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Dance and Dance/Movement Therapy to Support Social-Emotional Learning in the Boston

Public Schools

Bethany Lynch

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Dance and Dance/Movement Therapy to Support Social-Emotional Learning in the Boston Public Schools

Presented here are findings and perspectives that explore and support the function and impact of dance and dance/movement therapy (DMT) as a catalyst for social and emotional skill development for students in the Boston public schools (BPS). Since 2004, many public school districts in the United States have adopted an increased focus on the social-emotional development and well-being of their students (CASEL, 2015). It is important to reframe our instructional approach in this way and consider the arts an ideal vehicle for rendering increased mental health for the youth in BPS. With an increased understanding of the implications and techniques of DMT and the expressive arts therapies in general—gained through research, academic training, and practice—a combined implementation of such practices infused within, and customized to, the diverse and dynamic educational environments in BPS has incredible potential to improve the lives of students. Implementing DMT in the BPS common core and arts curriculum frameworks as a tool to develop further mastery of social-emotional competencies defined by the BPS district such as self-awareness and management, relationship and social skills, and decision-making (Appendix) would be beneficial. Initial to this discussion are definitions of social-emotional learning (SEL) and DMT, their intrinsic value in generalized contexts, and their application in various educational settings. Subsequently, connections between the application of DMT theories and practices and the development of competencies within the various domains of social-emotional skill development are explained through a presentation of the literature.

Social-Emotional Learning

Through his work in the study of child development, J. P. Comer is considered to have founded the concept that children's social and relational experiences and the skills they develop, notably those they have with adults, are profoundly valuable (Beatty, 2018). The term *social-emotional learning* evolved from the concept of emotional intelligence, coined by Salovey and Meyer in 1994, as the human capacity to mediate—or self-regulate—the experience, impact of feelings, and processes of logical operation and reason (Goleman, 1995). As the counterpart to the skills measured by the intelligence quotient, the term has been applied to define a person's character and capacity for self-discipline, which Goleman asserted is necessary to not only achieve an independently “virtuous life” (p. 433) but also is crucial in the development of successful social and democratic conditions.

When individuals are able to connect, communicate, relate, and understand themselves and one another, possibilities for a positive quality of life increase dramatically (Rieffe et al., 2015). Such capacities are associated with an emotional aptitude in which the mental and physical experience of an individual is identifiable and its value and influence are quantifiable, by the self, by others, and in others. In addition to the social and systemic necessity of connecting with self and others, “sociality (associating with others in groups)” is not only beneficial to our emotional state. When a pleasant and secure experience is shared among individuals, the body's “relaxation response, promoting cell reparation, immuno-regulation, and metabolic- and digestive regulation” is activated (Christensen et al., 2021, p. 10), making it organically beneficial.

In the course of human neurological development, the neocortex and the limbic system serve as co-pilots that steer our ability to perceive, evaluate, decide, reflect, and empathize

(Goleman, 1995). When practiced in tandem, the neocortex and limbic system—where emotion and reason are mutually informed—SEL takes place, and competencies such as self-regulation and effective decision-making are achieved. However vital, proficiency in SEL abilities is not cultivated effortlessly in all circles of the anthropological experience.

Particular conditions and experiences can facilitate and nurture growth in skills in the areas of self-awareness, motivation, empathy, and interpersonal interactions. As easily, they can inhibit this development if the limbic system is set into overdrive, known as the fight-or-flight response, and the neocortex's role of reasoning is removed from the response equation (Goleman, 1995). Just as a trail through the woods becomes wider and clearer with greater foot traffic, the habits of our brain are formed by the version of situations that occur more frequently. As such, the response becomes a trait of the human. Deficiencies in childhood development of social-emotional skills inflict an elevated risk of challenging experiences and negative outcomes on the individual throughout life (Lobo & Winsler, 2006). Without frequent and healthy opportunities to practice and refine social emotional skills and competencies, a more treacherous path is widened. If the circumstances of an individual's development do not support the growth of proficiency in social-emotional skills, it is further likely that they will experience a more challenging existence. With widespread access to experiences and environments where SEL is happening commonly and continuously can allow individuals to have positive outcomes in life. Not only are the classrooms in BPS ideal environments for applying strategies known to support necessary SEL skill development, but the BPS also are a widespread network of already-established facilities ideal for making preventative mental health care and therapeutic experiences accessible to the masses (Eke & Gent, 2010). Educational settings, including classrooms, extracurricular programs, clubs, and councils, particularly those in the public sector,

are generally understood as “microcosms of society and are reflective of societal issues” (Payne & Costas, 2021, p. 1). The collective investment into the intellectual and moral well-being of neighbors and the collaborative creation of communal and municipal spaces that occur with the establishment of a public school cultivate a social bond within communities (Kaestle, 1983). Beyond the logistical establishment of the educational services, bringing together children from diverse backgrounds in classrooms like those in BPS provides an environment for them to experience the process of socialization where they learn norms and expectations of that context, and also learn from each other, empathize with one another, and, therefore, develop interpersonal skills (Kober & Rentner, 2020). Just as with skill development in other content areas, equitable learning conditions must be established to promote SEL which requires state and district level policies and resources to guide instruction (Mahoney et al, 2020), such as standardized curricular criteria.

In the early 1980s, national standards for curriculum and instruction began to develop and define what proficiencies students are expected to attain at various stages in their education (McClure, 2005). Prioritizing the acquisition of skills and understandings that are categorized as scholarly and can be measured in written or verbal form dictates the curricular focus of educational institutions in industrialized communities across the globe (Goleman, 1995), including across the United States and Boston. However, these standards have largely applied to academic content areas such as math, science, reading, and writing. This limited concentration tends to neglect the development of creative, emotive, and expressive traits and abilities, which can have negative influences on students’ ability to reach their potential.

Researchers have concluded that approximately a quarter of public-school students nationwide demonstrated emotional difficulties and challenges with social-adjustment skills such

as conflict resolution and self-management (Esser et al., 1990; Hinshaw, 1992; Zigler et al., 1992, as cited by Panagiotopoulou, 2018; Juvenon et al., 2004 as cited by Chibbaro & Holland, 2013). A consideration of this facts reveals an obligation of the public education industry, and BPS specifically, to identify, address, and promote SEL in congruence with academic skills. By 1997, a group of multidisciplinary experts collaborated to define what they identified as a missing component of learning standards—those that address a student’s social and emotional development (CASEL, 2015). The BPS has a responsibility to provide their communities with opportunities for the rehearsal of healthy applications of social-emotional skills in ways that promote proficiency development and constructive application of such skills.

Since 2004, many states, including Massachusetts, have adopted or developed educational standards and guidance to support the implementation of practices that promote SEL, articulated K–12 SEL competencies, and subscribed to pre-K SEL competency development initiatives (CASEL, 2020). As the largest school district in the State of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2022) and one of the most diverse school districts in the nation (Gellerman, 2015), BPS have implemented significant measures to prioritize student wellness, including the establishment of numerous departments focused on promoting student social, emotional, and physical health and wellness intended to advance healthy development and learning readiness (BPS, n.d.).

In 2010, with the understanding that “healthy development” supports learning, the BPS Health and Wellness Task Force presented the district’s plan to support and improve the health and wellness of its staff, students, and families. This plan included strategies to increase access to quality health and physical education programs and nutritional meals and to equitably create healthier school environments “in which the healthy choice is the easy choice” (BPS, n.d.). In

2015, the BPS were the first district in the United States to appoint an assistant superintendent of social-emotional learning and wellness, which is believed to be the first public-school-district-level position in the nation (Larson, 2015).

The establishment of this position demonstrated an elevated commitment to student social-emotional development. The BPS approach parallels CASEL's guidance and skill definitions, aligning with five fundamental abilities, each evidenced by five or more observable practices. Implementation of their approach is supported by numerous resources developed by the district that define SEL skills and guide the implementation of instructional practices that support SEL skill development. These resources include an online action guide and playbook, complete with strategies and routines that educators can incorporate into their classrooms by embedding it within academic content areas, including literacy and mathematics, as well as supports for integrating SEL as an explicit instructional focus for skill development (BPS, n.d.). This is a valiant beginning to a crucial process of supporting students in BPS by advancing their exposure to the SEL processes. Continuing to support the incorporation of such learning opportunities into the focus of BPS curricula provides opportunity for widespread SEL development.

Dance/Movement Therapy

Human bodily movement has long had a place in culture and social development and is widely understood as a connecting and communicating act, whether in gesture, facial expression, or artistic performance (Payne & Costas, 2021; Thom, 2010; Deans, 2016). The arts, such as dance, can facilitate an information exchange that can be “elicitive, culturally ambidextrous, and nonverbal” and sculpt an individual's view of the world (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 236). Dance largely involves social connection, as people often come together to create, learn, and participate

in movement, inciting and encouraging not only emotional expression but relationship development and understanding (Christensen et al., 2021). Through the use of our bodies in gesture, rhythm, and shifting through space, movement has the power to rouse, reflect, and reveal emotion (Payne & Costas, 2021). Organized movement as performative dance has served meaningful purposes that bring citizens together for recreation, rituals, rites of passage (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003), recuperation, and stress reduction since humans began to coalesce in social groups (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922; Evans-Pritchard, 1928; Schögler & Trevarthen, 2007; Dissanayake, 2009 as cited by Christenson et al., 2021).

Movement as a representation of the human experience is a universal phenomenon (Deans, 2016). However, it is important to affirm that, although this concept is comprehensive worldwide, the translation of the intent of bodily movement is not equivalent across populations. While the cross-cultural appropriation of movement meaning is intentionally avoided as much as possible in the practice of DMT—to not deduce an assumptive emotional inference from a body shape or movement—the use of movement as a communicative tool, a language, is a pillar of DMT ideology (American Dance Therapy Association, 2009). Therefore, the application of DMT can play a uniquely beneficial role in settings where various cultures are represented and verbal language fluency may not be homogenous (Pallaro, 1997) because, inevitably, systems of meaning are cultivated in relationship to the individuals' experiences (Thom, 2010). In this way, expressive movement is an idiom in which we all “discover and learn about their world, make meaning of experience and express reactions to others and situations” (Deans, 2016, p. 46). Additionally, expressive movement activates not only kinesthetic involvement but also creative imagination, preference selection, and problem-solving (Deans, 2016).

Movement as a catalyst for psychological well-being has, in just over the past half century, been coined as DMT and is understood to involve the development of “emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual” (American Dance Therapy Association [ADTA], 2009; Levy, 2005). The work of DMT practitioners is guided by the understanding that the functions and experiences of the mind and the body are inherently connected. Foundational to the practice, dance/movement therapists are informed by the principal belief that the shape and movements of the body indicate the experience of the inner individual (ADTA, 2009). When this form of expression is facilitated in an environment created with a therapeutic intention, deeper levels of awareness, connection, and well-being can be achieved (Shank & Schirch, 2008). In a systemic review of evidence attributing to the therapeutic benefits of DMT, Strassel et al. (2011) verified that DMT has a positive impact on those affected by developmental, physical, medical, social, and psychological challenges (Chibbaro & Holland, 2013).

Across various theoretical frameworks, principals of DMT have been identified to steer the intention of pursuing and increasing mental and emotional well-being. These include eight elements essential to the application of group DMT, according to Claire Schmais (1985): (1) synchrony, such as moving simultaneously or in a relationship; (2) expression as a way of understanding and becoming aware of the emotionally felt experience; (3) rhythm; (4) vitality and the vigor of being alive; (5) integration, or building a relationship between the bodily movement experience and the mental or neurological activity; (6) cohesion, or the development of group dynamics; (7) education, and (8) symbolic representation. Because classrooms and other educational settings such as after-school programs and clubs typically consist of groups of students, these components of group DMT work can be employed in such environments.

Through the use of rhythmic structure, repetition, and consistency, DMT can facilitate the broadening of a participant's understanding of their own physical and emotional experience and that of others. Additionally, Marian Chace defined fundamental components, such as circular formations, kinesthetic mirroring, abstract and interpretive symbolism, and relationship development (Levy, 2005). Chace also codified a structure by which DMT sessions can be formatted, including warmup, theme development, and closure routines (Chaiklin et al., 1993). Characteristics and synchronicities of creative movement exploration and creation, bodily oriented interventions (BOI), somatic movement therapy, play and drama therapies, mindfulness practices, progressive muscle relaxation techniques, and recreational, performative, and cultural dance are reflected in the experiential application of DMT. Thus, a discussion of the impact of these practices will be considered within the context of exploring the relationship between DMT and SEL development.

Dance Movement Therapy for Social Emotional Learning and Development

In their review of scientific literature on the relationship between dance and emotional intelligence, San-Juan-Ferrer and Hípola (2019) concluded that individuals from infancy through early adolescence who participate in dance present advancements in emotional skills which closely parallel the BPS SEL Competencies. These include “higher levels of self-image and self-knowledge, self-control, self-motivation, empathy, emotional intelligence, self-expression, self-efficacy, self-realisation, social and emotional competence, and concentration and development of a healthy ego,” which contribute foundational elements for growth and development (San-Juan-Ferrer & Hípola, 2019, p. 27). Often, and particularly for adolescents, the expression of emotions through body movements and shapes comes more easily than verbal communication, especially in adverse and turbulent situations (Gladding, 2006). Sitzer and Stockwell (2015)

determined that art therapy, including DMT, is a natural purveyor of increased social-emotional function and can minimize the prevalence of psychological problems later in life. Organizations that focus on social-emotional development specifically through the use of expressive arts therapy, have been established, and, increasingly, this practice is being infused into the educational settings of the public-school systems (The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007). With continued effort, this approach could make psychological difficulties less prevalent in our students' lives.

Dance Movement Therapy in Boston Public Schools for Social Emotional Learning

The BPS define social-emotional competencies as those that reflect a transformative approach to skill acquisition, guided by a focus on equity aligned with culturally and linguistically sustaining practices. The foundational components that guide this methodology include “developing and affirming positive identities, fostering agency, and building a sense of belonging” and require “implementation commitment, feedback, and deep reflection” as part of the process (The Rennie Center, 2021, What is Transformative SEL?). Applicable to all content areas and learning environments, this approach can be implemented in programming and curriculum across the district. As discussed previously, efforts are in place to incorporate the development of social-emotional competencies into instruction in the core subjects (English language arts, math, science, and social studies). A special focus on how the arts specifically can impact social-emotional development has been set at the forefront of BPS's SEL implementation and the BPS Visual and Performing Arts Department (BPSArts) actively encourages and prepares educators to implement the Arts Education & Social Emotional Learning Framework into their work with students (BPSArts, n.d.). The framework is designed to “illuminate the intersection between arts education and social-emotional learning” by bridging the academic

standards of visual and performing arts instruction with SEL and skill development (Social Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey, 2022). BPSArts also maintains an online database of lesson planning and professional development resources to support educator implementation of the framework to promote SEL in arts classrooms across BPS (BPSArts, 2021).

Wright et al. (2006, 2014) concluded that when working with children in low-income communities, art-based programs can advance children's social-emotional skills. A study of a creative dance/movement instructional program implemented in a preschool setting with low-income students in the United States delineated growth in their social competence (Lobo & Winsler, 2006). This is important to consider since 63% of BPS students were identified as "economically disadvantaged" in 2021 (Massachusetts Department of Education). In an examination of the SEL curriculum applied in the context of after-school programming, Gullotta (2015) suggested that activities where students are "active, moving and doing," and movement, participation, manipulation, and practice are involved are more meaningful for SEL development than "passive, sitting, hearing-only" experiences (Pereira & Marques-Pinto, 2017). This supports the incorporation of movement and dance opportunities in their academic instruction to advance SEL.

In various studies, student behavior has demonstrated growth in SEL competencies at different grade levels and for students with various needs. As a component of instruction in special education classrooms, DMT can be a tool for students with developmental and neurological differences to engage in SEL. In a qualitative study, Devereaux (2016) collected reflections about the students' experiences with DMT in a special education classroom from the educators who worked with them. In various realms of the student's education experience, the educators stated they had witnessed improvement in the students' presentation of behaviors

related to and defined as SEL skills. A comprehensive examination of BOI on the SEL competency development of preschool-aged students found that the application of BOI supports growth in various domains of SEL fluency. A vast assortment of BOI approaches was included, such as “psychomotricity, play, dance, relaxation, physical activity, and exercise” (Dias Rodrigues et al., 2022, p. 2), similarly representative of various instructional practices present in BPS. Thom (2010) also discussed her experience incorporating creative movement to heighten SEL development with preschool students. Within months, she witnessed considerable observable gains in the students’ ability to navigate kinesthetic and emotional tasks like maintaining and recognizing personal space and sharing. These tasks are crucial not only in early-childhood development and throughout the educational experience of an individual, but also when they become an adult. A qualitative and quantitative study of the effectiveness of DMT to enhance students’ social-emotional development when incorporated into the educational curricula in two elementary schools in Greece signified that doing so positively influences SEL skills (Panagiotopoulou, 2018). Eke and Gent (2010) found that DMT applied in group settings in secondary schools in the United Kingdom could provide students, particularly those who have been identified as being “withdrawn” and having “emotional difficulties” (p. 45), with a “physical space reflecting an inner place where trust can develop,” allowing participants to “open up the conflicts, resistance, and emotions which would otherwise remain unexpressed or displaced” (p. 55). By releasing this potential, students’ SEL abilities can flourish and thrive.

The BPS affirmed that when art education and SEL are incorporated, students are provided with unique opportunities to “express appreciation for their own and others' cultures, while building connections with peers and staff” (The Rennie Center, 2021, Where Does SEL Live Across BPS: Arts). They also explained that an active learning environment, such as a

physical education or dance classroom, promotes “social skill development, positive identity formation [where] cooperation, problem solving, and inclusion,” as well as collaboration and self-reflection, are emphasized in the curriculum standards (Where Does SEL Live Across BPS?). In a review of the effects of BOI on preschoolers’ social-emotional competence, Dias Rodrigues et al. (2022) found that involvement in such programming improved the students’ self-awareness. By allowing our bodies to inform and support our needs, we learn to rely on ourselves to meet challenges, promoting confidence and self-efficacy (Levy, 2005).

As mentioned previously, the application of DMT can facilitate learning and understanding in settings where the cultures and verbal language fluency is not uniform among those present (Pallaro, 1997). The students we serve in the BPS present a vast array of cultural backgrounds, verbal language skills, and development. Both traditional education pedagogy and psychotherapeutic methodologies implore students and clients to exercise verbal language to examine and exchange cognitive meaning and, too often, do not consider or are not informed by the knowledge of the physical body. In addition to the benefits of applied DMT as a multiculturally inclusive use of the body as a tool to communicate, there is also the advantage that it can be utilized as a communicative bridge for nonverbal individuals, such as young children and individuals with atypical or delayed language development (Thom, 2010, p. 104) by qualifying and leveraging the comprehension of an experience in a physical context. Children with diverse learning needs, particularly those with limited verbal skills experiencing movement as a vehicle for self-expression, healing, and growth, can gain new perspectives of themselves and experience an increased level of self-relatedness (Devereaux, 2016; Vincent et al., 2007).

The DMT Approach to the Development of Self-Awareness

The BPS defined the ability to identify and understand the influence of our own emotions, personal and social identities, goals and values, personal and cultural assets, perceptions, and biases across contexts as *self-awareness*. This awareness is crucial to an individual's ability to "negotiate increasingly complex social situations" (Thom, 2010, p. 109).

Improvisational free-form movement is a tenant of DMT and integral to DMT as well as creative movement experiences. Such encounters vary greatly from the rigorously structured and sequenced lessons students may typically experience in a classroom and have numerous benefits, particularly in the realm of self-discovery and -awareness. Creative movement promotes psychological health, well-being, and maturity and offers a structured, safe outlet for the physical expression of emotions while gaining awareness and appreciation of oneself (Payne & Costas, 2021). Acceptance of all forms of bodily movement allows students to be led by their instincts and "attend to the somatic cues within their own bodies, rather than seeking an external vision of their bodies and movement" (Thom, 2010, p. 106). By allowing activities to be guided by creative ideas and improvisations drawn from their inner resources, students are invited and permitted to explore and develop their movement potential, body awareness, and self-image (Gronlund et al., 2005). By removing expectations of right and wrong performance and instead allowing the educational environment to be influenced by the students' strengths and involving all facets of identity, the art therapy approach contributes to the development of a positive self-conceptualization (Panagiotopoulou, 2018).

The DMT Approach to the Development of Self-Management

A person's power to achieve personal and collective goals, communicate responsibly, and persevere in the face of a challenge is considered the skill of *self-management* (BPS, 2019). At

the core of this area of skills is the ability to identify and understand our emotional spectrum and compose healthy, beneficial responses to experiences, also known as *emotional literacy*. Pereira and Marques-Pinto's (2017) study on the impact of a socio-emotional educational dance curriculum on middle school students found that the programming significantly improved students' self-management skills. In an analysis of the relationship between dance and emotional intelligence, San-Juan-Ferrer and Hípola (2019) identified the artistic-expressive qualities of dance as a form of mediation in the process of positive psychological change in the human being. As a prime intention of DMT, recognition of one's own internal feelings and needs allows us to respond to and self-regulate emotional experiences (Levy, 2005), providing an opportunity to practice self-management.

The DMT methods, which include mindfulness practices that draw from yoga and meditation techniques, invite participants to engage their sensory awareness, identify impulses, and internalize control (Levy, 1995). This can be powerful for students, particularly those with diverse neurodevelopment diagnoses such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder, who struggle to assimilate into the regimented environment characteristic of most BPS classrooms (Devereaux, 2016; Gronlund et al., 2005). Incorporating a focus on or discussion of the bodily experience while a student is learning can improve interoceptive accuracy, which is essential for emotional regulation (Füstös et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2015, as cited in Payne & Costas, 2021).

In 1998, Henley found in his study of an integrated multimodal expressive therapies program for young children diagnosed with ADHD that their symptomatic behaviors could be self-regulated through "facilitated creativity" (Habib & Ali, 2015), such as DMT endeavors. Devereaux's (2016) qualitative study of educator evaluations of a DMT program on student

behavior and academic engagement in a special education classroom found that, unanimously, the teachers observed that their students were increasingly more attentive and settled, and “their nervous systems appeared ‘more regulated’” following their participation in the program. The students in the study presented a greater capacity to adjust the way they expressed themselves emotionally and applied “coping processes that either increased or decreased the intensity of the moment” (Gross, 2002, as cited by Devereaux, 2016). In their sweeping review, Dias Rodrigues et al. (2022) also found that involvement in BOI improved students’ ability not only to recognize their emotions but also to self-regulate their emotional responses.

The DMT Approach to the Development of Social Awareness and Relationship Skills

The ability to consider and empathize with various perspectives, interpret communal contexts and norms, and respect and appreciate diversity defines the domain of *social awareness* (BPS, 2021). These skills are essential to building healthy connections with others and developing relationships founded on clear communication, active listening, cooperation and engagement, and conflict resolution. When our students can demonstrate these abilities, they are better prepared not only for learning alongside their peers but also for the world beyond our classrooms. The body is a tool for communication, and subtle variations in body movement, posture, and gaze, when detected and perceived by another, can reveal information about the emotional state or experience (Winters, 2008) and facilitate a meaningful emotional connection.

Rena Kornblum asserted that 80% of our relationships are determined by body language. However, our education system lacks consideration of this fact, and we fail to equip students with body-oriented communication skills (Shank & Schirch, 2008). Deans’ (2016) study found that learning dance allowed students to exercise interpersonal body-based concepts such as personal space and recognition of peer expressions. Dias Rodrigues et al. (2022) found that

involvement in BOI improved students' social competence, including cooperation, interaction, communication, assertion, empathy, and independence.

In group DMT settings, nonverbal communication is encouraged to facilitate interactions and guide relationship development on a somatic level. This gives students an opportunity to express themselves through the “immediate, concrete, tangible vehicle of body movement” (Payne & Costas, 2021, p. 282), providing them with a communicative tool in their toolbox in addition to words. It also expands awareness of others' capacity for nonverbal communication, which is crucial in understanding and relating to others, and increases the potential for positive, sustained relationships (Payne & Costas, 2021).

Specific types of group DMT experientials can contribute to the development of social awareness, including trust-building and mirroring activities, as well as the use of shared materials and props like parachutes, Octabands, or scarves. Neuroscience and social psychology data confirm that observing someone else embody the same body shape as us produces a similar emotional response in both persons, achieving a level of attunement that supports emotional group cohesion (Christensen et al., 2021; Eke & Gent, 2010; Thom, 2010; Winters, 2008). Activities such as the Human Knot, in which participants must work together to untangle their bodies, require collaboration and solidarity in pursuit of a common goal. These kinds of practices illicit a kinesthetic awareness that reinforces the idea that our actions impact others, a key understanding in any nurturing community (de Valenzuela, 2014).

In Devereaux's (2016) study, it was apparent to the participants that the group process of DMT uniquely leveraged the range of abilities among students in a classroom setting to build empathy and awareness of others, unifying the group while also uplifting each individual's contribution. The Andréa Rizzo Dance Therapy Program leads dance therapy programs in public

schools throughout the northeast United States. Students who participate in their programming experience “synchrony, or moving in relationship with others, while maintaining individual movement expression, leadership opportunities and turn-taking as they contribute to the group interaction” (Vincent et al., 2007, p. 54), which fosters their ability to connect with others.

Gronlund et al.’s (2005) pilot study on DMT as an alternative treatment for young boys diagnosed with ADHD found that, at the final stage of the treatment program, the participants were connecting in increasingly cooperative ways and able to communicate more freely about their concerns, show compassion for one another, and support one another, demonstrating an increase in interpersonal awareness.

Conclusion

When it comes to children’s well-being—physical, mental, social, and emotional—why would we not invest all resources and employ all innovative instructional and experiential strategies to support students? SEL skills and competencies have the capacity to improve the lives of students in BPS. BPS public educators have a responsibility to provide experiences and opportunities for students to witness, practice, and master social-emotional skills. When incorporated with the creativity and embodied experience of dance and DMT, the process of SEL development is enhanced. Expanding beyond a curricular focus on SEL in core academic subject areas, BPS supports the inclusion of arts education to further student health and learning. This opens the door DMT, as a therapeutic and expressive art, to become a tool for SEL.

Implementing a combined approach of DMT and SEL in k-12 education leverages the connective and communicative nature of bodily expression and invites participants to reflect and engage through kinesthetic means. For students from diverse backgrounds, like those in BPS classrooms, infusing DMT into SEL provides opportunities to learn from each other and understand each

other in ways that involve the mind and the body as an expression of self. Particularly for students with special needs, DMT can activate and facilitate the use of our body in ways that expand their ability to express themselves and relate to others. The studies discussed affirm and provide an authenticated understanding that dance/movement experiences, when applied with therapeutic intent and using psychotherapeutic methods, can encourage and facilitate SEL. Further research in the area of social and emotional learning and DMT in schools, and a broad application of their combined implementation, is needed.

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Appendix



SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES & SKILLS

Transformative social emotional learning is a process whereby young people, and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting, relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, communal and societal well-being. Through this process youth and adults learn essential life skills and competencies that promote a positive identity, a well-managed self, healthy relationships and agency to successfully navigate their future. At BPS, we believe that strengthening adult and youth social and emotional skills and competencies enhance our abilities to connect and relate to others across race, class, culture, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, and learning needs.

COMPETENCIES:

SKILLS:

SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to recognize emotions, personal and social identities, goals and values and how they influence actions across contexts. The ability to recognize one's personal, cultural and language assets, perceptions and biases with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy.

- Identifying and understanding emotions
- Recognizing cultural & linguistic assets
- Understanding of personal and sociocultural identities
- Awareness of beliefs, mindsets and biases
- Recognizing personal interests and motivation
- Self-Efficacy & Self-Confidence



SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability to successfully manage, advocate and persevere to achieve personal and collective goals and objectives. The ability to communicate ideas responsibly and persevere when personal and group-level challenges arise.

- Managing thoughts and behaviors
- Goal setting
- Organization
- Identifying strategies and techniques to manage stress
- Constructively managing conflicts
- Agency



SOCIAL AWARENESS

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand broader historical and social contexts and norms for behavior in different settings, and to recognize family, school, and community supports for self and others.

- Perspective-taking
- Showing empathy
- Appreciating diversity
- Showing respect for others
- Recognizing cultural demands and opportunities
- Understanding social norms
- Recognizing issues of inequity



RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

The ability to establish and maintain healthy rewarding relationships and to effectively navigate settings with different social and cultural norms and demands. The ability to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate with others, negotiate conflict constructively, seek help when needed.

- Effectively communicating
- Social engagement
- Relationship building
- Teamwork
- Applying cultural competence
- Collaborative problem-solving



DECISION MAKING

The ability to make caring, constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across settings. Ability to examine ethical standards, safety concerns, and norms. The realistic evaluation of the benefits and consequences of various actions, and to consider collective health and well-being.

- Identifying values, choices and decisions
- Co-creating inclusive solutions
- Analyzing situations
- Evaluating
- Reflecting



THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University

Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences

Expressive Therapies Division

Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling:

Dance Movement Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Bethany Lynch

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Dance and Dance/Movement Therapy to Support Social-Emotional Learning in the Boston Public Schools

Date of Graduation: September, 2022

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Carla Velázquez-García