How Learning Dance in School Can Produce Smarter Kids

Only “43 percent of all public elementary schools and only 14 percent of secondary schools offer any instruction in dance,” according to Carmen Carter’s 2004 study published by the University of Florida. Instead, teachers focus on science, math, and English, often leaving out the arts. This is partly because, according to Serin Ngai, these subjects are measurable on state achievement tests, and students’ high scores lead to higher school district funding.

It makes sense that under-funded teachers design lessons to increase students’ test scores, but it shows a disturbing skew in kids’ education. Subjects such as the arts have had huge budget cuts; many schools have cut them entirely to fund test prep courses in math, science, and English. Unfortunately, studies have shown that students who learn to dance in school have significant advantages: high grades and higher SAT scores, compared to students without dance lessons.

Dance Lessons Help Kids Learn Other Subjects
Multiple sources show that dance in schools relates to increased mental ability and high grades. In MacDonald’s study, elementary school teachers worked dance into their lessons on math, history, and other subjects. Teachers in this study said, “children responded to creative dance with an intensity, concentration, ‘ownership,’ and enthusiasm they did not usually see in children’s educational activities.” Teachers found that it was relatively easy to use dance to teach many subject areas, and were “astonished at the possibilities it offered.”

Using dance to teach standard subjects allows students to have fun with the material, but also helps them gain a deeper understanding of concepts by approaching them from new angles. Cognitive scientists, such as Patricia Alexander, agree that the understanding of concepts’ underlying truths is the mark of expert-level knowledge. When students are given multiple ways of understanding a concept, they are better able to deeply grasp the underlying principles.

Dance in School Makes Kids Smarter
Dance’s mental benefits are clear, both when taught with other subjects and when taught alone. Cognitive generalization means that a learned skill in one area expands to skills in many other areas. For example, when students scan an essay for spelling errors, this improves their ability to recognize errors in other visual patterns, such as rows in an accounting spreadsheet, or in a piece of sheet music. In the same way, dance lessons give students important cognitive skills that boost their ability in many other subject areas.

In addition to the overlaps with other subjects, learning dance in school can lead to high grades through an overall increase in mental ability. In dance class, Carter explains, students practice physical exercises that “stimulate mental alertness, modeling, sequencing, attention to detail, and memorization skills”…—thereby promoting the learning process.” When kids learn to dance, they learn important skills, like how to pick up new ideas quickly, to pay attention to small details, and to focus on the task at hand.

Four studies in the REAP (Reviewing Education and the Arts Program) report showed a relationship between dance in school and improved reading skills. Another three REAP studies showed that dance lessons improved nonverbal reasoning, which includes math and mechanical ability. This makes sense when you look at the overlap between dance and other school subjects, as Carter explains: “…the spatial designs and angles of the body are expressed with geometric terms; an understanding of anatomy and physics are needed to properly negotiate the body in space with proper technique and alignment…and the most apparent conception is that dance is language-like…Writing a book is similar to the process of making a dance…The art of choreography can be simply defined as composition of movement.”
Learning to Dance Leads to Higher Grades & SAT Scores

The positive effects of dance on students’ grades are shown in various scientific studies. In a controlled study of high school students, there was a statistically significant difference in the grades of dancer and non-dancer groups. The dancers’ overall Grade Point Average was 3.22, while the non-dancer group averaged a 2.87. This equates to the difference between a B+ and a B-

Non-dancers average two grade scales below students who have dance lessons; these students, if they had access to dance in school, could do much better. Dancers’ high grades suggest to Carter that “dancers are able to manage themselves better in a variety of academic situations, have higher levels of self-discipline, and have better coping skills thereby achieving higher academic success.

The positive effects of dance in school go beyond high GPA into standardized testing. According to Carter, “the College Board revealed that students who take arts courses tend to score higher on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who do not,” and are more likely to be successful in college.

Both Students & Teachers Need Dance in School

Now that we know that dance in school leads to smart kids, high grades, and high SAT scores, it would be wise for teachers to include more dance lessons. Instead of shortchanging kids by limiting lessons to test preparation, including dance the curriculum would help both students and teachers. It would give students the advantages mentioned above, and it would help teachers by improving students’ overall academic performance, test scores, and by extension, district funding. With benefits to both students and teachers in mind, the data is clear: We need dance in school.

Sources


