

Financial accessibility of dance classes

If dance training continues to be expensive, whose stories will be told?

by Natalie Aronno

An arts education has been proven time after time to be an indispensable part of a child's education. Having grown up dancing, I can personally attest to how having dance training as a constant in my life dramatically shaped who I am today; it has taught me discipline, drive, teamwork, persistence, and more. I also know how dance has quite literally saved some of my friends from going down the wrong path. However, getting my dance training came along with a significant financial burden. I know my parents sacrificed a lot to keep me in classes at my for-profit studio, and I am so grateful that they saw the purpose that it was serving in my life.

But what happens when families simply can't afford dance classes? It is widely known that paying for dance classes can be difficult for low-income populations, and non-profit organizations are not extremely common. According to Yuen in the article titled "Dance Education: Providing Equity Through Access," another aspect that can make obtaining a dance education difficult is the stigma surrounding it as a profession. This stigma exists because it is a low-paid profession, therefore disadvantaged communities may discourage their children from pursuing a career that would leave them in a similar financial situation.

What isn't taken into account are all the benefits that come along with a dance education such as its physical aspect: "improved mental functioning, improved general and psychological wellbeing, greater self-confidence... self-esteem, better social skills," helping to prevent dementia, "and the socialization aspect lowers stress, depression, and loneliness" (Yuen 7-9). In fact, dance education benefits students beyond a performance career, as the skill sets required for dance can be applied to almost any field of work. Furthermore, it has been observed through studies that dance education in schools and studios positively impacts students' academic performance because they become more engaged with the academic material and their other classmates. In other words, students become more engaged with material as dance increases self-motivation, comprehension of content, and positive emotional reactions (Yuen 13). It also gives students an outlet for expression and can be a therapeutic tool for students that may be dealing with a lot but cannot access therapy.

In terms of nationwide arts incorporation into public school curriculums, rates have stayed roughly the same for the past few decades. In a 2023 study conducted by Kari Dalane, slightly narrowing gaps between more affluent school districts and less affluent districts were noted, but there were no significant changes (Dalane 11). Incorporation in public school curriculums could significantly raise rates of arts education where dance can be widely used as a mechanism to positively impact future generations. Nonetheless, larger changes need to be made and awareness needs to continue spreading so that dance and other arts become an integral part of K-12 public education.

Another benefit of having dance in public education is that it benefits the dance world as a whole; having dance education accessible to low-income racial and ethnic minorities would lead to a more diverse dance ecosystem. This is a point I emphasize because the artists of tomorrow need to reflect a wide version of the human experience. If dance continues being difficult to pursue financially, we will only hear the stories of privileged people. This does not represent the larger population of the United States. Luckily, some steps have been taken in certain areas such as Oakland, California. A non-profit institution named Destiny Arts Center was started and has students paying tuition on a sliding scale depending on how much income a family makes on average. This allows for a diverse socioeconomic group of people to receive dance training in a more equitable fashion (Yuen 15-16).

There needs to be more programs like Destiny Arts Center to ensure that anyone who wants to pursue dance or an art form has the resources to do so. The steps taken by Destiny Arts Center are great and need to continue alongside the integration of dance in the public school curriculum. At the end of the day, art unifies people and is a part of everyday life. Music, movies, television, commercials—all utilize a variety of artists to send a message to a large population. Why not have these artists come from more diverse backgrounds?

It would mean the world to me to know that any child that dreams of dancing can do so. I know of so many people who had dance training in their life at some point and had to leave it due to the financial strain classes caused. It saddens me every time I hear a story like that, because they always express how much they enjoyed it and wish they could have continued. I hope to hear fewer stories like these in the future.



Natalie Aronno will graduate from the University of California, Irvine in 2024, with a B.F.A. in Dance Performance and a B.A. in Psychology. She is passionate about pursuing a career in dance as a performer and choreographer, but also cares about opportunities for all children to pursue the arts in a sustainable fashion.

Works Cited

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