, such as West African, Hawaiian, and modern. I attended a public high school that offered arts education. Without these opportunities that were afforded to me with the support of my parents, I may not have made it this far in my dance career.

Before attending university, many dance majors study in a studio, or performing arts school setting, and many report that any form of dance education in the public school setting did not offer a holistic and diverse curriculum. My brief, and ultimately negative, experience dancing at a public high school involved “jazz” and “hip hop” choreography, which drastically failed to recognize the Africanist roots these styles stem from. It was not until I attended a UCLA Dance Department summer intensive that I realized that the dance world and its impact was so much greater than I imagined.

This reflection has me thinking: how many more dance majors could there be, if dance was more accessible? Most often, collegiate and professional dancers do not find their passion in the K-12 school setting. Dance, similar to many other extracurricular and athletic opportunities, is presented at a monetary cost, immediately dismissing the potential of students whose families do not have the resources and funds to send their children to dance classes. Therefore, students should be receiving their dose of arts immersion during their school day. However, many students receive little to no form of exposure to dance, drama, music, or visual art. While California mandates standards-based instruction from K-12 in various arts disciplines, nearly 90% of public schools fail to align their educational offerings with state standards (Flores).

Frequently, the arts fall into the shadows, while mathematics, sciences, and more “relevant” subjects are placed in the forefront of public school curriculum. Why is this? Many generations believe that art cannot produce a reliable, lucrative, or fulfilling career. Additionally, societal stereotypes underestimate dance’s power to establish cultural tradition, and an intellectual experience or career. Therefore, STEM subjects are prioritized as core subjects, while the arts are frequently viewed as “elective” or “extracurricular” classes. If there is ever a chance of society viewing careers in arts with as much respect as careers in medicine, engineering, business, and law, the arts must be placed on the same playing field as other disciplines.

How can such a lofty goal be achieved? Administrators, policymakers, and superintendents must be urged to prioritize the arts when curating curriculum, forming budgets, and hiring educators. As artists, we must be the ones to urge those in positions of power to advocate for us, and for future generations of artists. Whether you are an artist or not, I urge you to consider how dance has shaped you.

Dance, and the arts as a whole, have the power to add value to society, promote culture, and provide career satisfaction. As a creative art form, dance promotes creativity, collaboration, and interpersonal skills, which are all tools needed to succeed in arts careers and non-arts careers alike. Even students who excel in STEM subjects can benefit from experiencing a consistent arts curriculum. In the *New England Theatre Journal*, Taylor Barfield argues that “STEM students can sharpen skills in collaboration, improvisation, emotional intelligence, close-reading, and storytelling; theatre students can gain deeper understanding of STEM skills that support theatre-making, including photography, psychology, business mathematics, physics, and engineering.”

As an elementary schooler, I severely struggled in STEM subjects. I dreaded the portion of each school day that was dedicated to learning long division, and completing timed math tests. The intensity that surrounded rigorous subjects, like math, instilled anxiousness at a young age. In those moments, all I could think about was how excited I was for the school day to be over, so that I could go to ballet class. If art was present in my classroom, would I have viewed math differently? Would I have had the tools to approach subjects that challenged me in a calmer, more motivated manner?

Now, as an aspiring elementary educator, I am committed to infusing dance and arts education into my future classroom. When my students have been sitting for too long and need a break from sedentary tasks, dance is the first thing that I will turn to. There is potential for students to discover an interest in or love for the arts, even if only ten minutes per day is delegated for leading a class through a common social dance, or allowing students to present one pose or gesture that expresses their personality. Achieving this small goal may seem out of reach, as there is no way to ensure that educators have a substantial arts background. However, I believe that the dance community has the power to initiate the first steps in the direction of positive change.

Dancers, take this moment to identify how the arts have impacted you. Whether or not you intend to dance for a living, choreograph, or take your dance skills into other fields, think of how these experiences and skills are present in your life today. Use these experiences to advocate for the arts, and why they deserve a spot at the table of education. By increasing the quality and funding of arts education, more students could experience the joy and enrichment that the arts have to offer.

So, write to your local public school superintendents. Urge policymakers to carve out more funding for arts education in K-12 schools. With enough encouragement and advocacy, I believe that the arts will one day earn the same regard as other academic subjects and career paths, and will therefore be able to provide all of the benefits and opportunities students deserve.

Hannah Bode graduated in Spring 2024 with a B.A. in Dance and a B.A. in Education Sciences, from the University of California, Irvine. She plans to attend graduate school to obtain a Master of Arts in Teaching, as well as a multi-subject teaching credential. After, Hannah plans to enter the field of education as an elementary school teacher and will infuse her passion for dance in her classroom. Eventually, Hannah hopes to enter the policymaking sector of education and advocate for arts education and funding at a national level.

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