

The Importance of Dance Education in Relation to the Need for Connection

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Abstract

Dance is the physical expression of what our lives look like – they include a combination of steps, a rhythm of patterns, connections with people and a series of emotions. As educators, we are teaching students how to navigate adolescence and, by extension, how to live in the world. Dancer and religious scholar, Kimerer LaMothe stresses that there “is a dancer in each of us and a dance in everything we do” (LaMothe, 2015, p. 15). There is a crisis in dance education, as evidenced by the diminishing importance of programs in public education systems. This issue is not new, as Shirley Hoad posits how dance in provinces across Canada had been pushed aside and/or lumped together with physical education courses (Hoad, p. 46; 1990). Ann Dils (2007) reflected on a similar issue, questioning why dance was absent from schooling when there was significant evidence that children were better able to express themselves through movement than through traditional literacy instruction (Dils, 2007). Focusing on Hannah Arendt’s (1958a) theory of ‘worldlessness’, tells a cautionary tale of the potential dangers a loss of dance education would bring. This paper will conclude with Maxine Greene’s (1995) *Releasing the Imagination* and Arendt’s *The Crisis in Education* (1958b) to pose hope for the future of dance.

Keywords: *Wordlessness, dance, education, connection*

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What is Dance Education?

According to dance educator Jaqueline Smith-Autard (2002) dance education can be divided into three modes of learning: professional, midway and educational (Smith-Autard, 2002, p. 4). The professional model of education is often seen at the secondary and/or post-secondary levels of schooling, where the goal is to produce highly technical professional dancers (Smith-Autard, p. 4). The professional model prioritizes product over process and maintains strict expectations for student aesthetic in dance (Smith-Autard, p. 6). This model of education can be viewed as training in dance traditions and is usually seen in professional dance companies or arts-based schools where the teacher is the expert and the student is there to take direction and adapt (Smith-Autard, p. 6). The educational dance model is the opposite, where the process is arguably more important than the product (Smith-Autard, p. 6). The model focuses more on creativity and individuality than on technique or on repeating the same body movements. The teacher is seen as the guide, and the student is encouraged to ask questions, problem-solve, and develop autonomy in their learning (Smith-Autard, p. 6). The midway model combines both forms of education, blending them to prioritize both process and product (Smith-Autard, p. 27). With the midway model of dance education, students are given a balance between learning techniques and creating (Smith-Autard, p. 27). For the scope of this paper, I focus on the midway and educational model of teaching dance education. The Ontario curriculum focuses on both process and product, thus advancing a blend of these two modes of learning (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Dance is one of the few subject areas that targets all four stages of student development: kinesthetic, aesthetic, cognitive, and psychological (McCutchen, 2006, p. 63). Dance educator

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Brenda Pugh McCutchen (2006), breaks down the stages of development in child development and shows how dance education addresses each stage. Kinesthetic development is directly related to motor development which dance can help with coordination, mobility and musicality (McCutchen, 2006). Aesthetic development allows the student to view and connect movement to their own emotions and creativity (McCutchen, 2006). Cognitive development in dance trains the student to problem-solve through choreography, plan and thus develop critical thinking skills (McCutchen, 2006). Finally psychological development in dance targets the social realm of learning (McCutchen, 2006). Students can collaborate and create community through dance. Dance allow students various opportunities to integrate both the body and brain to created holistic learning experiences.

Arendt's *Worldlessness*

Hannah Arendt's 1958 work, *The Human Condition*, explores how society functions. Along with the curricular benefits of dance for learners, dance is critical to cultivating worldliness in students. The crisis of dance education is related to Arendt's chapter "The Crisis in Education" from her 1958 work, *Between Past and Present*. Arendt believes that the purpose of education is to prepare students for the real world, therefore making them more worldly (Arendt, 1958, p. 177). Dance education prepares students cognitively and physically for real-world situations, enabling them to become independent movers, thinkers, and feelers. Arendt's work supports the idea of the importance of dance education, as she calls for fostering connection and education to support our futures.

Hannah Arendt describes a world without connection as "worldless" (Arendt, 1958a, p. 54). The absence of connection to each other and the world will cause us to become disengaged, even robotic. Robotic behaviour can be seen in our everyday lives, with our dependency on

technology. We are living in a world where our only source of connection is being reduced to likes, shares and views. We are measuring our happiness based on comparison and doing things for attention. Technology cannot replace the arts, more specifically, dance. Dance is the physical expression of emotion, rhythm and culture. The feeling of connection in a dance space cannot be replaced.

Hannah Arendt distinguishes between the private and public realms of society, grounded in Ancient Greek life (Arendt, 1958a). She divides different sectors of our lives into private and public spaces but urges that the public realm is vital to keep communities united (Arendt, 1958a). She points out that politics making its way into the public realm causes conflict and warns us that it can separate us if we do not keep both separate. She writes:

To understand the danger to human existence from the elimination of the private realm, for which the intimate is not a very reliable substitute, it may be best to consider those non private traits of privacy which are older than, and independent of, the discovery of intimacy. The difference between what we have in common and what we own privately is first that our private possessions, which we use and consume daily, are much more urgently needed than any part of the common world; without property, as Locke pointed out, ‘the common is of no use.’ (Arendt, 1958a, p. 70)

The public realm has lost its power to unite us, the more we shift to a selfish mindset of individualism. Arendt puts education in the domain of the *domos*, which prepares people for public participation. Learning to participate in public is part of the role of education and school. As dance is a worldly activity (an activity that moves us into the world) it supports us to be together with others in public. Dance brings us together through sharing dance, viewing performances and making political statements.

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Hannah Arendt explains that “Worldlessness as a political phenomenon,” she writes, “is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene.” (Arendt, 1958a, p. 54). The same could be said for education as preparation for public and political life. Education without worldliness leaves teachers little to prepare students for the real world. Worldlessness promotes disconnection between our bodies, our environment and each other. Living in such a world leads to a loss of purpose and feelings of loneliness. The world often already feels large and intimidating, so with the loss of purpose, we all may feel isolated. This will impact students' lives—being a teenager is already a time when one can feel lost and misunderstood. Eliminating movement classes will only amplify these feelings. Lyndley suggests, “Dance is important to their growth, self-esteem and creative expression, and allows them to think, feel and move simultaneously” (Lyndley, 2015). Dance education can help students navigate who they are in a time when they need most, such as adolescence. As such, dance “fosters opportunities for discussion and practice around self-regulatory skills. In a safe and secure environment, students are able to explore how to express feelings, interpret the emotions of others and practice being empathetic people” (Lyndley, 2015).

In my experience, students returned to the classroom with a reliance on their personal devices and are hesitant to practice social and collaborative skills. Students in elementary classrooms can use their dance education class time to develop critical analysis skills and collaborate with students in their class (Lyndley, 2015). It has been found that students engaged in arts-based learning achieve higher academic outcomes across multiple subject areas (Cattrell et al., p. 24, 2012). Especially students who come from at-risk backgrounds, can achieve higher academic levels when involved in the arts throughout their educational upbringing (Catterall et

al., p. 24, 2012). Referring to Gloria Ladson-Billings' 1995 study, the key to culturally relevant teaching is to "value their skills and abilities and channel them in academically important ways" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). She also suggests using students' cultural knowledge and backgrounds as a "vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). This approach to teaching has helped guide teachers to put the learner first and value the importance of getting to the students, before being able to teach them. It is vital in a creative classroom to understand the learner for them to prosper and understand their creative choices.

Dance has always been thought of as a form of connection among people. Celebrations often include dancing, such as weddings, birthdays, and religious celebrations. Dance is part of who we are as a society as it is "vital for the health and well-being of our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves; for our families, our communities, and our relationship with the earth in us and around us. It is vital for our humanity" (LaMothe, 2015, p. 3). Similarly, Arendt (1958a) sees the only thing that can keep us together is the concept of community and objectivity. She fears that if people cannot agree on what is in front of them in the public realm, then we are heading in the direction of 'wordlessness.' She explains that there is little that still gathers communities, "What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them" (Arendt, p. 53). She explains that dance is one of the earliest forms of communication; when language fails, dance can unite society instead. Arendt suggests that people are moving towards a world where they will no longer be able to acknowledge and agree on what is physically around them. As such, the world is moving towards a space where it is difficult to be able to acknowledge and agree on what is physically around, "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and

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ourselves” (Arendt a, p. 50). She stresses the importance of allowing space for debate, recognizing that people may hold differing views on why things are the way they are.

Failing to provide students with the opportunity to communicate physically is denying them a chance to connect with anything other than language, which is limiting, confusing and impossible at times. The loss of dance is the loss of connection with ourselves and with each other. Dance is rooted in almost every culture in the world (LaMothe, 2015, p. 9). Dance has always been thought of as a form of connection among many. (Murray 2024). Celebrations often include dance such as weddings, birthdays, and religious celebrations. LaMothe explains that dance is part of who we are as a society, as explained, “It is vital for the health and well-being of our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves; for our families, our communities, and our relationship with the earth in us and around us. It is vital for our humanity” (2015, p. 3). Dance is an expression of people’s culture and connects us again because there is no need to translate movement - it is a universal language. People can learn about culture through dance practices. Denying students of dance is a part of their history. Diversity cannot flourish when physical expression is taken away.

The way to combat this is to use Arendt’s theory of *natality* to begin again (Arendt a, p. 178). She believes that we are born to live; therefore, living includes creating, feeling, and expressing our lives in every way possible. She states:

This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world, it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before. It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started (Arendt, 1958, p. 178).

There needs to be a reintroduction of dance education. Creative movement speaks to Arendt's idea of natality – every movement is spontaneous, sudden and an invitation to a new possibility.

Furthermore, educational philosopher Maxine Greene's *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), discusses the importance of widening our vision for education and expanding it beyond what it is. She emphasizes that the future is leading with creativity and imagination to ignite learning. She states:

Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers' eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities (Greene, 1995, p.3).

Dance education requires the imagination to succeed. As discussed, dance is an outward expression of inner emotions, therefore, the core is the imagination. She goes on to theorize the possibilities of including creative learning:

to have a number of languages to hand and not verbal or mathematical languages alone. Some children may find articulation through imagery; others, through body movement; still others, through musical sound. Mastery of a range of languages is necessary if communication is to take place beyond small enclosures within the culture; without multiple languages, it is extremely difficult to chart the lived landscape, thematizing experience over time (Greene, p.57).

We know that often children learn differently from one another; therefore, our education system should reflect that. The education system is built for pen-to-paper learning and often

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lacks room for creativity with the heavy emphasis on standardized testing and grades. In my opinion, schools should focus on teaching students to discover their passions rather than what subjects will reward them the wealthiest careers. In his 2006 TedTalk, Ken Robinson discusses whether schools kill creativity. He states that no school teaches dance every day the same way they teach literacy or mathematics (Robinson, 2006). When pondering this question, he explained that as children get older, the education system starts to educate them from the “waist up” (Robinson, 2006). The education system makes learners “unembodied” using their bodies to “transport their heads to meetings” (Robinson, 2006). This idea articulates the crisis I am seeing with dance education. In my experience, people dismiss the intelligence required to be a dancer and deem the subject as ‘easy’ or ‘unacademic’. Robinson articulates that schools were created during the industrialization era to create workers, therefore, subjects that resulted in work related to engineering, business, etc. were prioritized (Robinson, 2006). Every form of entertainment, such as reading, watching television, listening to music, going to plays, etc., stem from creative art forms. If the education system keeps dismissing the value of the arts, where will that lead the world?

Students are meant to be in school to learn the life skills they need to succeed as adults, so why is the use of the imagination rarely considered a life skill? As adults, we often see that the ‘real world’ lacks imagination and can feel ‘worldless.’ In Arendt’s *The Crisis in Education* (1958b), she characterizes the crisis as adults' reluctance to assume responsibility for the world's poor state, leading to a tendency to shield students from difficult truths. She states, “In education this responsibility for the world takes the form of authority...the teacher’s qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world” (Arendt, p. 189). I argue that failing to provide a

creative environment for children to use their creativity and imagination will only create a darker world where Arendt's idea of natality or beginning again will not be possible. Imagination not only inspires questions but also encourages change. Change interrupts the current system and pushes Arendt's idea of natality forward—to begin again. Greene shares a similar hope for the future by discussing the hope for possibilities when releasing the imagination is possible in education, “The democratic community, always a community in the making, depends not so much on what has been achieved and funded in the past. It is kept alive: it is energized and radiated by an awareness of future possibility” (Greene, p.166). The only hope for dance education to be able to survive is advocacy.

Dance Education in Crisis

Everything we do is a movement, therefore dance is all around us. LaMothe describes humanity and movement as interconnected that, “Every movement that we make, every movement that we are impelled or compelled to make, consciously or not, participates in the making of who we are (LaMothe, 2015, p. 15). Dance allows us to be more comfortable in our own skin and how we conduct ourselves in society. Dance is the way we interact with each other and foster connection. Dance education encourages students to explore new ways of knowing themselves and connecting with peers and the outer world.

The ongoing neglect of arts education is not a new issue, but it appears to be worsening over time (Winner & Hetland 2008). Arts programs are often sidelined in favor of subjects deemed more essential, such as math and English. Winner and Hetland (2008) argue that the value of these subjects is not that they benefit students more than others, but rather that they enhance learners' abilities to develop into better thinkers in the future (Winner & Hetland, 2008,

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p. 29). Despite being somewhat dated, this research critically analyzes the necessity of arts-based education for K-12 students. Arts education is often undervalued as an effective learning method, challenging the conventional definitions of learning. The study states, “We don’t need the arts in our schools to raise mathematical and verbal skills– we already target these in math and language arts...the arts teach vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking” (p. 31). This study also highlights the importance of integrating arts education in other subject areas like math and science (p. 31). Engagement with arts education can foster the development of well-rounded cognitive skills in students (p 31). By integrating arts-based methodologies within conventional educational frameworks, learners are exposed to diverse modes of thinking and problem-solving. Furthermore, this integration may enhance their performance on standardized assessments, as it cultivates critical skills that are applicable across various domains of learning and achievement. (p. 31).

Mara Sapon-Shevin (2009) argues that dance is often not privileged in public education because of its focus on embodied knowledge rather than pen and paper. Sapon-Shevin states, “If bodies were fully integrated, accepted and valued in education, then students would be taught the language of bodies. They would be encouraged to move their bodies during the day in a variety of settings. Bodies would be respected as an important source of information and knowledge” (Sapon-Sevin, 2009, p. 177). This issue seems to stem from the Western emphasis of cognition as intelligence in education.

Along with developing embodied knowledge, dance introduces cross-cultural forms of learning through the body. Research suggests that people who engage in cultural dance forms have better spatial and bodily awareness (Liu et al., 2024, p. 1). Globally, cross-cultural dance forms provide new ways of teaching the histories of indigenous peoples. They have proven to

create more diverse and inclusive learning experiences for students of all ages. (Liu et al., 2024, p. 12). Dance has been able to educate in multiple ways, “Dance is considered a significant cultural practice tool, serving multiple functions such as cultural transmission, social education, and identity construction” (Liu et. al., 2024, p. 12). This study helps show the benefits of engaging with cultural dance in students' educational journeys.

Dance education professors at NYU (2024), discusses the concept of *The Black School*, a travelling school founded by Joseph Cullier and Shani Peters in New York City (Desai et al., 2024, p. 14). The schools’ aim to use art to teach about African American history as a form of anti-racist, decolonial education (Desai et al., 2024, p. 14). The school has had great success in opening students’ ideas of creativity and Black representation in arts education. This is another example of how decolonizing and anti-racist pedagogy and using culturally relevant methods can help advance and support arts education.

Dance engages plurality in the classroom both individually and in collective. Dance instruction is often daunting for many, primarily due to its associations with Western styles such as ballet, which are typically reserved for highly trained professionals and, as a result, become inaccessible to the public. Nyama McCarthy-Brown's work about culturally relevant teaching states that “Dance is a cultural experience. It is a racial experience. It is a gendered experience. It is a kinesthetic body experience. All of this is to say that one’s experience in dance is reflective of his or her demographic and dance environment” (McCarthy-Brown, 2017, p. 14). Her book designs a way for teachers to integrate cultural dance in any dance environment to ensure students are exploring all that dance has to offer and are fairly represented. This is another way dance education differentiates itself from other subjects—it is the living embodiment of history and culture for students.

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As a secondary dance teacher, I have experienced first-hand how the inclusion of cultural dance forms is able to grow an interest in the dance program through culturally relevant pedagogy, coined by McCarthy Brown (2017). This past school year, I ran six extracurricular dance teams to ensure students find their place in dance at the school. The dance teams included cultural styles like Bhangra, Bollywood, Hip Hop and Afro-Dancehall. These teams were choreographed by students who have training in these styles from their cultural experiences and communities. Together, we were able to perform for the school community and create a culturally relevant dance experience for everyone to be a part of. It was a celebration of dance and the diversity that the school community has to offer. These teams encouraged students to want to engage in dance education throughout their high school studies and encouraged those watching to also join. Creating spaces where students can have community and celebrate their cultures, in my experience, has proven to be an effective way to promote dance education.

Dance Education in Ontario

In the Ontario Secondary Arts Curriculum (2010), students can learn about the solar system by creating shapes of the planets with their classmates or how animals live by imagining their environment through creative movement. Students can learn how to read by applying movement to the words in the book. Students can learn language by exploring the culture's dance. Dance is everywhere, and yet we give it so little credit. We often dismiss our movement and do not take the time to appreciate what our bodies can do.

The current Ontario dance curriculum's front matter describes the importance and benefits of an arts education, such as linking the arts with other subject areas, connections to culture, increasing kinesthetic learning and coordination, to name a few (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2010, p.4). My question then is if the province clearly states all the benefits and ways to advance dance education, why is it rarely given the funding or attention it deserves? The Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE) state that “dance is most certainly the least understood and the least delivered by teachers in Ontario schools” (Council of Ontario Dance & Drama Education, 2019). They equate this to the lack of teacher education in faculties of education in Ontario (CODE, 2019). There are very few faculties of education that offer dance as a teachable subject (York University being one of them), thus result in a lack of understanding and practice of the dance curriculum for many teachers especially at the elementary level (CODE, 2019). Teachers can opt to take additional qualification courses but very few universities offer in person classes for the dance Additional Qualification. (CODE, 2019).

At the elementary level teachers will often outsource their dance unit to various companies that claim to cover the entire dance curriculum in their short workshops (CODE, 2019). This alone poses a huge issue, due to the lack of expertise needed to teach, support and evaluate the dance portion of the curriculum. The compromises to dance education further discredits the subject and teach both teachers and students it can be given away for a few hours and checked off as something they covered for their arts credit. Although there is little evidence to be found, I speculate this is why I am experiencing a lack of dance education at the secondary level. Students are being given minimal exposure to dance in their elementary education, thus making them question the efficacy of it in secondary schools. It is an insult to me as a professional in this field that dance is treated so poorly in the Ontario public school system.

Dance education has the power to transform students’ everyday experiences by opening them up to new ways of thinking, creating and connecting with each other. There has been a decline in dance courses in public education due to a lack of funding, support and value for the

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courses (Aikat, 2015). Research has shown an increasing concern for the lack of importance given to dance education in the public education system. In a 2008 study at Simon Fraser University, Karen Kurnaedy states, “One of the smaller and most neglected elements within the artistic sphere is dance and dance education” (Kurnaedy, 2008, p. 26). Students are encouraged to pursue courses and programs that will result in great wealth rather than engaging in learning for pleasure (Sundar Singh, 2023).

There is an absence in the educational field for creativity and transforming passion into work. In my experience as a teacher, students appeared to have re-entered the classroom with severely limited attention spans and a lack of excitement for education. Dance education is an area that is still able to fully integrate cognitive and kinesthetic learning to create well-rounded learners. The decline in the importance of these programs is a disservice to not only the students, but also to society. We are moving towards a world that is more divided than ever, where personal wealth and success are put ahead of community (Mackler, 2010). Arts education has never been needed more after a time when we felt so disconnected from one another. Dance has the potential to lead students towards success, bring people together in a post-crisis world and encourage creativity in learning.

Dance is seen as a disposable and irrelevant subject area that is often left out of children’s schooling experience (Aikat, 2015). Dance is not given the same respect as physical education is, even though the benefits are easily comparable. Physical education is given preference in funding, classes and teaching opportunities (Sundar Singh, 2023). Going further, subject areas like math and science are treated with even greater deference because they are considered more ‘practical’ subjects for students to engage with. There is an emphasis on preparing students for the ‘real world,’ but it deprives them of creative endeavours. This is where the idea that

education for pleasure is dismissed because students are now being taught that the acquisition of wealth is the path towards fulfillment, and the arts lack the means to achieve those ends. Dance programs are being cut with every passing budget cut and years by without curriculum updates (Aikat, 2015).

Conclusion

Dance education crucial for student development as it is a way of becoming and rebirth for humans. Everything humans do is a movement, therefore dance is all around. LaMothe describes humanity and movement as interconnected that, “Every movement that we make, every movement that we are impelled or compelled to make, consciously or not, participates in the making of who we are (LaMothe p. 15, 2015). Dance allows people to be more comfortable in their own skin and how they conduct themselves in society. Dance is the way to interact with each other and foster connection. Dance education encourages students to explore new ways of knowing themselves and connecting with peers and the outer world. Dance education is vital for the education system since it emphasizes a focus on the present and physical surroundings. As demonstrated throughout this paper, dance has the power to unite people in ways that few other disciplines can. Dance education is fleeting, yet more important than ever to ensure our youth stays connected to their bodies, each other, and culture. Arendt’s theory of ‘worldlessness’ will become a reality if creativity is not given a platform to thrive—dance can be the guiding light toward the future of education.

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