Physical education involves more than sport skills and should extend beyond teaching the psychomotor domain. According to SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators (2014), “There is strong support for a health-enhancing and lifetime physical activity approach in physical education” (p. 8). A vital goal of physical education is, therefore, to teach life skills that equip children with knowledge and motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle. One of those life skills is dance. As noted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, 2005, para. 4), “dance is great for helping people of all ages and physical abilities get and stay in shape.” The purpose of this article is to advocate for the inclusion of dance in the physical education curriculum. We begin by discussing how dance relates to the SHAPE America (2014) National Standards for physical education before addressing the benefits of participating in a dance curriculum. We conclude by providing insight into how physical education teachers can overcome the barriers to teaching dance.
Dance Connections to the National Standards

Though physically and cognitively challenging, dance can also be an enjoyable social activity that provides opportunity for lifelong learning. It covers all of the National Standards, especially Standard 5, which stresses recognition of the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction (SHAPE America, 2014). Moss (2007) mentioned that dance should be included in schools because one can communicate with others through movement and “dancing is strongly connected to the self” (p. 185). Another expectation in the National Standards is fitness. Dance improves the five components of health-related fitness (such as cardiovascular endurance, flexibility and muscular strength), and it also enhances the six components of skill-related fitness (including agility, balance and coordination). “Like other moderate, low-impact, weight bearing activities, dancing can help ... strengthen bones and muscles, tone [the] entire body, improve ... posture and balance ... increase ... stamina and flexibility” (AARP, 2005, para. 5). These skills increase students’ athleticism and confidence in pursuing active lifestyles.

Steve McLendon, a Pittsburgh Steelers football player, has taken ballet classes to help improve his performance on the field. He has attested that these dance classes “have strengthened his lower body, particularly his ankles and feet, making him less prone to injury on the field” (Führer, 2013, para. 5).

Benefits of a Dance Curriculum

A well-rounded education includes positive behaviors and skills that can help students throughout their lives. Life skills that can be taught through dance include goal setting, perseverance through challenges, trying new things, self-expression and critical thinking. Self-expression is particularly important because it stands out more in dance than in a sports curriculum and promotes students’ awareness of their own individuality. Kim (2010, para. 1) addressed this topic by stating, “self-expression ... is closely associated with ... positive concepts, such as freedom, creativity, style, courage, self-assurance.”

Another benefit of dance is that it teaches cross-curricular skills, such as empowering students to think critically about movement (Moss, 2007). Questions such as, “Would swinging movements portray happy or sad emotions? Why or why not?” or “What story could you interpret from watching dancers travel from low to high levels?” can help students consider the meaning behind movement. Analysis of physical movement is significant because this skill aligns with the Common Core standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL.6.5, which asks students to “analyze how a particular sentence ... scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot” (Common Core, 2015, para. 5). Experiencing dance can connect with tactile, audial and visual learners in ways that traditional classes could not. Exercising both the mind and body by practicing language arts skills (such as analyzing) while dancing can help students to synthesize knowledge from all academic areas. Smith (2009, para. 2) emphasized this point by stating, “Involvement in the arts is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skill.” Through critical thinking, heightened awareness of self-expression, and physical engagement in dance, students improve their attention to detail and memorization skills as an added benefit. The AARP (2005, para. 2) explains, “exercise increases the level of brain chemicals that encourage nerve cells to grow ... dancing that requires you to remember dance steps and sequences boosts brain power by improving memory skills.”

Overcoming Barriers to Teaching Dance

Despite the many benefits of teaching dance in physical education, many teachers do not have experience with dance and may not feel comfortable incorporating it. Ferry and McCaughtry (2013) found that “teachers’ experiences with sport early in their lives [impact] their embodied views and feelings about ... teaching youth competitive sports” (p. 367). With the focus on sports, few teachers feel confident teaching dance. Teachers who are not trained in dance should start with watching online videos or DVDs about the basic steps in merengue or a short jazz combination so the content is not too overwhelming. Videos can also be used to enhance instruction, such as by showing the video during class to help demonstrate the movements or by using a video as a visual example for students to create choreography. Another strategy to increase content knowledge is to observe a physical educator or studio instructor’s dance class and/or discuss
with them thoughts and concerns. This will help in the design of dance lesson plans and setting of class goals. One realistic approach to teaching a dance class is to focus on Laban Movement Analysis, which focuses on body, effort and space awareness and can be applied to any dance style (Bales, 2006).

Another barrier to teaching dance relates to the cultural norms in the United States that emphasize the teaching of team sports in physical education (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013) and the idea that dance is viewed as a feminine activity. Strategies to motivate male participation could include watching videos of famous male dancers or identifying current or former athletes who have benefited from learning dance. Students may be more motivated after identifying role models who have benefited from dance. Other ideas include a field trip to watch a live performance or having a trained dancer speak in class about the difficulties and masculine qualities of the profession. This would provide a more complete account of dance in our culture and thus increase the likelihood that students will show interest in dance.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to advocate for the teaching of dance within the physical education curriculum. As emphasized by the National Standards, physical education highlights the psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains. Dance covers all three domains because it includes movements that can be used across the lifespan (psychomotor), critical thinking (cognitive) and self-expression (affective). The inclusion of dance can also foster cross-curricular benefits. Smith (2009, para. 2 & 6) made this point by noting that “arts learning can . . . improve motivation, concentration, confidence and teamwork . . . . If [schools] . . . want a way to get [test scores] higher, they need to give kids more arts.” These learned skills help students succeed in school and experience lifelong benefits through maintaining an active lifestyle. Despite the challenges of implementing a dance unit in physical education, it is worth the effort to provide students with a well-rounded education that will have a positive effect on their lives.

References


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