

**A Look Inside the Educational Curriculum: Why is Dance Cast Out?**

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Joy. Anger. Sadness. Fear. Disgust. The movie *Inside Out* shows personified versions of these emotions and how they mature inside the brain of a young girl as she grows. Although the actual human brain is devoid of these emotion characters, people's brains and emotions still develop and learn to cooperate with one another as they mature. Children and teenagers are sent to school to learn and to progress their development, but the traditional educational curriculum is missing a key component in helping children discover themselves and their potential.

Dance could be this missing piece. There is much more to the art of dance than stepping along to music or leaping across a stage. Dance is a thorough combination of creativity and physical activity that provides numerous mental, physical, and emotional benefits. Additionally, children of all ages and abilities can experience these benefits and introducing them to this type of movement in a school setting allows them to try it without making a complete extracurricular commitment. This small yet crucial introduction to dance is the key to navigating the many emotions and complexities that come with growing up.

Public education has been a foundational pillar in America since society began. The need to prepare children for adulthood and their roles in society has been apparent since colonial times, yet funding education has been a persistent issue, especially providing funding for children of all races, genders, and ethnicities.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, not all educational subjects have been treated with equal importance. Due to the technological path the world is on, scientific subjects have been at the forefront of the educational curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Physical education classes have also been incorporated in the curriculum since the American colonial period but took centuries to develop into the classes seen in schools today.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the development of both academic and gym classes, dance has rarely been incorporated into curriculums despite its many physical and mental benefits. It is an intellectually stimulating form of physical activity

that develops one's artistic skills, and it appeals to many different learning styles, unlike traditional teaching methods.<sup>4</sup> Dance deserves a place in educational curriculums across the country and its numerous benefits must be laid out to those who wish to further advance education.

## I. THE INSECURE PLACE OF DANCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND FUNDING

The importance of public education in the United States has been recognized since the birth of the nation when the Founding Fathers established the necessary means for running a country. They decided that in order to preserve the democracy they instilled, an educated and virtue-oriented population would be required. The idea of public education was well-liked, especially by leaders such as Horace Mann, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, but this idea took a great deal of time and persistence to be fully implemented. This early quest for educational access for all has recently shifted to focusing on the quality of education.<sup>1</sup>

As a part of this ongoing aim for high quality education, gym classes have been added and developed since the colonial period in the 1700s. The American colonists did not originally include physical education in their curriculums because the European curriculums did not include it. However, as public education continued to develop, educators and policy makers realized the relationship between students' overall wellness and their focus in classes and therefore, their more effective participation in society. In fact, Benjamin Franklin wrote the "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania" regarding physical activity, Thomas Jefferson advocated for physical education, and Noah Webster claimed that fencing was just as important as mathematics in schools. Traditional sports such as running, football, and bowling were and continue to be the focus of gym classes, but there were other physical

activities that had periods of popularity. These included gymnastics, women's calisthenics, and manual labor. However, dance was never included in historical curriculums despite its extra-curricular popularity. When the Civil War ensued, physical education became less of a priority. However, after the war, Americans realized that their soldiers, and society, were of a very low physical caliber and began to place a greater emphasis on gym classes.<sup>3</sup>

Since the beginning of public education, funding has been provided, but where the money goes and who makes these decisions has been a diversifying topic since the start. The authority for public education is very decentralized, far more than other countries. As a result, it is often more difficult to achieve goals with multiple layers. Although states have the primary say over educational decisions, the federal government plays a role as well as local and state authorities.<sup>1</sup> The funding has been divided within schools to ensure academic success as well as social success with the inclusion of school nurses, school lunches, and gym classes.<sup>5</sup>

However, a recurring theme is that when budget cuts need to be made, the arts are one of the first areas to be cut, while science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes remain a central part of curriculums. One reason for this is the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957. When the United States witnessed Russia make this large technological advancement, STEM classes were made a top priority.<sup>5</sup> Society continues to become increasingly technological, and schools have the responsibility to prepare their students to be effective contributors to society outside the classroom. In 2017, the United States Department of Commerce reported that STEM occupations are expected to grow by 8.9% from 2014-2024 as compared to non-STEM occupations, which are only expected to grow by 6.4%.<sup>2</sup>

Dance is not only connected to physical education but also to art education. There is a commonly believed notion that government funding for the arts is a political issue, and dance has

been drawn into this due to its classification as art. Based on the results from the General Social Survey in 2000, conservatives are more likely to be opposed to art education because of the sacrilegious or violent elements that can be represented through art. In addition, the survey indicated that men, middle-class citizens, and people of lower education statuses are also less likely to support the arts. This is a large majority of the American population, and people's opinions are taken into consideration in this democracy when important decisions such as funding determinations are being made.<sup>6</sup>

## II. PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF DANCE

However, dance is much more than a politically polar art form. As a type of physical activity, there are numerous physiological benefits induced by dancing, including increased strength, coordination, stamina, and flexibility as well as decreased stress. Movement is fundamental to how humans function, as the theory of evolution states that animals developed brains to enhance their movement. It is from the movement that thoughts originated and are directed. This same idea applies today with the implementation of dance classes; one of the main reasons for its inclusion in the educational curriculum is for children to acquire and advance their fine and gross motor skills.<sup>7,8</sup>

Dance is also a healthy neurological activity. In young children whose brains are still developing, specifically ages seven and below, dance has been shown to improve how these children process movement and improve how efficiently they store these movement patterns.<sup>7</sup> It has the power to reorganize neural pathways in various regions of the brain. For example, the neurological areas that control the development and understanding of speech, the Broca and Wernicke areas, overlap with the neurological areas that control hand gestures, which are a

substantial component of dancing.<sup>8</sup> This overlap demonstrates that dance develops movement patterns that utilize the entire body, which prepares the brain for a wide variety of functions and movements.<sup>7</sup> In a primary research study by Ross and Butterfield, both boys and girls, between the ages of five and fourteen, developed observable increases in the number of mature gross motor patterns they possessed after 36 weeks of incorporating dance into gym classes, where half of all gym classes were used for dance and there was a final culminating performance.<sup>9</sup> This highlights dance's potential to engage children and progress their development more efficiently than traditional sports and gym classes are able to.

Dance physically benefits children whose bodies and brains develop traditionally, but it has also been shown to benefit children with developmental disabilities, who make up a significant portion of the public education population. Physical activity is no less important for special needs children, but traditional sports and gym activities are often too intense and fast-paced. Dance can be collaborative, but it also encourages individuals to develop their movement and artistry at their own pace without the competitive aspect of traditional sports. This can be beneficial for sedentary children with little movement experience as well as for physically aggressive children who have not yet learned to control their actions towards other children when they lose in games and competitions.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, children with Down syndrome struggle with their motor skills due to low muscle tone and delayed reaction times.<sup>4</sup> One study found that children with cerebral palsy who participated in regular dance classes showed increases in flexibility, stability, muscle tone, and respiratory and renal capabilities.<sup>9</sup> Another study found that at a summer camp, Camp Thunderbird, in 2003, minority students with special needs and students from general education classrooms were brought together and took ballroom dance classes that resulted in an end-of-camp performance. There was strong anecdotal evidence that

these different movement forms enhanced both fine and gross motor skills for the special needs students.<sup>4</sup>

### III. MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF DANCE

In addition to the physical benefits of including dance in the curriculum, there are also various mental and intellectual benefits that come from this incorporation. The typical educational curriculum is rigid and focuses more on test scores and outcomes rather than a student's engagement with and comprehension of the material. However, dance offers a different way of presenting information in a classroom setting. Dance requires multiple intelligences, including musical, interpersonal, and logical-mathematical intelligences.<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates that dance appeals to students with an array of different strengths and learning styles while encouraging them to explore and develop other intelligences.

Dance allows students more freedom in their learning, but it also allows instructors to deviate from the typical and exclusive teaching methods. The addition of dance in the classroom has been shown to deepen students' understanding of material as it is presented in a different format than a lecture, and this in turn increases student engagement levels. This is especially important for the special education curriculum, as children with learning disabilities are at a 50% greater risk than other children of dropping out of school.<sup>4</sup> Dance provides an intersection between artistry and movement that other sports do not, and this challenges children to become more aware of themselves and more intentional about their thoughts and actions.<sup>7</sup>

Children who do not connect well with traditional teaching methods can especially benefit from dance as an instructional method, but all children learn through actions and should be encouraged to do so. Eliot Eisner, a professor of arts education, claimed that concepts are first

understood through sensory experiences.<sup>8</sup> Dance itself is a multi-sensory experience, as it combines music, movement and gestures, creativity, and one's environment. This is further supported by the notion that dance has been essential to the survival of prehistoric communities. People in these times used dance as a social tool and as a method of passing values and cultural identities to future generations.<sup>7</sup> In fact, when language and movement convey contrasting information, the dominant idea comes from the movement. Since young children understand movement far before they can understand language, gesturing helps children of all ages to articulate their thoughts beyond what their vocabularies are capable of. Ultimately, this decreases the frustration of learning new concepts, as dance encourages multiple ways to express this new information beyond a precise string of words.<sup>7,8</sup>

Children progress from simple gestures to speech to advance their communication skills and neurological development. Additionally, once children master their primary language, other languages are often taught at home or at school. Bilingualism offers many benefits, such as increased neuroplasticity, enhanced development of new areas of the brain, an increased ability to multitask, and an expanded appreciation for different cultures.<sup>5,8</sup> Learning to dance has been closely compared to learning a new verbal language. Both dance and verbal language possess vocabulary, grammar, symbolism, and sequence connection, and the benefits of learning a new language are also seen when one learns to dance. Bilingualism also allows the skills learned from different languages to complement each other. For example, a study from the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education found that flamenco dance helped build the confidence of students learning to speak English as a second language.<sup>8</sup>

This newfound confidence that dance instills carries children farther into their development, especially their emotional maturation. Through movement, children become more

aware of themselves. This self-discovery leads to increased self-esteem, which provides children with the confidence to approach new and people and situations in a school setting. For example, a primary research study done by Lobo and Winsler consisted of forty impoverished preschool students. The students in the experimental group showed considerably greater gains in social competence and confidence than the children in the control group. The participants were reluctant to hold hands in the beginning of the study, but they were spontaneously holding hands and enjoyed interacting in socially appropriate ways by the end of the program.<sup>10</sup> Similar results have been found for older school children as well. A primary research study from Masadis et al. in 2019 showed that when traditional Greek dance was taught to 206 elementary school pupils, there was a significant decrease in inappropriate and aggressive behaviors and a rise in socially acceptable manners in the experimental group with no change in the control group.<sup>11</sup> Participation in dance classes helps a child develop emotionally, but participation in choreographic activities also allows children to take ownership of what they create.<sup>8</sup> This feature of dance gives students a sense of control when other factors in their lives may be out of their hands, which can ultimately help to strengthen their sense of responsibility and confidence in their growing abilities.

#### IV. PORTRAYAL OF DANCE

Despite the numerous benefits provided by dance, the activity is still burdened by stereotypes; this negative portrayal discourages politicians and educational leaders from giving it a greater place in schooling. Although science and other STEM subjects have become the priority of many educators, dance has been around much longer than these sciences; it has been a fundamental cultural aspect since the start of civilizations and continues to be integral. However,

dance is portrayed as solely a social and cultural physical activity because prior to the twentieth century, that was all it was. However, with the development of modern dance in the early 1900s and the implementation of dance departments in higher education institutions in the 1980s, society began to view dance in a more serious and academic light. It was not until the option to earn a doctoral degree in dance became available that many people accepted the idea of dance being something more than a simple art form.<sup>8</sup> Once this was recognized and dance began to gain more respect, educators and policy makers began to realize that dance influences the culture of a school and its students, as well as strengthens the connections with the community through partnerships and performances.<sup>12</sup> Dance is beneficial for the cohesion and profile of schools, but the arts are also classified as “core academic subjects” under federal and state laws, and this is not widely known.<sup>7</sup>

Many myths and stereotypes arise from dance’s little known academic stature. When people think of dance, they tend to conjure an image of a ballerina in a tutu floating across a stage, which creates a femininely biased stereotype. This often deters many young boys from becoming involved with dance, as they are trying to establish their own sense of self and are uneasy about anything that could change their portrayal as a tough male. As a result, physical educators have been hesitant about including dance in the curriculum.<sup>9</sup> Another myth that obstructs dance’s academic path is the notion that arts education should only be provided for naturally gifted and talented children. However, math is not only taught to mathematically gifted students, and biology is not only taught to students with a special interest in nature.<sup>13</sup> The same should hold true for dance, as a well-rounded education in all subjects is necessary for a student to reach their full potential and discover their true passions. It is healthy for children to step out

of their comfort zones and for their ideas and stereotypes to be challenged, and educators and policy makers must be made aware of the possibilities that this discrepancy is preventing.

## V. APPLICATION OF DANCE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Dance has its fair share of benefits for children while they are in the classroom setting, but the skills that dance strengthens travel with students far beyond school walls. Children attend school to become prepared for the next step in their education and ultimately, for successful careers. Not only does dance involve multiple art forms such as music and scenery, but it also promotes interdisciplinary topics. When students learn about the history of dance or the importance of dance in both past and present cultures, they are engaging in history and sociology. When students learn about administration of the arts or how the how professional dance companies run, they are engaging in business ideas. Through choreography and interactions with others, students are fine-tuning their critical thinking, interpersonal, and observational skills, which relates to psychology and philosophy.

Dance is also a rich gateway to scientific study. Students are able to engage creatively with anatomy, kinesiology, physics, and health and wellness as they explore how their bodies move and the muscle forces required to create these movements. In fact, it was through movement and sensory experiences that Albert Einstein developed his theory of relativity before he could articulate it.<sup>8</sup> Einstein did not make this career-altering discovery by sitting in a classroom; he utilized movement to advance his career. Additionally, the observational skills that children gain from watching others perform the steps are necessary for successful medical careers.<sup>8</sup> Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers must observe their patients carefully to watch for changes in their signs, symptoms, and progress.

Hence, dance draws on skills required in many careers that cannot be taught in a lecture, and these skills are the backbone of any strong and adaptable employee.<sup>13</sup> If a child learns to adapt their movement and self-correct at a young age, they will be able to better adapt their mindset and self-correct their work in their future careers.

Dance enhances the skills required to join the workforce, but there is more to life than a career, and dance helps children with these skills as well. Primarily, dance is a powerful platform for connection. It encourages people to have more civil and agreeable interactions with one another, which is a skill that is needed throughout one's entire life. For example, children are able to release their emotions safely through dance and this emptying of emotions builds up a greater awareness of self and others.<sup>7</sup> This theme, awareness of self and others, is a core objective in the Residential Life curriculum at Sacred Heart University. Resident Success Assistants must create programs that enhance their residents' understanding of themselves and their cooperation with others. If children are able to gain a concrete yet basic understanding of their minds work through dance, this skill will only continue to improve by the time the child reaches college age, where it is evidently still needed. In a study done in New York City in 2018, the effect of dance on students' interpersonal interactions was strong and clear. 95% of teachers reported increased collaboration from their students, 66% of principals reported increased acceptance of others, and 81% of students reported increased respect with which they treated each other.<sup>13</sup> These improved relationships and interactions encourage students to find comfort in one another, and the children who engage are less likely to struggle with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.<sup>10</sup>

## VI. HOW TO INCORPORATE DANCE INTO EDUCATION

The actual inclusion of dance in the educational setting is a multi-layered and gradual approach. Primarily, there must be a clear and defined purpose for introducing dance into the curriculum. This can take a variety of forms, but there must be at least one goal that will guide dance's introduction and development in the school setting. Examples of purposes include the improvement of engagement in physical fitness or creative collaboration and cooperation among students.<sup>4</sup> The purpose may vary between different schools and different age levels, but school children of all ages should receive a dance education in some capacity. This includes children in preschool, which is a crucial time in their development. Here, children begin to interact with other people outside of their families and if these social interactions are negative or inadequate, communication and cooperation issues compile as children continue through their schooling.<sup>10</sup>

It is also important to consider the methods that will be utilized for delivering dance education. Children should not solely learn dance in a classroom; they should be presented with the opportunities to choreograph, perform, and appreciate it.<sup>12</sup> The processes of dancing and choreographing are different and thus promote different and equally valuable skills. Dancers must use and build upon their observational and self-correction skills to reproduce the movement that is given to them. On the other hand, choreographers must utilize their knowledge of technique, sequencing, spacing, and musical beats and themes to produce a mature and complete movement sequence that conveys a message or story. Additionally, choreographers must be able to keep the order among their dancers and manage a classroom in order to create their work efficiently. It is through this creative process where children are most encouraged to grow as they learn to persevere through creative blocks by trial and error.<sup>8</sup> Students should also have the opportunity to present either the work they have learned or choreographed. These presentations

are beneficial for students' self-esteem and confidence, especially when their parents, peers, and community members are supporting their talent from the audience.<sup>12</sup>

These benefits and culminating presentations can be the result of dance as its own subject or a component of other academic courses. Historically, educators and government officials have been hesitant towards combining dance with core academic subjects as they are concerned with one or both disciplines being devalued from this combination. However, the opposite is true. Dance becomes more powerful when it is connected with other themes, such as those found in literature or science. These combinations demonstrate the true breadth of dance and help students realize how movement can help them better understand academic concepts.<sup>8</sup> These benefits also come from dance as an extracurricular activity but dancing at a studio is a lavish expense and this discriminates against impoverished families. Children whose families live in poverty have more pressing concerns than financing dance classes, so providing free and accessible dance education through the child's school eliminates these financial decisions without robbing children of the various benefits provided by dance.<sup>10</sup>

In order to make the experience of dance education positive and successful, the choice of instructors must be considered. It is important to find individuals who can connect with children and who possess and background and degree in dance or dance pedagogy. Additional partnerships to local dance studios, professional companies, or other schools with dance curriculums also heighten the credibility of an instructor, as they are able to synthesize these various backgrounds and bring different approaches to their students.<sup>12</sup> As previously discussed, students with special needs also benefit greatly from dance education. The instructors for this population of students must also be considered, as it is likely to vary from the instructors of the general student population. Special education teachers are likely a strong fit for this job, as they

have already established trusting connections with their students. In this case, these teachers could participate in dance pedagogy courses or collaborate with dance educators to truly enhance this artistic experience for their students.<sup>4</sup> Although the instructor's credentials matter a great deal, it is also necessary that they bring a positive and encouraging attitude to their job. Each student's ideas should be valued in order to make them feel heard and appreciated. In traditional sports seen in gym classes, there are often winners and losers to the games that are played. On the contrary, if dance instructors create an environment where all children feel that they have won at some aspect of the class and creative process, their confidence will continue to grow and their capabilities will expand.<sup>10</sup>

However, choosing an instructor is only one piece of this experience. Teachers and high-level school officials must also be onboard and invested. If children see that their role models and superiors are interested in the curriculum, their enthusiasm for dance has a better chance of taking off. The same applies to parents. If a child's parents are supportive of the work their child is dancing or choreographing, the child will be more likely to nurture their passion for dance and discover more of their own unique movement patterns. Furthermore, budgets are often tight in many public schools, but without proper funding or resources, dance will be cast aside and children will not take it seriously, thus missing out on the benefits it provides.<sup>8</sup> Music is also a substantial component of any dance experience. From the first musical relationship between a mother and her child through the use of lullabies and soothing, there is not a known time or place in history where music and dance have not existed in a symbiotic relationship. Both dance and music are multi-sensory but because they touch upon different senses, they complement and enhance each other. In a study of tango dancers who danced both with and without music, there

was a higher level of brain activation (specifically in the anterior cerebellar vermis) when the dancers performed to music.<sup>14</sup>

## VII. RESOLUTIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although public education has long been established in the United States, it is not, and should not be, a static system. Physical education classes have been added and modified over the centuries, but dance has yet to find its permanent home in the educational curriculum. This is often the result of strict budgets and disagreements among policy makers, which increases the need to project the benefits that dance provides. Dance is primarily a physical activity, and the fine and gross motor skills that children need in their everyday and classroom lives are fine-tuned by dance. In addition, children require assistance with their emotional and mental maturation as they progress through their education. Dance can be this helping hand because it allows for more freedom in how children learn material, and many children do not take to traditional lecture methods. Children also learn how to better interact and share ideas with one another when sharing an intimate art form such as dance. Despite these positive aspects of dance, it is often still portrayed and stereotyped in a rigid and narrow light, which hinders its fight for a place in the curriculum. The emphasis on dance's impact both inside and outside the classroom helps to strengthen its case, as the skills that children develop through dance stay with them into their careers and lives. Through the proper and methodical inclusion of dance into school settings, the big picture of dance's necessity in children's lives becomes clearer.

However important it is to focus on the big picture of dance in education, the emotions inside of children's minds must not be forgotten. These little emotions are trying their best to make

their way in this vast and daunting world, and why trudge monotonously through these challenges when they can dance to their own beat?

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