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**Improving Development in Youth:
My implementation of an after-school dance program
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Dance/Education

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Abstract

Dance has proven to have many benefits to children's learning and development. The use of movement supports students processing, social emotional, and motor skills. Research shows that the integration of dance in education increases development in the affective domain providing an avenue for students to express themselves and explore emotions. It also has been linked to improved cognitive development resulting in higher test scores and grade point averages. This study of an after school dance program with first and second grade students supported the research. The surveys and observations gathered from the dance program showed many positive short term affects on development connected to the dance education.

Keywords: *Dance, Education, Development*

For the Honors Research Project, the researcher used knowledge of education, combined with the expertise in dance, to create a free, after school dance program. The goal of the program was to provide children with the opportunity to grow and develop through the art of dance. Dance promotes a sense of well-being, is a great source of exercise, and serves as an outlet for emotions. It was evident that in just eight weeks, the participating children in the after school dance program excelled in all aspects of their life.

The program occurred at Northwest Local Elementary School, my alma mater. A suburban public school located in Canal Fulton with about 400 students from grades kindergarten- second grade. With the help of my sister, a fellow dance instructor, we were able to accept 48 students into the program. After school we gathered the students into the cafeteria where we spent about fifteen minutes unwinding from the day. We would have snack, take a restroom break, and let the kids hang out together. Then we would head to the gym and have our dance class.

At the end of the 8 weeks, the dancers got the opportunity to perform at halftime of the varsity basketball game, which was such an exciting experience for the kids. On the last day of class, parents to observed and completed a survey of their opinion and observations of the program. The survey contained the following questions:

1. "Did your child enjoy the program? How did you know?"
2. "Did you see short term benefits from he program in your child?
(In learning, attitude, confidence, coordination, and/or other skills?"
3. "If this program was longer (18 weeks) do you think there would be any long term learning benefits? What kind?"

4. “What did you like about the dance program? What do you think could be changed to make the program better?”

Many elements of progress and development in cognitive, affective, and motor domains were observed in the children through dance and will use this paper to display my cited research with my personal experience along with parent surveys.

Most people would agree that music has a huge effect on the cognitive development of children, but what about dance? *“In the last 10 years, music’s status within cognitive neuroscience has moved from being a fringe area to a topic of central interest to neuroscientist. Dance seems to be poised to be “the next wave” in cognitive neuroscience. And, in fact, dance takes advantage of many of the strides made by music research and combines them with notions of motor control and sensorimotor coupling that have already attracted great interest in neuroscience (Brown, 2011).”* In both dance and music, you are working with movement patterns, rhythm, and timing. But in music, those elements move to make the sound, whereas with dance, the movement is the art itself.

Dancing requires the coordination of moving multiple body parts at one time. *“Much motor research in cognitive neuroscience is based on simple movements, such as finger tapping, grasping, or joystick movement. Dance by contrast typically involves full-body movement. While all actions involve complex patterns of body movement, dance is probably the single most complex form of movement that humans engage in (Brown, 2011).”* During warm ups in dance class, students work through all the individual body parts, first isolating one body part at a time, and then moving several body parts at the same time. It's very interesting to see how the children react to having to isolate one body part at a time and while some students pick it up easily, others

struggle with mind/body connection. Dance takes flexibility, strength, rhythm, and endurance, all of which were observed during the program.

Motor learning and imitation are other components of dance. *“Watching a motor act that is perceived as familiar and executable stimulates not only visual parts of the brain but motor planning areas as well. In addition, dance learning is often accomplished by means of imitation of experts, and so the neural circuits involved in imitation are well-engaged during dance learning, thereby leading to the condition in trained dancers in which observation alone can stimulate the motor system (Brown, 2011).* In the survey response, parents said the program was a good form of exercise and that there was increase in muscle flexibility. They also noticed an improvement to gross motor skills and coordination. One parent even mentioned that her child slept better on Thursday nights (the day our class was held) and that the class served as great way to release energy. Dancing takes flexibility, strength, rhythm, and endurance, all of which was evident to the parents and our students. In addition to the many physical benefits of dance, there are also social aspects to examine.

In the Miriam Giguere’s abstract entitled “Enhancing Cognition through children’s dance creation,” she states, *“For students to be maximally engaged cognitively, a group is necessary. In other words, students are more stimulated cognitively by creating a group rather than creating alone.”* Many social elements were exhibited, which are inevitably to surface when you combine children of different ages, lifestyle, experience, and background. *In Giguere’s study she observed that four distinct personalities emerged from the study data: facilitator/organizer, critic, loner, and compliant follower...the role of critic was necessary to bring about articulation and the presence of a “nay sayer” forced facilitator/organizer and sometimes compliant followers, to defend and analyze their choices...another key social role- that of the loner- was a*

child that preferred to work alone and return to small group when they had material to contribute.”

During the program all of the children fell began to fall into one of these roles. The “facilitators/organizers”, or the leaders, of the group were mostly those of who had previous dance training. These students in this role helped greatly by providing an example of the choreographed movement for less experienced dancers to follow along. They also helped maintain dance class etiquette and reminded others of the rules and directions. A few of the students fell into the “critic” role. These students were sometimes a challenge with the questions they asked or the rules they bent, but they added depth and variety to my program. At the beginning of the program we had a one or two students that fell into the “loner” role. These were mostly students who were shy, insecure, or lacked previous dance training. About four weeks into the program, however, the group’s established “cliques” had dispersed and everyone was working well together. The kids were able to find a place where everyone could contribute to the group in a positive way, while keeping their roles intact.

Another component of the social role that dance plays is in gesture and role playing. *“Dance dramas such as ballet can be thought of as narrative plays in the most theatrical sense of the term. In this regard, dancers have to capitalize on resources related to role playing, gesturing and pretense. Dance dramas highlight dance’s universal role as a gesture language. A dancer’s movement patterns are designed to serve as meaningful gestures of a character’s actions and emotional experiences (Gieguere, 2012).”* The dancers were given cues during “freeze dance” such as “dance like you're cold” or “dance like the sun is shining on you” to combine processing with the movement. There was also breaks or pausing often during choreography to explain the story the movement was expressing. The song lyrics were also

discussed to help explain the intention behind the lyrics and how it connects to the dance movements.

Interpersonal contact is a social and emotional advantage to dance. *“Dance involved body contact and thus interpersonal coupling. In addition to that are social and emotional attunement processes that accompany such physical coordination, including feelings of bonding, empathy, cooperation, and social identity (Gieguere, 2012).”* Many parents expressed that their children gained confidence as a result of participating in the program. Students also exhibited enthusiasm for their school day every Thursday when dance class was scheduled. There was also an obvious decline in social anxiety, stage fright, and shyness, all being obvious benefits from dancing.

In schools all around the U.S., several programs have been developed for the use of movement and expression to teach kids social-emotional skills. *“Dancing Classrooms, a nonprofit based in New York City brings ballroom dancing to schools primarily in undeserved communities. Ballroom is used as a vehicle for teaching elementary-and middle-schools social-emotional skills like respect and teamwork and, by extension, empathy. For many underprivileged students, in-class time with programs like Dancing Classrooms is the only time that they will have regular exposure to the arts (Yap, 2016).”* Like **Dancing Classrooms**, my goal was to bring dance and its benefits to all children, regardless of their situation. Dance serves as an outlet for children who need a safe way to express their positive and negative feelings. Baja Poindexter, a teaching artist with **Dancing Classrooms** had a whole class descend into a collective crying for when students threw verbal jabs at each other about relatives dying from gang violence. Poindexter said, *“They’re at a disadvantage, and at some point, they realize*

they're at a disadvantage. Will dance keep them away from some of these negative things? I do believe that, and that's why I teach (Yap, 2016)."

Dance and Dialogue was started by Glucksmen Kelsch who had a shared the belief in the power of dance. *"The free one-day workshop convenes middle-schoolers from various socioeconomic strata in L.A. County to take master dance classes in different genres; last year's event featured a class taught by a deaf instructor. They also bond with each other by sharing personal stories in small group sessions modeled on the Native American talking circle."*

Dancing is most effective at bringing children together by providing a common interest that can be joyfully shared no matter what the socioeconomic background. *"In its first year, Dance and Dialogue drew 80 students; now in its third, the workshop is expanding to two days and Kelsch anticipates over 300 students will participate."* Another program called, **Move This World**, promotes emotional well being through the idea of "dancing out" our problems. *"Move This World outfits schools with a video-based curriculum of daily ritualized tools (movements and mantras, for example) designed to help students and teachers manage stress and express emotions (Yap, 2016)."*

The success of programs like these are apparent. *"In a 2014-2015 survey, 66 percent reported an 'increased acceptance of others' among their student bodies, while 81 percent of students said they treated others with more respect, following the **Dancing Classrooms** program (Yap, 2016)."* Not only does it improve the morale of a school body, but it can also specifically target underprivileged children exposing them to the art of dance and using its benefit to improve their education. *"Studies have shown the cognitive benefits students experience through being exposed to dance and other art forms, which is linked to improved test scores and grade point averages, especially for disadvantaged students (Hanna, 1992)."* Dance programs

like these also encourages conflict resolution through artistic expression. *“Move This World partners reported 37 percent decrease in incidents of conflicts from the 2013-2014 to 2014-2015 school years, although the decrease cannot be exclusively attributed to using the curriculum (Yap, 2016).”*

Our parents survey showed similar positive results in our dancers. Almost every parent listed how excited and motivated the kids were to come to dance class on Thursdays. Our students shared a common goal of working hard every week to prepare for the big performance at the basketball game, and therefore bonded over this goal. There was an improvement in the student’s attitude towards each other and their attitude towards coming to school was noted to be drastically better. A lot of parents mentioned that their children practiced at home and displayed more focus and concentration than before.

While the benefits should make the case that arts education is necessary, arts education is disappearing in schools. *“Since the 2008 recession, arts funding in school districts around the country has been adversely affected, making programs cost-prohibitive for schools in low-income communities in particular, where other sources of funding are often hard to come by (Yap,2016).”* Sadly this means that less affluent schools, containing the children who will benefit most, will have restricted arts education programming. *“What we find ourselves doing sometimes is putting the fewest amount of dollars in schools where the students need it the most (Yap, 2016).”* Some schools are hoping to narrow the gap between students who have access to arts and those who don’t by integrating movement into academic topics, such as setting choreography to explain the water cycle, or using movement to understand how the body’s anatomy works. Despite the method in which movement is incorporated, it is clear that dance serves as a huge asset to the classroom.

Overall, through the research conducted and studied in the dance program combined with the observational and survey completed results showed many benefits of the integrations of dance in education to be very evident. The students showed great growth in affective development associated with expression of emotions, confidence in learning, and attitudes towards one another.

Resources

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