

The Lost Audience for Dance

Do fewer people like or respect dance than in the past? Or do they just not know about it because of funding cuts in arts education?

by Taya Ovsiannikov

I first realized how disconnected the dance world is from the general public during a dinner at my neighbor's house. When I mentioned that I was a dance major, he surprised me by asking if I planned on joining a modern company. I was taken aback—not because it was a strange question, but because he knew what a modern company was.

Most people I have met have little to no knowledge of concert dance, and their unfamiliarity is often paired with skepticism about my career choice. I am often questioned with “I didn’t even know that was a major,” “What are you gonna do with that?” and “What’s your plan B?” These questions would make me second guess myself, when in fact most of these reactions come from individuals who have never even attended a dance performance.

This disconnect between dance and the general public is not just an individual experience; it is a broader societal issue. In 1992, the National Education Association (NEA) attempted to conduct a survey on modern dance audiences. However, the results were unusable because too many respondents misunderstood the term “modern dance,” assuming it referred to the latest social dance trends or musical theater (Sussmann 57). This illustrates the public’s lack of knowledge surrounding concert dance, as modern dance is one of its most prominent styles,

This widespread misunderstanding of dance highlights a deeper issue: a lack of exposure and education, as cuts in arts funding have led to a decline in dance education and a corresponding decrease in dance audiences. Research shows that early arts education fosters lifelong engagement with the arts while also supporting children's social development. Expanding dance education in schools can bridge the disconnect between the dance world and the public, cultivating an appreciation for the artform that will inevitably lead to increased audience engagement.

The gap between dance and the public is highlighted by dance audiences being significantly smaller than other art forms. A 2018 NEA study found that dance audiences were 40.3 million below those of theater performances (Caple, 2). Similarly, between 1992 and 2002, dance was the only performing art—compared to jazz music, classical music, theater, and opera—that suffered a dramatic decline in audience numbers, with ballet attendance dropping from 4.7% to 3.9% and modern, folk, and tap dance audiences falling from 7.1% to 6.3% (Van Dyke, 208). These figures confirm that dance struggles to attract and maintain an audience, a reality that stems from how dance has been positioned historically in education and society.

When dance first entered higher education, it was housed within women’s physical education programs and was only recognized as a fine art in the 1970s (Bonbright, 7). This history of

exclusivity continues to shape its audience demographics today, which remain predominantly upper-middle-class, college-educated, and heavily female (Sussmann, 58). The fact that current dance audience demographics reflect the origins of dance in education suggests a direct link between dance education and lifelong participation.

In today's education system, dance continues to be secondary to academic subjects, making it vulnerable to funding cuts when schools face financial constraints. In the late 1970s, many states cut arts programs, such as the reductions in arts education in New York City and the passage of Proposition 13 in California, which limited property tax increases and further restricted arts funding (Rabkin and Hedberg, 43). Due to these cuts, the integration of arts education in general education decreased nationally. Among the arts, dance has suffered the most—between 1999 and 2010, public schools offering dance-specific instruction dropped from 20% to just 3%, the largest decline of any art form (Caple, 6). This decline mirrors the drop in dance audience numbers observed between 1992 and 2002 (Van Dyke, 208).

Research has shown that early arts education is the most effective way to foster lifelong participation and engagement with the arts. A National Endowment for the Arts study found that over 50% of adults who had childhood arts education attended arts events later in life (Rabkin and Hedberg, 13). The correlation was even stronger for those who took adult arts classes, whereas few pursued arts education in adulthood without prior exposure in childhood (Rabkin and Hedberg, 16).

Beyond its impact on audience engagement, the absence of dance education is also a missed opportunity for student development. Research has shown that movement-based learning, specifically dance, is highly effective in developing social-emotional competencies (SEC). These are essential skills for personal and social development, as they include emotional regulation, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving (Borowski, 157). Furthermore, studies indicate that children who participate in dance also find the experience enjoyable, describing it as a fun and effective outlet for stress relief, focus, and self-expression (Borowski, 158). By neglecting dance education, schools are not only contributing to the decline of dance audiences but also depriving students of an engaging and beneficial learning experience.

Though dance education has clear benefits for early development, the lack of arts funding continues to be a challenge for the integration of dance in public schools. However, arts partnerships between dance organizations and public schools may be a gateway to getting dance into general education and garnering more support for its integration. Grantors are prioritizing these collaborations when allocating funds, recognizing their potential to expand access to arts education (Bontrager, 70). Many dance organizations already have strong outreach programs, making such partnerships both feasible and impactful (Bontrager, 69). Because most public school teachers lack the training to meet dance instruction standards, professional artists brought in can offer students a high quality dance education, while teachers build confidence in integrating movement into their teaching (Bontrager, 69).

I used to view skepticism about my dance major as judgment, but I've come to realize that it stems from a lack of exposure rather than malice. This ignorance is a consequence of the

persistent disconnect between the general public and the dance community, largely due to a lack of early arts education. Without exposure to dance, many people never develop an understanding or appreciation for it, leading to declining audience numbers and an unappreciation of the art form. The decline of dance education in schools has only worsened this divide, reinforcing its historical exclusivity.

The solution is clear: expanding dance education through partnerships can increase public appreciation while providing students with valuable social and emotional skills. Increased arts education would create a positive feedback loop—early exposure in education would cultivate future audiences, which in turn would generate greater support for dance education programs. By prioritizing dance education, schools can help bridge the gap between dance and the public, ensuring that the art form is properly valued and appreciated.



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