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Fostering Resilience: Connecting Children with Dance and Movement

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Fostering Resilience: Connecting Children with Dance and Movement

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Abstract

This paper aims to outline the way dance allows us to reconnect with our present selves, to accept ourselves, and to foster resilience. Providing background on the history, theory, and psychology behind Dance Movement Therapy I will discuss the ways dance and movement can help us process the past in cases where words fail us. I will also discuss dance as an impetus for reconstructing healthy and trusting relationships. Considering the intense ways stress manifests itself in the body and the affinity children have for movement, this paper aims to elucidate the importance of dance and movement programs in schools as a healing modality. Taking a proactive, rather than reactive framework, this paper offers dance as a potential platform for trauma prevention. Moving can reduce adverse mental health experiences by allowing children to process their pasts and their daily lives. Dance allows students to practice resilience through rooting them in their physical bodies, present moment, and classroom community. These concepts are demonstrated through an examination of current dance/movement integration in schools, and words from current dance/movement educators. Including a personal account of movement as a source of expression and growth in my own life, this paper will outline the incredible value dance could add as an integral part of the education system. Movement is not only a catalyst for healing, but a decolonizing force with the potential to promote awareness and value of diversity across all bodies and abilities.

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I. Introduction: Trauma in the Body and Movement as a Healer

Trauma and PTSD can occur as a result of combat exposure, childhood abuse (both emotional and physical), physical violence, sexual assault, life-threatening events, and daily microaggressions. In fact, multiple events which are not life threatening but which provoke emotional trauma can be even more detrimental than a single event (Seides 2010, 725).

Regardless of its source, trauma affects our ability to be creative. It robs us of one of the most vital and enriching components of the human experience. Imagination is *crucial* to the quality of our lives, and PTSD can take that away from us. Trauma subjects us to relive painful memories over and over again, pulling us into the past. This detracts from mental flexibility, thus altering the literal plasticity of the brain. In his bestselling book, *The Body Keeps Score*, educator and psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk explains that trauma is not only an event which happened in the past but also the imprint of that experience left on the mind, brain, and body; “a fundamental reorganization of the way we organize our perception of the world.” Drawing from his life’s work of understanding and healing traumatised individuals, Van der Kolk points to movement, breath, and chanting as crucial elements in healing.

Dance and movement allow us to reconnect with our present selves, to rediscover ourselves, and to accept ourselves. In this way it can help us process the past in cases where words fail us. Dance can also help us build healthy and trusting relationships again. Dance and movement theory is endorsed by neuropsychiatric research, and by Porges’s Polyvagal Theory which “describes social engagement as an emergent, adaptive behavior arising from the development of a branched (dorsal and ventral) nerve, the vagus nerve” (Grey 2015, 173). Polyvagal theory emphasises safety and human relationships as cornerstones of the

developmental process. For decades, systematic studies have been revealing and reaffirming that the stress and pain we feel in our minds is physically manifesting in our bodies. Stress causes an increase in cortisol levels which thin the lining of the stomach, weakens the bones, and disturbs menstrual and reproductive cycles, and suppresses the immune system, leaving us vulnerable to infection. (O'Connor 2006, 80-81). The body of research demonstrating the relationship of mental suffering manifesting in the body continues to grow, so why are our solutions often so isolated from our physical bodies? Why not *use* our bodies as a catalyst through which to process and resolve that stress and pain through dance and movement.

Van der Kolk explains that we must connect “viscerally” with ourselves in order to begin any healing process. We often see talk-therapy and movement-based therapy as two separate avenues for healing and processing, but in reality most individuals likely need a combination of the two. While traditional talk therapy is the most common clinical practice, we must acknowledge that in order to engage in these narrative practices we must first ground ourselves in our bodies. In some cases, linguistic expression will fall short of resolving feelings of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression. Dance is not only an important way to reconnect with one’s self in the wake of trauma, but also serves as a platform to reconnect with others. Oftentimes trauma can cause the areas of the brain which process language to shut down. Voicing trauma can sometimes even do the opposite of establishing community if friends or family feel pressure to reject an individual who is voicing distressing or disturbing memories (Van der Kolk 2013, 244). Being simultaneously assaulted by, and also separated from, bodily sensations can result in alexithymia; a condition where the individual is unable to sense *or* express their experience (247).

II. History of Dance Movement Therapy

Dance and movement practices have been regarded as essential elements of healing and community building since time immemorial in many cultures, while they remain viewed as “alternative” modes of healing in mainstream Western culture (Van der Kolk, 2009).

Industrialization and rapid technological growth have already separated us from our bodies in countless ways. Often in our sedentary society, few things can feel more frightening than moving the body. This creates a culture in which “there is no form of self-expression that makes us feel more vulnerable than dancing,” says Dr. Brene Brown who has spent over 20 years studying vulnerability, shame, and empathy (brenebrown.com). While this may be true, when dance is embraced, it can also be the most freeing.

Movement is the last thing we want to do when we are depressed, yet neuroscience shows us that dancing can raise our serotonin levels. Even watching *others* dance can offer resilience in situations where individuals have felt none. Take this interview with Dr. Denis Mukwege: he describes his experience operating on rape victims in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the trauma he experienced seeing thousands of women violated by militia groups in the war over conflict minerals . Mukwege was ridiculed for trying to describe the mutilation of the women he operated on; “when I said I saw destroyed vaginas, everyone thought I was insane...I thought about leaving Congo. Why would I want to continue when nobody understood?” said Mukwege. He had lost his ability to sleep, and to see any hope for the future. As he is considering leaving the hospital, he describes an experience watching his patients gather and dance the traditional dances of their village or tribe. “I felt that dance relaxed us immensely,” says Mukwege, “It was like an incredible form of therapy, because it was the first time after the whole period, that I went

home and slept deeply...I saw that all is not lost and I had a revelation, that I should continue and not give up, because if these women could express such a force within, then I had to fight alongside them” (City of Joy, 2018). Mukwege is responsible for operating on these women, and he discovers that movement in the wake of violence crucial to their resilience, but also to his own practice.

Dancing in rhythm with others has always been an important source of social bonding, and dance is frequently used in healing rituals. The !Kung San offers an example of dance used as the primary healer since time immemorial. The !Kung San have hunted and gathered in the Kalahari desert since time out of mind, and their medicine men heal through dancing and deep trances; forming a connection with the spirit world, curing sickness (both physical and mental), and facilitating cathartic release through dance. The ceremonial curing dance often lasts all night. Although the dance is a sacred and serious matter, the songs are sung often in day to day life, purely for the sake of enjoying their melody. Each of these songs is named after a natural phenomenon; Rain, Sun, Giraffe, Eland, Honey, Buffalo, Mamba. (Marshall, 249). The frequency and enjoyment of such songs ensures that they are accurately passed onto future generations. In healing rituals, women sit around the fire where they sing and clap in a circle, men sing and dance around them in a close-knit line where rattles of dry cocoons contribute to the rhythmic atmosphere. Marshall’s ethnography describes the dance drawing the group together into such unity that they appear to be one dancing and clapping being. The medicine men act on behalf of the entire band to purify them, they rise above fear and “release from ordinary action” to combat evil and sickness (251).

After many dances have been danced, the medicine men begin their curing. In fact, dancing more and more vigorously is required to enter into their healing trance (Low 2015, 35). The trance can be described firstly as a period of frenzy. Often Western researchers refer to this process as “shaking medicine” because of its sticotto and idiosyncratic rhythm (Low 2015, 35). The period of convulsing, cursing, and sometimes running at the fire is followed by a comatose state which can resemble unconsciousness. This is where the man’s spirit has actually left his body to meet the spirits of the dead; it is called “half-death.” Community members watch over individuals in this sensitive state, keeping them warm and “blowing into their ears so that they do not close” (Marshall, 251). Medicine men feel deep responsibility for the welfare of the people in their band, yet they received no economic benefit or heightened social status.

In some communities, dance is not only a central healer but an essential and irreplaceable part of the healing process. Disconnect between western medicine and healing dance practices is apparent in modern clinics in indigenous communities of North America. In “The Healing Power of Sacred Dance,” Mariam Maron describes the experience of Carl Hammerschlag, a recent graduate from Yale University Medical School, doing medical work at a pueblo in New Mexico as a postgraduate internship:

“Working in the clinic, an elder approached him and “eyed him for a while and then said: "I am curious. They said a healer has come to the pueblo." Carl chuckled proudly: "That's me! I am a doctor." There was quiet. Then the elder asked him: "Do you dance?" Carl laughed again: "No." The elder rose and turned to leave, and said: ‘Then you can't heal’”(Maron, 2010).

What Dr. Hammerschlag goes on to realize, is that his own Jewish heritage, there is a strong presence of dance as the central healer. In Hebrew, the words of dance and affliction are interconnected: “ma'cho'l for dance, machah'lah for illness or affliction.” Dance did not always

have this label as an “alternative” healing option; in *The Art and Science of Dance/movement Therapy: Life Is Dance*, Chaiklin and Wengrower explain that the western world too once believed that “art was a necessary part of life and that there is magic power in the dance.” However, the value of movement as central to healing has long been de-emphasised in our institutions (2009, 4).

The result of this institutional mind-body separation is that dance therapy as a viable treatment in what we consider “modern medicine” has a very young history. The practice was not recognized in this sphere until after World War II. As need grew for mental health professionals and group therapy for returning soldiers experiencing PTSD, alternatives to talk therapy came under consideration by clinical institutions. In the wake of this growing demand, Choreographer Marian Chace was invited to work at St. Elizabeth Hospital with the application of movement as an avenue towards processing the atrocities men had experienced in the war. Around this time other women including Trudi Schoop, Mary Whitehouse, Blanche Evan, Liljan Espenak, Alma Hawkins, Irmgard Bartenieff Norma Canner and Elizabeth Polk (the later two focusing their studies on children experiencing PTSD) began adding to the theory and body of knowledge developing around the way playful, fantastical, and even sporadic creative movement could give ways to new posture and new behavior among traumatized patients. (Chaiklin and Wengrower 2009, 8). The practice which began with veterans has now spread to treat chronic pain, eating disorders, head injuries, drug abuse, and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Talk therapy can be incredibly beneficial, but we must acknowledge that healing through verbal processing is not a universal experience. “Creativity in art and, in this instance, dance, is a

search for structures to express what is difficult to state” (Chaiklin and Wengrower 2009, 5). The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defines dance/movement therapy as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual” (American Dance Therapy Association, 2008). Dance is an effective avenue for both individual and communal healing. It is a discipline which unites somatic psychotherapy and creative art (Grey 2015, 170). History, science, and modern case-studies all support movement as an avenue for healing from violence (either physical or physiological), for developing self-regulation, and for community building.

III. Children and Movement Affinity

Movement is especially important for our youth. It is our first language; “we all learned to relate on a nonverbal level before starting to communicate verbally” (Liefer, 125). Thus, dance therapy is particularly effective among children. When children are provided with a loosely structured environment which brings them safety, this simultaneously allows them the freedom to explore their bodies (Liefer, 126). Pre-school teacher Lilt Thom found that in using dance therapy for socioemotional development, her five-year-old pupils “made connections between their bodily feelings and conscious appraisal of their emotions” (127). While there has been an increase in recognition of dance in the health care sector, in education there is a continuing social categorization of dance as a ‘performing art only.’ Dance reduces stress because it draws the dancer into the present moment, “as if dance is a magic bullet putting stress and tension on hiatus while immersed in dance routines” (Alpert 2017, 156). There are many physical, psychological, and social benefits on health; dance emphasises endurance, bone health, spacial awareness, temporal and prefrontal brain activity, and possible prevention of dementia. In

addition to raising serotonin levels, dance can actually heighten the blood supply in the brain and form new neural pathways. This means that movement has the possibility to counteract the destruction of neuroplasticity (156-157).

Despite these conclusions, children attending public schools in the United States are increasingly forced to sit still. By limiting our children to learning only in their seats, we separate them from that first language: movement. It is this language that naturally children use to communicate with each other; dance and movement therapy is based on strengthening the connection an individual has to their community through dance, and “simultaneously [finding the ability] to express their own impulses and needs within that group” (Chaiklin and Wengrower, 5). These processes of expression are the basis for validation, and healthy symbiotic relationships. Dance and movement theory recognises phases of development through a relationship of physiological and psycho-social growth (Lewis 1986, 280). By isolating the mind from the body, we cut off a crucial part of our understanding of psychology. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act emphasised standardized testing in reading, math and science. Emphasis on these “core” subjects narrowed the focus in the classroom to promote better test performance, and left the arts subject to elimination every time budget cuts came into question (McDonald, 2020). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 3 percent of elementary schools offered dance instruction in the 2009–2010 school year. This represents a 20 percent decrease from the 1999–2000 school year (2012, 5). It is also worth noting that the data in this report is limited regarding dance as “separate surveys of dance specialists were not included in the study because the percentage of schools with these specialists on staff was relatively small” (2012, 40).

In the name of protecting children, we limit the physical risks they encounter by literally limiting their mobility; but could these restrictions be doing more harm than good? By allowing what educational researchers call risk-rich movement and exploration, “children are seen and see themselves as competent partners in learning, who share responsibility for their learning” (Brown and Kaye, 2016). Children cannot adopt agency if they are not given the chance to. If they are never given time to learn from their bodies, and the limitations of those physical bodies they inhabit. Despite our efforts to shelter them, children often prove to be the most resilient and adaptive of humans. A Systematic literature review of over 850 articles by the Department of Pediatrics at the Medical College of Georgia found that “most intervention studies used supervised programs of moderate to vigorous physical activity of 30 to 45 minutes duration 3 to 5 days per week” and concluded that “School-age youth should participate daily in 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity that is developmentally appropriate, enjoyable, and involves a variety of activities” (Strong et. al, 2005).

A study by Amber Elizabeth Grey reveals the incredible effects of dance therapy among refugee children. Displaced people not only experience hunger, fear, and violence, but also ongoing instability and social rejection. Based on the understanding that the basis of our first relationships are founded in sensorimotor engagement, dance and movement therapy serves as a promising avenue for displaced children to reinstall trust and connection (Grey, 178). Grey demonstrates such effectiveness through a case study of her work with Amanda, a sixteen year old asylum seeker from East Africa, recovering from her experience of violence in civil war. Grey describes Amanda’s posture as frozen, and her range of motion as limited. Through working initially with sand trays, Amanda was able to begin dancing and eventually keep rhythm

with Grey. The sharing of rhythm allows for “kinesthetic empathizing,” shared experience, and the beginning of a relationship. With this relationship came openness to other soothing and regulating movements; swinging of the arms, and mimicking rocking a baby. Several sessions of such movements yielded Amanda increasing the duration of her eye contact, and increasing in the size and fluidity of her kinesphere¹ (178-182). Growth in the kinesphere is an important indication that movement therapy is providing a platform for safe exploration of the body, and expanding an individual's comfort level.

It is crucial to remember that while the biology of communication through movement is universal, the cultural stipulations of that movement vary widely. “When using DMT, we are literally delving into cultural history through body and movement; the human body is literally how we know where we are,” explains Grey (184). In a second case study of Emmanuel, a 12 year old from Hati, it is crucial to understand the importance of fluid movement and ongoing spinal undulation in Hatian culture, to understand the concern in the child’s “unstable, fragmented, and tight” kinespheric exploration (185-186). In Emmanuel’s case, he benefited greatly from mirroring, which “offers the opportunity to see and be seen” (187). Often it is our body language and facial expressions which communicate safety rather than the spoken word (173). This means that dance and movement therapy is useful in helping children to understand both their traumatic histories, as well as their joyful ones (188).

By emphasising those joyful experiences through dance as a community building exercise, positive relationship dynamics and self-awareness can better be integrated into the school curriculum. Dance and movement programs have revealed promise for promoting

¹ Defined by Choreographer Rudolf Laban as “the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extended limbs without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot” (Laban, 1966, p. 10).

flexibility and healthy familial relationships in early childhood education. A case study of children in movement programs in preschool reveals the way that even the youngest students can greatly benefit from dance, especially when the family community is involved. Through movement and dance practices which imitate animals or use props, children are taught to focus, experiment, and refine their motor skills. The results after just two months of program participation, saw improvement in children's spatial reasoning, self-regulation, and social skills. Inviting parents to participate can evoke positive results. It allows children to interact with their parents in creative ways, and increase their exposure and practice of dance/movement if the parents choose to continue those interactions at home (Lorenzo-Lasa et. al. 2007, 26-30).

Dance, Movement, and Social Barriers: Contemporary Examples for Promoting Diversity

Dance Educator Hannah Downs works for Buckman Elementary School, a public arts magnet school in Portland, Oregon. She has been teaching since she was 16 years old, beginning as a student teacher at her ballet studio in western Colorado. This developed into studio teaching and working through community centers while she pursued dance professionally, eventually working in the Education and Outreach program at Oregon Ballet Theatre for 10 years.

Downs explains that dance offers students “a much needed chance to move their bodies during the school day, but in an environment that isn't competitive.” It teaches mindfulness, strength, and flexibility which are important for lifelong health. Downs also elucidates the way dance as an integrated part of the school day can actually support success in other more ‘traditional’ academic subjects: “it helps with musicality, precision, and spatial awareness which support math skills, it supports reading and language arts skills by using specific vocabulary and sometimes narrative, and it offers a lens through which students can view other cultures and

traditions.” She concludes that the most important thing dance offers students is “the opportunity to increase their brain/body connection...It's a fact that learning and executing a new dance phrase actually builds new neural- pathways in the brain.”

In Downs’ experience, Dance in the public school system is definitely *more* predominant than it used to be. “In the last 10 years and even the last 5 I have seen a lot more schools in the Portland area offering it as part of their arts curriculum. This is because dance has gained more respect in popular culture and as a therapeutic tool than it had say 15 or 20 years ago.” This has come with a more holistic appreciation for different styles of dance as well: “Now the job of dance educators is to educate not just students but families and principals on the value of ALL kinds of dance, not just dance styles people are familiar and comfortable with like ballet and hip hop but modern, contemporary, folk dance, and creative movement,” says Downs.

Downs describes a specific student who was “a rockstar in dance, so physically capable, so expressive and artistic.” She explains that after a few weeks, she was talking to him “and discovered he had some pretty severe language delays...Speaking was really hard for him.” In spite of that, or maybe because of it, “he was channelling his expressive energy into dance...It made me realize what a powerful tool dance can be for individuals who struggle with verbal communication.” When asked about the value of dance in promoting cross-cultural awareness, Downs responded in saying “Dance is such a great way to expose kids to other perspectives and cultures. When you learn about a culture by reading, that's great. But if you learn a story from a culture, or listen to music or learn a folk dance from a specific culture, or eat that culture's food, then your brain and body are immersed in the experience and you are more likely to remember what you have learned.” She speaks to the way dance and movement are powerful forms of

communication, which, like all art, “speak in the universal language of emotion.” Downs believes that if “dance educators do their job mindfully, we can model that dance is for all regardless of race, gender, class, or ability. I try my utmost to do this at Buckman by ensuring that the dance videos we watch, the books we read, the cultures we explore, and the dance styles we learn represent humans in all their beautiful and varied forms and identities.”

Western Professor Pam Kuntz has been teaching since 1999, Kuntz teaches in Elementary Schools, at the University, and also provides classes in the community for individuals with Parkinson’s Disease. She explains why she went into the field in saying: “I am most full when I am in the studio in a learning environment, an environment that is about discovery, curiosity, bravery, risk taking, and solving together. Once a product is put on the table things change. I wanted to be in an environment that was more about process than product.” When asked what she considers the most important thing dance offers children in schools, she spoke of their personal voice; “a lot of what we do [in school] is from the neck up. Dance incorporates the whole self. We have a self below the neck and it is really smart.”

Western Student Elizabeth Smyth has taught dance to children for two years and explains that the most important thing about dance is that it is both a “creative outlet and an athletic endeavor. Students are also given a structure that they may or may not have in other parts of their life.” “I have seen dance be an outlet for several students from household issues and or bullying in school. Dance classes can give students a feeling of accomplishment and give them a place to fit in as well,” says Smyth. Reflecting on what she gained from her own dance education she said: “I have learned so many life skills from dance, whether it be time management, leadership, confidence.”

Smyth speaks to the structure, and sense of groundedness dance can offer students in times of uncertainty as well. During COVID19, she explains that teaching dance during a pandemic is very different. As dance classes are interactive, teaching online can be a challenge. Especially with younger students it can be hard to keep their focus, but I think dance is more important than it's ever been right now. I have been teaching on zoom and although it's not the same my students do enjoy getting to see their classmates and most of all they have something to do. Classes provide some structure and are something that they are used to."

In a lecture for the Leading Equity Center's virtual summit on "Bringin' Hip Hop Into Our Schools," Sausalito Marin City School district Superintendent Itoco Garcia explains the ways that hip-hop can also be crucial to supporting and healing educators. "History, science, and modern experiences of healing through movement in the face of intense violence all support movement as an avenue for resilience," explained Garcia. Regardless of the individual's history, dance is an incredible way for children to learn social-emotionally.

In August of 2019 the George Lucas Educational Foundation published an article highlighting dance as a catalyst for social-emotional development via a case study of second grade teacher Jennifer Grau, who decided to introduce dance "as part of her effort to build bonds between her special education students and the general ed second graders at her school on Chicago's West Side" (Toppen, 2019). "It was the first time all the kids were engaged and collaborating without any fights or complaints," revealed Grau.

In *Dance Education around the World*, Charlotte Svendler Nielsen and Stephanie Burrige discuss dance as a vehicle for raising "basic questions of social equity, of human rights and of political priorities in the re-shaping of public education. It's a task that has to be engaged

through examining dance education throughout Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific and Africa “giving insights and fresh perspectives into contrasting ideas, philosophies and approaches to dance education from Egypt to Ghana, Brazil to Finland, Jamaica to the Netherlands, the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand” (p. 17). Ken Robinson, patron of the London School of Contemporary Dance and global leader in educational reform, summarized the studies of Nielsen and Burrige in saying the “explore how a deeper understanding of dance challenges standard conceptions of intelligence and achievement and show the transformative power of movement for people of all ages and backgrounds” (Ted-Ed, 2018).

Dance can be a powerful tool for students, even young ones, to explore intense and difficult content. Pam Kutzer shares a recent experience from a residency she did at Carl Cozier Elementary School in the Fall of 2019 with 4th graders:

“We made a piece exploring the truths of Japanese internment camps. I witnessed wild creativity, collaborative problem solving, children with some behavioral challenges really stepping up and participating in ways I am told they hadn't before, bravery, children learning about a very challenging and hurtful truth in the history of this country and showing great empathy and patience while investigating... We explored what it could feel like and look like to have your freedom taken from you. We explored what it could feel like and look like to be removed from your safe space. We explored what it could feel like and look like to be isolated and targeted. It was difficult content but because they discovered ways to embody these ideas, I believe they developed a much deeper understanding...an unforgettable understanding. The piece wasn't really a finished piece...it was a work in progress. Every day I worked with them we explored truths of the internment camps through movement. It was a remarkable experience. We have teachers in our schools who welcome this kind of exploration. That is pretty fantastic.”

Echo Theater Company Director Aaron Wheeler-Kay has been teaching embodied arts for 24 years. His first teaching experience was tap class for “Special Ed” kids in my High School...”These were youth with intellectual Disabilities, and my goal was to share fundamentals of Tap Dance.” Wheeler-Kay went on to study at Alvin Ailey in New York City and proceeded

to teach Modern Dance and Ballet in studios outside of the city. He describes being immediately “drawn to the creative problem solving involved in teaching: How does this person learn? What communication signals are they receptive to? How can I guide them to the expression of a given idea?” Wheeler-Kay’s definition of dance is “embodied expression for its own sake, for the sake of being more connected to oneself, or for the sake of being in community with others.” This definition aligns with the major benefits of what dance can offer in regards to development, trauma, and social-emotional development, and it is in cognisance of this definition that it should be applied to schools.

When asked the most important thing dance offers students in schools, Wheeler-Kay responded:

“Freedom. Control of self. Opportunity to be with others. Embodied learning. Time and space for Integration. Time away from Cerebral-centric learning. Focus on learning about your body in space. Boundaries. Balance. Rhythm. Acceptance of self...Dance taught well offers a learning experience that is only partially cerebral. It is embodied learning that requires that the student connect to, explore, and know their physical self. It carries some of the same opportunities sports provides such as discovering one’s physical limits and growing beyond them, while offering opportunities to explore expression, embody emotion, and interact with music and other people in a non-competitive environment. It offers a student a place to explore stillness, balance, rhythm, community and a larger vision than one’s own individual goals. The longer it is studied, the more control and the more freedom it brings to the student. Students of dance become more present in stillness, more able to move with abandon and power, and more grow confidence and trust in themselves.”

Wheeler-Kay, who has also worked in the Public School system and has children who are 8 and 11 in school in Portland, sees physical education and movement in general taking a low rung on the list of public education priorities. “All arts are generally valued even less,” he explains, adding that his own children receive the equivalent of 30 minutes of physical education per week.

Among our societal preconceptions that dance is not a valid way to educate or to treat clinical disorders, we also have many socialized preconceptions about who can dance. “Everyone has the instrument of dance...the body. We all can move our bodies, or have someone move our body for us. In a way, dance levels the playing field” says Kutzer. DanceAbility is an international organization which celebrates the movement of a diversity of bodies through performances and workshops. Their method, pioneered by Alito Alessi, is improvisation based. DanceAbility International’s mission is: “to dissolve barriers and connect people with and without disabilities through dance and movement. This mission is accomplished through classes, workshops and events for adults and children, performances, teacher training and educational materials for teachers of inclusive dance.” The organization is a testament not only to the way dance fosters community, but also the way it can break down stereotypes² and allow us to see each other in our purest, most vulnerable, and most free state. Wheeler-Kay, who is a DanceAbility certified instructor, explains that the improvisation based practice “allows any movement the student can do to be included in the vocabulary of dance.” This allows the curriculum to be “informed directly by who attends: A class including Blind students will be structured differently than a class including a person who cannot move themselves through space. And class will be structured differently again if the class has both these students, or those who involuntarily vocalize, or those who do not understand cause and effect. I’ve encountered no other dance modality that has this capacity for inclusion,” says Wheeler-Kay. In this form, dance class “becomes a lived experience of inclusive culture. This is available almost nowhere else in

² When discussing social justice rhetoric, Wheeler-Kay makes a crucial point that “most theories that explore non-ableist, non sexist, non racist spaces are theoretical, rather than practiced. Because of this, these theories themselves are not accessible to all people.” Individuals who do not have access to the literature or discussion, or who do not use language are automatically excluded, thus making the conversation inherently inaccessible universally.

the pantheon of dance. “I believe dance will have to evolve to include forms that do not fetishize athleticism, and radically reimagine what a dancer looks like before it can truly break down the barriers of Ableism,” concludes Wheeler-Kay, adding that a major barrier for this radical imagination of dance and the dancer comes down to how few dance spaces are accessible to all bodies.

Wheeler-Kay explains that “because not all humans can move voluntarily, most forms of art and expression cannot be truly inclusive...Those with no voice cannot participate in singing, immobile people cannot lift a brush or saxophone, those without language cannot play Hamlet...” However, all living people move. “A dancer who uses mechanical breath and is otherwise immobilized moves each time they breathe. If other dancers in the room move with this dancer during the inhale and are still during the exhale, the dancer with mechanical breath becomes the leader that informs the other dancers’ choices. This movement can be interacted with, images can be built in relationship to the leader.” This agency and inclusivity is unique to this modality of dance, “In every other dance class I’ve been to, this person would be a spectator only,” says Wheeler-Kay.

A study of children in an integrated dance program found that before participating in the program, all students (11 able-bodied and 5 differently-abled) related ability in dance to turning and jumping (Zitomer and Reid 2011, 143). All able-bodied students associated children in wheelchairs with an inability to dance before the program. The study also revealed that the able-bodied students perceived wheelchair users as passive participators, unable to direct their movement, prior to the study. Such perceptions are extensions of the ablist mindset constructed by society to label people with disabilities as incapable of controlling the aspects of their daily

life (145-146). After the program, most children responded ‘yes’ when asked if a child in a wheelchair could dance, even though none of the children with disabilities in the programs were wheelchair users (most used walkers). The able bodied children demonstrated understanding of dance as a movement process which does not require the ability to walk or stand, and the conceptualization of dance as a process which can use many different body parts and styles of movement (148-149). The study also concluded that the children with disabilities also experienced subtle changes in the way they perceive themselves, displaying a higher sense of competence upon completion of the program.

We must acknowledge that not all dance has the power to combat ableist preconceptions. “Dance that is primarily focused on the development of the athletic and virtuosic skills of the individual cannot break down ableism,” explains Wheeler-Kay. Examples of dance which cannot break down ableism include ballet and tap. “I have found the term ‘Dance’ itself to be problematic when offered as a tool for breaking down barriers because it comes with a lot of baggage. In the west, the definition of what a dancer is is very narrow. Many people who enjoy moving and are good at it are quick to point out ‘but I’m not a dancer,’” says Wheeler-Kay, adding that he has lost count of the number of people who have told him this, yet possess incredible movement skills.

Personal Experience

Dance has served as an emotional and expressive outlet for me throughout my life. Although I have never officially been treated through Dance and Movement Therapy, I have felt the forces of such practices as avenues of processing, as well as effective forms of dealing with anxiety and depression. As a young child I developed extreme social anxiety. While I by no

means suffered from trauma, my anxiety intensified after being bullied at recess. Terrified of speaking with my school counselor, I could not vocalize why I was petrified to raise my hand to be excused at lunch, or why I would hide inside during free-play time. I could not explain why I did not want to interact with the other children in my class. I was fortunate enough to attend an arts magnet school which required dance as a part of the curriculum. In my dance classes, I was a completely different child. It was as though no one else could see me, I would become consumed by the experience of moving my body to the rhythm of music.

Realizing the effect that movement had on me, my mother (an educator), signed me up for classes at a local physical theater collective. When I left the performing group ten years later, I described my experience with these words:

“The only light I can see as I step onto the stage’s black mats is the little exit sign glowing bright green in the corner of the theater. I take shaky breath as the audience holds theirs and I run my chalky hands along the trapeze bar, swinging my legs onto it and coming to stillness. For years my parents had tried to get me to get out of my comfort zone in front of people, but I refused to talk. I hated anything that had to do with people’s eyes on me. Giving a speech, acting in a play, performing a dance, even talking in a group—it all made me seize up. The day I found myself in the Echo Theater was one that changed my life forever. I discovered a place where teachers encouraged making mistakes and trying new things. After years of this encouragement I slowly but surely made my way out from under the hunched shell that I had taken refuge under, and into a confident body that loved the feeling of the audience’s eyes on it.”

As a member of the youth performing group at the Echo Theater Company, we would start every rehearsal by counterbalancing with partners or in groups. This practice involved beginning back to back with a partner and slowly leaning into them. As we progressed we would begin to take more and more of each other's weight, finding organic shapes in the negative spaces between our bodies, and eventually lifting each other off the ground to prepare for acrobatics. This warm-up not only fostered nonverbal connection, but also allowed us to learn

from each other in experimental and creative ways. The vulnerability and cooperation involved in these movement and trust exercises generated a support network that catalysed *radical* creativity. The practice described above serves as a metaphor for the understanding, supportive, and collective nature of the performing group. The Echo Theater taught me about intersectionality and subjectivity long before my anthropology classes did, and it gave me the opportunity to discover grace in even the most awkward and uncomfortable of movements. I think back to those days when I was so frightened I could not lift my eyes and unhunch my shoulders. The opportunity to learn in my body and *from* my body turned that hunch-backed child into a child who wanted to walk on stage in pajamas and play the saxophone upside down, suspended from the ceiling.

Dance as Trauma Prevention

Trauma is most frequently discussed in the context of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but in many cases if trauma is not ‘post,’ it is an ever-present reality. Most of the world experiences constant stress and anxiety as a result of structural systems. This is the case in many classrooms where children are bullied or feel unrepresented by the curriculum. Children are also often entering the school system with heavy emotional baggage. In the United States, the number of children entering school with multiple Aversive Childhood Experiences³ (ACEs) is staggering. Over 50 million students attend public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, and as of 2012 almost 50% of those students will witness and/or experience a traumatic event by the age of 17, and 26% will witness and/or experience a traumatic event by

³ According to an ACEs research brief by Childtrends, “Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being.¹ These experiences range from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental divorce or the incarceration of a parent or guardian” (2014, p.1).

the age of 4 (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012). In 2015, a national study revealed that not only are 50% of all children still experiencing ACEs nationally, but 50% are also below the poverty line (Layton, 2015). Children with high ACE scores often show cognitive effects entering school including slower language and speech development, poor verbal memory, and attention problems (McInerney and McKlindon, 2014). This means that when school is stressful, anything could be triggering to a child who has or is presently experiencing trauma. Thus, as Eliza Hirst argues in “Trauma, Resilience, and the Impact on Learning,” we have come to a time where trauma must be treated as a *universal precaution* (2019).

Pam Kutzer makes an important distinction that the burden of weaving dance into the curriculum cannot fall solely on the shoulders of classroom teachers. “Educators know that movement is essential. They understand the importance of the arts,” she explains. “I think teachers are asked to do way more than is humanly possible and incorporating dance into their curriculum could be one of those tasks. The system needs to recognize and support arts education including dance.” Change needs to come at a policy level; employing more dance and movement practitioners in schools, and funding more resources which support teachers in integrating dance and movement into the classroom.

Schools need to provide support for students, not reinforce trauma. In an overview of ways that teaching personal and social responsibility can be integrated into physical education programs, researchers suggest a space that includes “earphones to listen to their choice in music, stress balls and other items that students can play with in their hands, or yoga mats and blankets if a student wants to engage in mindfulness practices or simply rest if they are lacking in sleep”

(Ellison et. al., 2019). The appropriate level and environment for physical movement will always depend on the individual and their unique history. Providing options within the communal classroom space, and in a separate environment, promotes agency and feelings of safety.

Incongruence between school and home culture can also be a source of identity-based trauma and confusion for many young folks. Here, dance has the possibility to serve as a decolonizing force in education by representing a wider breadth of cultural identities. Where traditional forms of cultural dance are taught, by knowledgeable, experienced teachers, dance can be an important part of building cultural awareness,” says Wheeler-Kay. That being said, when dance is taught for the purpose of athleticism alone, it will inherently facilitate no awareness at all, in fact “Dance taught purely as movement has the potential to misinform, ignore, appropriate the culture that it arose from,” says Wheeler-Kay, “Hip hop comes to mind...I feel that hip hop dance is widely taught void of cultural and historical relevance, allowing dancers to access it without ever being exposed to its history and roots.” Dance taught in this void free from the complexities of history will only perpetuate stereotypes and patterns of ignorance and inequity already present in the education system. “Cross cultural awareness is largely unattainable without cultural representatives to interact with,” explains Wheeler-Kay, a “teaching artist spending 4 classes sharing traditional West African dance with a group of primarily white fourth graders is definitely better than no dance/no exposure to West African culture, but building overall lasting empathy and cultural awareness in these students will require much larger systemic changes than dance can provide on its own.”

Introducing multiple forms of dance to the classroom and diverging from a purely Western framework in dance education, we can “move away from the ethnocentricity that

[privileged] Western dance forms can bring to the dance classroom.” Dance and history are inexorably interconnected, making a dance a core part of every culture explains Giguere; “by honoring many dance forms, we honor tolerance” (2005). Giguere elaborates on this idea of tolerance and agency over the body by explaining that it must be used in a way that does not make “training” or “correcting” a child the goal. Part of learning to self-regulate is moving in a way that *feels* right. We live in a world permeated by capitalist structures; a world defined by competition; by achievement versus failure. Kutzer speaks to this in saying: “There isn't a competition when engaging in a dance experience...you are expressing yourself or an idea...and you are the best one to express yourself or express that idea...you just are. So since there are no competitors in that environment, and it is about *your* experiences, no one can do it better than you.”

Wheeler-Kay, who took West African dance in high school describes the way his teacher offered students a background to the nature of the dances they were learning; “a dance for harvest, for an initiation rite, to mourn the death of an elder.” The classes were facilitated with traditional drummers “explaining how the communication works between dancer and drummer. I learned what the shape of the Ankh represents. I learned about sex roles in traditional West African dance and culture. I learned traditional steps that were so close to modern, popular steps that the connection to Africa and African-American culture was inescapable. It was immersive and rich and also some of the most fun and energized dancing I've gotten to participate in. It was a fantastic way to learn about another culture, and the steps became so ingrained in me that they inform my movement to this day” reflects Wheeler-Kay (30 years later).

Dance and movement is also an avenue for resilience in education beyond primary and secondary schools. An examination of African and “African descended” dance and music courses at the University of California Berkeley reveals the importance of movement in higher education for cultivating community, healing, and self-acceptance. The five-year study used qualitative methods in participant observation of students enrolled in “Music and Dance of Ghana World Music Performance Ensemble” and “Advanced Hip-Hop.” The research concluded that the courses created a “circumstance for a transitioning into adulthood that empowers students to healthfully matriculate through the university while they heal mentally and physically from challenges faced before and during college” (Rann, 2015). The study reaffirms that dance not only provides relaxation in high-stress environments, but also instills agency in its practitioners.

In regards to dance in higher education at Western Washington University, Pam Kutzer explains that “Dance in higher ed is cookin' along. We still have parents who won't allow their child to just major in dance, they have to double major. I don't understand that but we work hard in our dance program at Western to offering scheduling that helps students pull off a double major. Also dance has to fit into the system of higher ed in a way that doesn't necessarily support dance...but we have done it. I see small changes happening that are encouraging.”

With increasingly advanced and efficient technology, we not only see an increase in sedentary lifestyle, but also a higher value on efficiency. Western Medicine is often criticised for being *reactive* rather than *proactive*; treating symptoms rather than addressing their causes. This is especially counterintuitive in the context of trauma; when unaddressed, trauma begets more trauma. Could movement deprivation be resulting in higher levels of trauma and stress? How can

we foster resilience in a society where we are constantly playing catchup? How can we foster resilience in a system where discipline in schools reflects and reinforces experiences of trauma that students experience at home? How can we foster resilience when more often than not, we wait for children to have adverse experiences before giving them tools to cope with them?

“Resilience involves an active decision, like sobriety, that must be frequently reconfirmed. That decision is to keep moving forward” (Southwick et al. 2014, 3). Resilience cannot be practiced without agency, and certainly without trust in our own bodies and communities. Using our first language, movement, as an integral part of education will be an important step to offering resilience practices to young people who have likely *already* undergone aversive experiences.

Dance and movement can teach students to reflect upon themselves, *and* care for their peers:

“Dancing is not merely an exercise to be accomplished, but rather a statement of one’s feelings and energy and desire to externalize something from within. When one creates a dance, it is based on a concept, realistic or abstract, that needs to be communicated to others. This understanding led to the use of dance/movement therapy not only in groups but in sessions for the individual in his or her search toward self-integration” (Chaiklin and Wengrower, p. 6).

This modality of internal and external emotional connection is a vital tool even *before* facing the aversive experiences life will inevitably bring. As Van der Kolk concludes in *The Body Keeps Score*, we must translate neuroscience into everyday practice (353). “In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, all kids need to learn self-awareness, self-regulation, and communication as part of their core curriculum” says Van der Kolk. We cannot form a healthy relationship with our minds and our emotions in a process that is *separated* from the body. Resilience is the product of agency, and what better way to promote agency than to create and explore through movement of our physical bodies?

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