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Learning dance improves everything—or at least enough to require it in every child’s education

So why aren’t all American parents calling their kids’ schools to demand dance be incorporated into the curriculum?

by Emily Guerard

After 16 years of dance training, I still hear people say dance is an extra, just a hobby, disregarding its importance and value. I guess they think dance is just twirling around in circles, and it didn’t teach me anything about life. In a way, I understand—dance is at the bottom of the arts ranking system in America. As dance critic Joan Acocella notes, “That’s been the case ever since the fourth century when the church took over the arts and banished dance from public religious ceremonies” (Mainwaring 3). Would this lack of dance appreciation change if people knew the vital benefits of dance? What if America’s school system installed a dance education class in its curriculum that was as important as science? Would more people begin to appreciate dance at a young age?

During the 2009 to 2010 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a nationwide study on dance in all public elementary schools. Only three percent of public elementary schools taught dance as a separate subject, 44 percent of schools taught dance as part of physical education, and 29 percent of schools integrated dance into other curriculum areas. On the other hand, 90 percent of public elementary schools across the nation taught general music to kids.

There are many reasons why dance should be in the school curriculum. Dance is unique from the other arts because of the abundant physical benefits it can bring at any age, like enhancing cardiovascular health and strengthening weight-bearing bones like the tibia, fibula, and the femur (Alpert 155). Dance also helps increase flexibility, endurance, balance, spatial awareness, muscle strength and tone, improved posture, and an overall sense of wellbeing (155). In addition, dance helps the brain compute faster, creates new neural pathways, and heightens blood supply to the brain (155, 156). Dance increases activity in the prefrontal and temporal regions of the brain leading to memory, attention, and multitasking improvement (156). Elevation in mood is a common response from dancing, as well. An article on physical exercise habits in a child’s life states the importance to “promote and (re)establish exercise habits early in life so they may persist into adult years” (Aarts 364). In the *New England Journal of Medicine*, a 21-year study revealed that dancing regularly could reduce your risk of dementia and prevent Alzheimer’s disease in the elderly (Alpert 156).

So why aren’t American families calling their local schools and demanding incorporation of this essential art form? A dance education would not only help kids gain the health benefits of dance, but help cultivate and improve creativity, which is essential for a child’s development. People who do not support this idea might believe creativity is unimportant to a kid’s education and future jobs, that reading, writing, mathematics, and science teach fundamental concepts better with their concrete frameworks. What does dance have to do with it? Children must learn at a young age to develop creativity for future careers. America’s economy needs creative minds to work to improve American society: “...creative people are the critical resource of the new

age” (quoted in Giguere 34). American society must prepare the next generation of creative minds by starting in the classroom and applying dance education to the curriculum.

Dance is not simply a physical activity but a “communicative art form” that allows a child’s body to be his “identity and the instrument of his physical expression” (Giguere 36, 37). In her article *The Health Benefits of Dance*, Patricia T. Alpert explains how dance “provides an outlet for releasing emotional expression” (156). Dance creates a safe environment for children to learn how to express their feelings, thoughts, and personalities in a healthy way instead of locking these emotions up.

If public elementary schools incorporate dance education in their curriculum, dance can provide a gateway into learning about different cultures as well. Alpert supports this statement explaining, “Dance is universal and knows no cultural barriers with every culture rooted in some type of dance form” (Alpert 156). Educating children about different dance practices would open the door to learning a richer comprehensive history of different nations and cultures. As dance educator Miriam Giguere says, “No artist or artistic style is without a historical context” (36). For example, ballet had a historical impact during the reign of Louis XIV in France. Ballets would be performed in the courts that displayed the different positions of power (35). Giguere uses this example of ballet in her article stating, “Addressing this fascinating history can be an opportunity to use dance to illustrate how art has been used as a means of symbolic communication throughout history, or how it illuminates the social structure from which it derives” (35).

Dance opens up the history book, allowing students to learn about influences beyond those of Europe on America. This approach to history through a dance education establishes a new engagement and appreciation for new cultures. Thus, varied cultural styles “can be an excellent motivator for children” to help them understand cultures in which dance developed (36). Children start to embody the diverse styles and begin to acquire an acceptance for the style’s culture and history. Giguere explains, “Just as dance...cannot escape being a part of history, so dance cannot escape being a part of culture. By honoring many dance forms, we honor tolerance” (36 and 37).

Including dance education in school curriculum would also help children develop body awareness. During constant growth and change, it is important for them to foster a healthy relationship with their bodies. Twenty-first century American society can disseminate harsh messages about a standard of beauty, that people’s bodies must look a certain way. As a result, negative emotions and beliefs about a child’s own body can arise, leading to self-consciousness and depression about the perceived lack of an “ideal body.” Dance enables children “to be in charge of their bodies” and gives a sense of “control over how their bodies are viewed” (Giguere 37). Although dance, specifically ballet, is known for demanding thin “ideal bodies,” this is not always the case with other dance techniques such as modern, African, jazz, and folk dance.

According to an article on dance therapy, “The idea is that through authentic movement, one can express oneself and come into contact with the conscious and unconscious parts of their personality. This contact leads to accepting one’s self for who they are” (Aktas 409). With a dance education, children can explore and develop a sense of who they are individually without comparison to other children. Dance education functions to further crucial “kinetics, cognitive and emotional development of children” (Kourkouta 230). Dance can help children create a positive body image that they will hopefully carry through the rest of their lives.

Based on the evidence, it’s surprising that dance does not currently exist in the curriculum for so many of our public elementary schools. Not only would kids gain the health

benefits of dance, but a dance education would help cultivate a child's creativity, foster cultural awareness and appreciation, and provide essential body awareness and coordination. Veteran dance critic Deborah Jowitt has said, "If art is valuable as a reflection—of a time, of a place, of a creation—then dance is just as important as literature or film, even though the audience for it is smaller." Dance is a vital art form that deserves the same respect as other arts. In order to change America's perspective on dance, it will take a strong community of people who are willing to advocate for it, thus guaranteeing that the futures of the next generation will be brighter than before.

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