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Revitalizing Learning Environments: The Impact of Incorporating Movement Breaks in
Classroom Curriculum

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This thesis examines the benefits of integrating movement breaks within high school classrooms to enhance student engagement, focus, and overall well-being. The aim is to highlight the negative effects that a traditional classroom structure can have when looking at the evolving needs of the high school population. Drawing on personal experiences, observations, and existing research, this study highlights the disconnect between traditional teaching methods and the developmental needs of today's students. Using comparisons from previous teaching methods to the standards of an academic class today, the study identifies movement breaks as a useful tool to address issues such as student disengagement, attendance, and academic performance. By providing short bursts of physical activity throughout the day, movement breaks offer opportunities for students to reset their brains, improve their attention span, and enhance cognitive function. In addition, the use of social and emotional learning principles create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment that can lead to reduced test anxiety and promote academic success. Drawing on successful models from existing literature, this study proposes a framework for implementing movement breaks within high school classrooms. Ultimately, this thesis advocates for the integration of movement breaks into the high school curriculum to create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments. By recognizing the importance of holistic student development and addressing diverse learner needs, educators can better support student success and well-being in the modern educational space.

Keywords: Dance, education, movement break, development, inclusion, learning styles

Author Identity Statement: I acknowledge my race and experiences. I am a straight-passing, bisexual, black Dominican male from New Jersey. Moving to Massachusetts initially brought cultural shock as I adjusted to a predominantly white population, but settling in my internship site, a predominantly black community, provided a sense of familiarity. Throughout my work with students who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, I have leaned on the support of supervisors and classmates, recognizing the importance of seeking guidance in engaging with new populations. My background shapes my perspective, and I strive for cultural competence and inclusivity in my work.

Revitalizing Learning Environments: The Impact of Incorporating Movement Breaks in Classroom Curriculum

Introduction

On average a child spends about seven hours a day, five days a week, one hundred eighty days in the year, attending school (Traub, 2000). So much time is spent in school where growing and developing is such a pivotal part of one's life. There is so much growth, and change happening intellectually, socially, and interpersonally. Learning environments in schools should reflect this development and growth. When one takes a step back and looks at the learning environments in school settings, there is a visibly noticeable broken system that has stayed complacent for many years. The broken aspects of school systems include limited access to education, pressure from standardized testing, outdated curriculum, underfunding, teacher burnout, inconsistency regarding discipline, and inadequate mental health support (Søbjerg, 2021). These issues hinder student development, perpetuate inequality, and require systemic reforms such as equitable funding, curriculum updates, and support for teachers. The world has developed and discovered new ways to educate students, yet the learning environments of most schools do not reflect these advances. "At a time when quality education is arguably more vital to one's life chances than ever before, students today are missing out on the education needed to live fulfilling lives as adults and to participate in and contribute to the world economy" (Krishnan, 2020, p.1). This environment is no longer suitable for the evolving cognitive, social, and emotional needs of students who are striving to do their best in all aspects of life.

From a personal perspective, I can see that one of my successes when it came to school

was that I did feel like I had a space where I could grow. Looking back at it I think that part of the reason why I was able to get ahead in the school system was because I left and I switched schools. In my hometown school, I found myself constantly surrounded by community issues and disruptions, which overshadowed my education. Crowded classrooms left me feeling lost in lectures and seeking support that was often elusive. However, upon enrolling in a different school, I noticed a significant improvement in the learning environment. While not a private institution, the facilities were more spacious, providing a sense of openness and allowing for better access to support resources. The hallways were quiet during class periods, and transitions between classes felt smoother. The school that I was in growing up is very similar to the school that I am working at right now. It was not labeled a transformation school, but all the signs were there. Low test scores, high rates of grade repetition, and efforts to prevent student failure were prevalent. Moreover, the hallways often seemed more populated than the classrooms, reflecting challenges in student attendance and engagement (Sabin, 2018). This observation prompts questions about the influence of my community and population on my education. Is it coincidental that I received a superior education in a predominantly white high school compared to my experience in a school with a higher black and Hispanic population? I aim to explore how socioeconomic factors and community resources shape the quality of education and opportunities offered at different schools.

So many students who were being held back were not given the materials to succeed. I remember being a Freshman in high school at 14 years old, there was a kid in my class who was 17 that had been held back time and time again not given any tools other than to just restart the year. Whenever I needed help I had to get outside tutoring or ask friends and my parents. Even

then, they were not able to fully understand because the type of learning that was being given in the school system was very specific. It was all lecture and reading-based with basic homework assignments. That did not work for me because I was too anxious to just sit at a desk and listen to someone talk for hours.

Throughout the day, I could not help but move around, and there were not any fidget toys back then to keep myself grounded. So to express this anxiety, I would be rocking my chair back and forth, playing with my pencils, and ripping paper just because I could not focus. I could not just sit and listen to someone speak for hours in the day, and I was not the only person that was like this. I believe the lecture style of learning failed to effectively engage half of the students in my class, which was proven by the teacher's need to provide extensive one-on-one support. This resulted in poor test scores and a lack of comprehension among students, as the material was not retained. These observations underscore several critical themes that highlight ongoing challenges within the education system. Specifically, this thesis aims to address the issues of mismatched learning styles, lack of engagement and attention, and the necessity for individualized support (Gilakjani, 2012). By emphasizing the importance of accommodating individual learning preferences, ensuring support for all students, and reassessing traditional teaching methods, I seek to contribute to the improvement of student engagement and academic outcomes.

I want my students to feel like they are given the steps they need to succeed outside of school so they feel like they have the path after they graduate high school. I want them to be equipped with essential life skills, ensuring they can thrive even if they choose not to pursue higher education. This includes practical knowledge like understanding how to manage taxes, budget effectively, and staying informed about what happens in their community. Additionally, I

aim for them to have a strong grasp of their history and culture, providing a solid foundation for navigating adulthood. More than anything, I want my students to have an understanding of their mental health and how to be safe, how to advocate for themselves, and how to tolerate difficult emotions wherever they are in life. Integrating movement breaks into our curriculum aligns with these goals by providing valuable opportunities for physical activity, which is fundamental for overall health and well-being (Fox, 1999). Research indicates that regular physical activity is associated with improved mood, reduced stress levels, and enhanced cognitive function (Fox, 1999). Furthermore, incorporating movement breaks can aid in resetting students' focus and enhancing concentration (Peiris et al., 2021), while also serving as moments for practicing mindfulness and self-awareness techniques (Woods, 2021).

Within the first week of being at my site, I realized that one of the biggest problems the school has right now is class attendance and engagement. Whether it is students not showing up to school at all or students not going to their classes, the biggest issue is that these students are not retaining the material that is being taught. According to The Commonwealth Institute (2017), “Students in high poverty schools do worse on standardized tests, are more likely to be chronically absent during the school year, more likely to be held back in their grade, and less likely to graduate on time.” Whether it was due to a lack of engagement or being overstimulated with their surroundings, more students were reported spending 50 to 60 percent of the class time in the hallways than in the classroom (School principle, personal communication, October 17th, 2023). The goal is to keep the students engaged in the material in order to limit the amount of students that leave the classroom to roam the halls. This can be achieved by making the class relevant to what is happening outside the classroom as well as creatively engaging with the

students to keep them focused and engaged. “Just as they should be aware of how culture and climate influence behavior, it’s important for teachers to consider the structure of their classrooms, including both physical structure (classroom arrangement) and the classroom’s day-to-day routines”(The IRIS Center, 2012, p.1).

The majority of time in school is spent listening to a lecture, doing solo or group classwork, or taking exams (Shernoff et al., 2003). Educators are consistently looking for ways in which they can adapt the learning process (Shernoff et al., 2003). Some have taken to online games to hold on to the attention of their students and make the material easier to digest (Vasileiadou & Makrina, 2017). While this has proven to be helpful to some, this means that most of one's life at school is spent in one seat staring at a screen, book, or another person. “The amount of time students spend in a classroom has always been a subject of debate and is affected by competing priorities such as budget concerns, academic time, and the weight of teaching expectations" (Cox et al., 2011; Howie et al., 2014). Students do have to spend a substantial amount of time at their desks, however the process in which curriculum is delivered can be adjusted to better meet the needs of students within that classroom.

Embodied learning is the process of incorporating movement into the classroom, which has shown success in immersing students in a more interactive lesson plan (Weijdom, 2022). Many of the articles used for this thesis have shown valuable evidence on how the body can be used within the general curriculum and create a collaborative and engaging environment in the classroom. Using a more social and emotional learning approach has also proven to improve academic performance as well as reduce test anxiety (Stocker, & Gallagher, 2019). Considering the population of the site the thesis is being written about, this approach can be

extremely beneficial. This high school is known as a transformation school, meaning that the students require more assistance in terms of academics (Campbell et al., 2018).

This thesis aims to investigate the multifaceted benefits of incorporating movement breaks within the confines of high school classrooms. The goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how integrating physical activity into the curriculum can positively shape educational outcomes. The study will provide research on the history of classroom structure and how it has evolved to today's standards. This information will support the method that was developed that demonstrates the importance of having movement breaks and social and emotional learning in the classroom. This thesis will also provide research on the benefits that movement breaks have with different populations within the school systems that are already incorporating this model. This thesis will also aim to answer the question: "How do regular movement breaks in a high school classroom impact student academic performance, attention span, and socio-emotional well-being?"

Literature Review

Purpose of Review

In the realm of education, the pursuit of innovative strategies to enhance student engagement, well-being, and academic performance remains an unending endeavor. As educators and researchers navigate the complex landscape of academic practices, the integration of movement into the classroom routine has emerged as a promising avenue for optimizing learning environments and promoting holistic student development (Open AI, 2024). This literature review seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of the benefits associated with incorporating movement breaks in the classroom, drawing upon a diverse array of scholarly

works spanning educational psychology, neuroscience, and academic frameworks.

Dance Movement Therapy and Incorporating Movement in the Classroom

To truly understand the benefits of incorporating movement in the classroom and the lens that was used to create this approach, it is important to define dance movement therapy as well as discuss how that could be adapted in a classroom setting. According to the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) dance movement therapy (DMT) is defined as the “psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, to improve health and well-being (ADTA, n.d.)”. Overall, dance movement therapy aims to promote holistic well-being by harnessing the therapeutic potential of movement and dance to facilitate personal growth, emotional expression, and psychological healing. (ADTA, n.d.)

In DMT sessions, individuals participate in movement based activities under the guidance of a trained therapist to explore emotions, foster self awareness, and address psychological challenges (ADTA, n.d.). DMT is widely used to tackle various mental health issues such as trauma, anxiety, depression, body image concerns, and stress-related disorders (ADTA, n.d.). It also proves beneficial for individuals with developmental disabilities, neurological conditions, or physical limitations (ADTA, n.d.).

Brian Sutton-Smith was an early childhood theorist who believed children can develop a large network of neurons that will go away if they are not used (Stevens-Smith, 2016). He also believed that these neurons create the foundation that helps children develop language, pursue creativity, and create problem-solving skills (2016). All of these things were also important in the idea of incorporating movement into learning. Active engagement is a

combination of knowledge, cognitive strategies, social interactions, motivation, movement, and conceptual knowledge (Stevens-Smith, 2016; Chandler, 2015). Active engagement, movement, and learning go together as dynamic components of an integrated educational experience, fostering increased retention, cognitive flexibility, and overall student achievement. Research has shown that movement and exercise improve cognitive function, improve memory, and help with learning, as well as stimulate neural development and produce more capillaries (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Abadie & Brown, 2010).

Incorporating Movement in Schools

An approach that has been tested in some schools is the integration of movement breaks into the traditional classroom model (Lander et al., 2024). In an article from the University of Nevada about how physical activity improves brain and cognitive function, a movement break or “brain break” was defined as short bouts of physical activity that help reset the brain and get blood and oxygen flowing more rapidly to the brain and body (Russo, 2016). Research has shown a vigorous connection between movement and enhanced brain function, including improved attention span, memory retention, and overall cognitive performance (Muallem et al., 2018). There is a growing trend of incorporating movement into the classroom setting as a means to enhance student engagement, academic performance, and overall well-being. Credible sources such as CNN and The National Association of Physical Literacy support its assertions, providing empirical evidence and expert opinions on the benefits of physical activity in education. “Sometimes all it takes is a two-minute brain break to transform a stressful classroom situation into a calm learning environment” (NeuroLogic, 0:15).

GoNoodle has become a widely used tool among educators, offering structured brain and movement breaks for classroom use. It provides a collection of videos focused on movement and mindfulness, designed to engage students and encourage physical activity during breaks from academic tasks (K12 Online Professional Development Courses ' Credits for Teachers, 2023, p.1). The introduction of GoNoodle as a popular tool for incorporating movement breaks is well-explained, offering a concise description of its purpose and effectiveness. The concept of Activity Permissive Learning Environments (APLE) is introduced effectively, emphasizing the importance of accommodating students' natural inclinations for movement within the classroom (Benden Associate Professor & Director of the Ergonomics Center, 2024).

APLE acknowledges that traditional classroom settings often do not give students the space to move and readjust as needed (Benden Associate Professor & Director of the Ergonomics Center, 2024), leading to restlessness and decreased attention spans among students. By contrast, an activity-permissive approach embraces movement as an important part of the learning process (Benden Associate Professor & Director of the Ergonomics Center, 2024). It encourages teachers to incorporate physical activity breaks, active learning strategies, and flexible seating arrangements to accommodate the different needs and limitations of students. The passage concludes with a compelling argument for the adaptation of classroom settings to better suit the needs of students, particularly those with individual education plans or behavioral issues (Benden Associate Professor & Director of the Ergonomics Center, 2024). This assertion is supported by evidence suggesting that physical literacy can lead to improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students. Overall, this article effectively highlights the importance of incorporating movement into the classroom curriculum and makes

a compelling case for reevaluating traditional approaches to education in favor of more inclusive and student-centered practices (Caldwell et al., 2020).

The expectation for retaining a student's focus in the classroom needs to be reevaluated, particularly with the rise in the number of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Traditional classroom curriculum may not adequately address the diverse learning needs and challenges faced by these students (Johnson, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to update and adapt the curriculum to better accommodate students with varying abilities, learning styles, and attention spans (Johnson, 2012). This may involve implementing differentiated instruction, providing individualized support, incorporating multi-sensory learning strategies, and allowing for flexible pacing and assessment methods (Stoffers, 2011). Learning is not solely a cognitive activity confined to the brain but is instead influenced by the integration of physical movement and sensory experiences. (Kleinjan, 2020) By embracing inclusive practices and recognizing the unique strengths and needs of each student, educators can create a more supportive and engaging learning environment that promotes success for all learners.

The Evolution of Learning

As society changes and evolves through the years, so do its methods of educating the younger generation. “There is a normative way of teaching that is no longer benefiting its target” (The IRIS Center, 2016). Martin Luther King Jr. released an article about what he believes is the purpose of education. “It seems that education has a twofold function to perform in the life of man and society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life” (King Jr, 1947, p.123). As society has evolved and modernized, the educational landscape has

undergone substantial changes, with some of the fundamental principles of learning and teaching becoming diluted or distorted along the way. The rise of mandated state testing is emblematic of this shift (Loeb & Byun, 2019). While standardized assessments serve a valuable purpose in evaluating student progress and holding schools accountable, the increased shift of focus toward state testing has led to unintended consequences (Loeb & Byun, 2019).

With an increasing emphasis on test scores as the primary measure of educational success, teachers and administrators often feel pressured to prioritize test preparation over genuine learning experiences (Loeb & Byun, 2019). There are too many extenuating factors that can influence a student's score and that can lead to an inaccurate representation of student growth or achievement (Loeb & Byun, 2019). As a result, students may find themselves engaged in rote memorization and regurgitation of facts rather than critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative expression. The curriculum becomes narrowed, with a focus on content that is likely to appear on standardized tests, at the expense of broader, more enriching subjects and experiences (Loeb & Byun, 2019).

Ultimately, the pressure to perform well on tests can create a high-stakes, stressful environment for students, leading to anxiety, disengagement, and a lack of motivation to learn (2019). This can have long-term consequences for students' academic achievement, as well as their overall well-being and desire for learning. The true essence of education - to foster curiosity, critical thinking, and personal growth - must be reclaimed and prioritized to ensure that students are prepared not just for academic success, but for a lifetime of learning, adaptation, and contribution to society (King, 1947, p.124). "We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character- that is the goal of true education"(King,

1947, p.123).

The following qualitative research articles highlight the benefits of using movement integration in a classroom setting in addition to traditional standardized testing. The conversation of learning has expanded from just kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learning, and incorporating movement integration gives students another strategy to process information.

The Integration of Embodied Learning in a Language Learning Classroom: Conclusions from a Qualitative Analysis

This article focuses on the value of embodied learning and how it can create a more engaging and interactive lesson plan. The goal is to examine the link between the brain and the body and examine whether embodied learning would improve students' language performance and enhance their engagement and motivation for learning (Kosmas, 2021). Throughout the study, data was collected from recordings of sessions in the experimental classroom. 118 elementary classroom students from two different schools and six primary school teachers were involved in this study (Kosmas, 2021). The students were a mix of first and second-grade classes with an average age of eight years old. The students were required to complete 12 EL sessions in the classroom in three months (Kosmas, 2021). These sessions would include short video presentations combining movement with specific words. In total, there were 80 movements/words that had easy steps for the students to follow (Kosmas, 2021). Each of these sessions was designed to create collaboration in the classroom and increased with difficulty over time.

The results showed that the students were extremely motivated to participate in the intervention sessions and managed to improve their language skills by connecting the movements they learned to the different words (Kosmas, 2021). This research provided valuable evidence on how the body can be used within the general curriculum to create a collaborative and engaging environment in the classroom. The author noted that there was an increased level of motivation and engagement with the material among the students who were participating in the study. The author also did a great job of compiling the data from each of the intervention sessions to capture the changes in the behavior of the students (Kosmas, 2021).

Teachers' Perceptions of Using Movement in the Classroom

The goal of this study was to explore classroom teachers' preconceived notions of using movement in a classroom. This information was gathered by conducting interviews and giving surveys to better understand the teacher's connection between movement and learning (Benes et al., 2016). Seventeen participants were enrolled in this study; 15 female and two male (Benes et al., 2016). The average age of the participants was 38-40 years old and had an average of eleven years of teaching experience. The participants were asked to submit a movement survey and were then interviewed by one of the researchers to get a more in-depth understanding of their answers to the survey (Benes et al., 2016). The interviews lasted 15 to 30 minutes and happened over the phone or in person. The results from the survey showed that while teachers were knowledgeable about the health benefits of physical activity, they proved to know little about the connection between movement and learning in the classroom (Benes et al., 2016). However, most of the teachers in the study did show a strong interest in integrating movement into their curriculum.

Based on the research gathered from these two qualitative articles (Benes et al., 2016; Kosmas, 2021), there is evidence that supports that applying movement-based learning into the curriculum has many benefits for both the students and the teachers. These articles can also be used as a tool to learn about different embodied learning/movement-integrated interventions that can be used in the classroom and how they can support both teachers in creating a new outlet for students to learn (Benes et al., 2016; Kosmas, 2021).

This paper sets out to explore the impact of incorporating movement into the curriculum on student engagement, an important factor in creating an effective learning experience. By diving into the concept of engagement as a foundational element for learning, this paper aligns with Cavanagh's assertion that engagement serves as the fundamental precursor to learning, highlighting its pivotal role in the educational process. (Cavanagh, 2019). The Schlechty Center's framework, which breaks down various levels of student interaction in the classroom, provides a valuable lens through which to examine the dynamics of student engagement. According to the Schlechty Center, "The business of schools is to design, create, and invent high-quality, intellectually demanding schoolwork that students find engaging" (Schlechty, 2003).

In the context of the internship site, where the writer has been conducting observations, there is a notable prevalence of disengagement among students, characterized by behaviors falling under the categories of retreatism and rebellion. Students exhibiting retreatism demonstrate disconnection from classroom activities and goals, while those in rebellion often harbor negative attitudes towards tasks and formal education. This observation underscores the urgent need for interventions that can strengthen a student's interest and enthusiasm for learning. The cognitive, emotional, and physical pieces of active engagement help children

retain what they have learned as well as process what they are learning (Steven-Smith, 2016).

Brain Development and Function

Looking specifically at brain development and how movement can impact it, a few important structures are crucial to this research. Experts suggest that specific movement patterns during development may have a profound impact on the formation of neurons, potentially influencing academic achievement later on (Archer & Siraj, 2015). Research has shown that about half an hour of exercise every day is good for your overall health. This means both physical and mental health, as “it only takes between 10 and 30 minutes of daily physical activity to instantly lift your mood” (Archer & Siraj, 2015). Movement plays a crucial role in supporting the growth and development of children and young adults, aiding not only physical growth but also cognitive, social, and emotional development (Archer & Siraj, 2015). Engaging in physical activity not only boosts energy levels but also diminishes stress and promotes relaxation for both the mind and body. Studies indicate that exercise can trigger the release of brain chemicals such as norepinephrine and dopamine, which enhance mood and vitality (Chaouloff, 1989).

Exercise can have many positive effects on a growing brain, and results from brain scans show that a child does their best learning when they are moving around and active (Smith, 2016; Chandler & Tricot, 2014). These structures, along with many others, work together in a highly coordinated manner to regulate all aspects of human cognition, behavior, and physiology (Chandler & Tricot, 2014). Movement can regulate all aspects of human cognition, behavior, and physiology by exerting a great influence on brain function, hormonal activity, physical health, and behavioral regulation (Chaouloff, 1989). Incorporating regular

physical activity into daily routines is essential for optimizing overall well-being and supporting cognitive and emotional resilience. “Actively engaging students helps them to think more deeply about course content, and, by adding physical activity to active learning, the cerebral blood flow increases the brain’s function and performance” (Hillman et al., 2008, p.6). This can create not only a stress-free environment in the classroom but also allow the students to engage with the material through a different lens helping them retain the information (Hillman et al., 2008). By offering students opportunities to interact with content through movement, educators can enhance retention and understanding, catering to diverse learning styles and preferences (Hillman et al., 2008). In regards to education and brain development specifically, movement based interventions have been associated with improvements in academic performance, attention, and memory retention among students of all ages (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016).

Exercise can have many positive effects on a growing brain, and results from brain scans show that a child does their best learning when they are moving around and active (Steven Smith, 2016; Chandler & Tricot, 2014). One of these ideas is that activity is an essential piece of a child’s nature, which can be shown through instincts, experience, individuality, and interests (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016).

“It Just Made Me Want to Do Better for Myself”: Performing Arts Education and Academic Performance for African American Male High School Students

This article by Walton (2020) explores the impact of performing arts education on academic performance specifically among African American male high school

students. It investigates how participation in performing arts programs influences academic outcomes and personal development. The relevance of this article lies in its examination of an educational intervention that targets a specific demographic group facing unique challenges in academic achievement. The goal of this arts-based research is for the researcher to identify strategies that could enhance both the academic performance and overall school experience for the African American male population in schools. The study followed and documented the experiences of African American male students who were enrolled in school based performing arts in addition to their regular curriculum (Walton, 2019). The interesting thing about the participants in this study is that none of them were high school students. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 21 with one 30-year-old (2019). However, each of the five participants attended and graduated from the Piedmont School of the Arts (PSOA), a performing arts high school in North Carolina (2019).

The participants' experiences were documented with semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors. The questions that were used allowed participants to address different themes such as school enjoyment, school safety, positive and negative school experiences, student teacher interactions, academic strengths and weaknesses, experiences in academic and performing arts classes, relationships between performing arts participation and academic achievement, and their perceptions of PSOAs impact on African American male students (Walton, 2019). The data gained from the interviews was used in a content analysis to determine research results. The results showed that African American male high school students can benefit from an education that combines performing arts learning with a regular core academic

curriculum (2019). Research showed that participants who took part in this study felt as if their academic engagement and overall school experience were strengthened and enhanced by school-based performing arts learning (2019). The author noted that a flaw in the research could be that due to how specific the topic of the research was, there was a limited amount of studies found that examined the connection between school-based arts engagement and academic identity development among African American males (2019). A limitation that this writer noticed was that the data collection and analysis were done on participants who had already graduated high school (2019).

'It Is You in My Picture!' A Holistic Approach to Six-Year-Old Children's Art Experience.

The study by Granö and Turunen (2022) highlights a holistic approach to understanding six-year-old children's art experiences. By examining how children perceive and engage with art, the article sheds light on the multifaceted nature of artistic expression in early childhood. This research is relevant as it contributes to the understanding of children's cognitive and emotional development through artistic activities (Granö & Turunen, 2022). The goal of this arts-based research study was to understand the impacts and benefits that arts and narrative-based methods have on children's social-emotional growth in early childhood education (Granö & Turunen, 2022). This research focuses on six-year-old children's experiences of a fairy tale and demonstrates the importance of peer relationships. The data that was collected was done on two consecutive days in a preschool class of 15 six-year-olds (Granö & Turunen, 2022).

The group was divided in half with seven to eight children in each group. The first group of participants were asked to listen to the researcher tell the story of *The Ugly Duckling* while the other group of participants were asked to listen to three pieces of ballet music (Granö

& Turunen, 2022). Both groups were then asked to draw pictures and talk about the drawings based on their impressions of the fairy tale and music. The researchers then analyzed and described the children's drawings, speeches, and body language through a holistic lens. The themes gathered from this study support the theory that hearing different perspectives helps children express and process their own experiences in the future (2022).

Research showed that the use of art exploration in the classroom can bring up feelings of empowerment and a decrease in anxiety. It also shows that art-related activities show children how to develop empathy within groups (Waajid et al., 2013). Based on the research gathered from the two arts-based research articles (Granö & Turunen, 2022; Walton, 2019), there is evidence to support that applying arts and performance-based learning into the curriculum has many benefits for both the students and the teachers.

Conclusion

For the thesis topic, exploring different methods to incorporate movement into the classroom model is crucial. Reports indicate a significant portion of students spending 50 to 60 percent of class time in the hallways rather than actively participating (School principal, personal communication, October 17th, 2023). The objective is to enhance engagement with course material, reducing the number of students leaving the classroom (Donham et al., 2022). Achieving this involves aligning class content with real-world relevance and fostering creative engagement strategies to maintain student focus (Donham et al., 2022). These studies highlight the importance of enhancing engagement with course material as a means of reducing classroom disengagement and student drop out rates.

In the article “The Effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning Strategies and Mindful

Breathing...”, Carolyn McLeod and Mike Boyes highlight the importance of incorporating social emotional learning in the classroom to reduce test anxiety and improve academic performance. 105 public school students participated in this study ranging from ages 14-17 (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Of those students, 75 were female and 30 were male. The interventions used in the experimental group included practicing gratitude, mindful breathing, communication strategies, perspective-taking, reframing, and the effects of emotional regulation on behaviors (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). After the end of the eight modules, the students were asked to take two surveys to measure test anxiety and emotional well-being (Waajid et al., 2013). The result of the study showed that most students had physiological and physical reactions to test taking which in turn resulted in lower test scores and lowered grades (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). The students who went through the experiment classroom reported using the different interventions they learned before taking the test and reported feeling less anxious and were able to complete the test with ease (McLeod & Boyes, 2021).

In the article “Infusing Social Emotional Learning into the Teacher Education Curriculum” (Waajid et al., 2013), the focus is on teaching future educators to make space in their curriculum for social-emotional learning. There were 15 participants in this study, 12 women and three men and they were all African American between 20 to 24 years of age. Each student was instructed to enroll in a course titled ‘Contemporary Approach to Curriculum Development’ so that their work could be examined throughout the course (Waajid et al., 2013). The text highlights the importance of selecting the curriculum course as an optimal pathway for acquiring deeper insights into the significance of emotions and emotion-related behavior in classroom instruction and student learning (Waajid et al., 2013).

By the end of the course, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience and write about what came up for them and their thoughts on including social and emotional learning (SEL) in a classroom model (Waajid et al., 2013). The three common themes that came up throughout the reflections were “ the connection between SEL and academic learning, shifting from teacher to student center pedagogy, and an increase in desire for continued learning related to SEL”(Waajid, et al., 2013, p.2).

In regards to the first article (McLeod & Boyes, 2021), the study's focus on a single classroom rather than attempting to implement a model across the entire school is noteworthy. The curiosity lies in understanding the background of the participants. While the percentage of male and female students was provided, further details about their backgrounds were lacking. Additionally, a deeper exploration into the historical test scores of the school before implementing any changes could have enriched the study.

Where the first article lacked background information on the participants, the second article provided a wealth of collected information. When asked to reflect on the experiment, one of the participants remarked, “Teaching is about understanding content as well as attending to the fact that children's learning styles and preferences are affectively based.”(Waajid et al., 2013) This statement perfectly highlights the success of the study. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the best way to find success in the classroom is to ensure that the material is both engaging and relevant to the students' lives (Waajid et al., 2013). This conclusion highlights the importance of creating engaging and relevant classroom experiences for students, which is a central theme throughout the literature review. By recognizing and responding to the diverse needs and preferences of students, educators can enhance student engagement and academic performance.

Therefore, in the method section, it will be essential to outline how these principles will be applied to the implementation of movement breaks in high school classrooms.

Method

The method that was used systematically implemented and evaluated the integration of physical activity into the educational environment to enhance student engagement, attention, and overall well-being. Throughout the six weeks, the students explored different topics such as self-identity, community, and establishing boundaries. Each session focused on a specific goal and aimed to incorporate movement interventions as well as journaling to give students the time and space to process their experiences.

After surveying some students I conducted weekly check-ins with, a common issue emerged: many struggled to stay focused and engaged in the classroom after prolonged periods of listening to lectures. Subsequently, I met with the school principal to discuss plans to restructure the classroom model, incorporating movement breaks and social-emotional learning. I engaged with three special education classrooms—Geometry, Biology, and English Language Arts—as well as one English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The special education classes typically consisted of five students, with two classrooms having the same students. The ESL classroom, the largest, had a total of 15 students. Two clients from my caseload also participated in the movement groups. Although teachers were not required to participate in my intervention with the class, many joined the students every week.

Initially, the goal was to establish a morning club where students could engage in fun

movement activities such as choreography, line dances, and TikTok dances to foster a connection between myself and the students. However, the focus later shifted towards using movement to teach students self-regulation during times of distress or anxiety. The hope was that students would apply these skills in the classroom when needing a break, prompting teachers to adapt their curriculum to reduce the amount of time students spent sitting and listening to lectures.

The original movement intervention group spanned six weeks, aiming to raise awareness of the body and provide students with various ways to express themselves. Initial attempts to engage students in the club were met with resistance, leading to the realization of the need for a new approach. To understand the lack of interest, I observed several classrooms to assess the underlying issues causing students to avoid them altogether. It became evident that simply introducing a school club would not suffice to engage students effectively and sustain their attention and focus throughout the day. Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive intervention, the focus shifted towards designing a strategy that could effectively break up the learning process, providing students with brief moments of respite between lectures. This approach aimed to mitigate the challenges of prolonged sitting and lecture-based instruction by incorporating movement breaks strategically throughout the school day, thereby promoting student engagement, well-being, and academic success.

After two weeks of observation, I selected four classrooms with students exhibiting behavior issues and some on the autism spectrum. I emailed the teachers and devised a schedule to visit each class twice a week for six weeks to observe behavior and conduct movement activities for 10-15 minutes. Although some sessions lasted 20-25 minutes, the goal was to

enhance learning without detracting from it.

To address this variability, each intervention session began with a thorough assessment of the classroom atmosphere and student disposition. I engaged students in discussions about their needs and preferences, allowing them to guide the direction of the session. We commenced with calming activities such as breathing exercises and gentle stretches before gradually incorporating more dynamic movements.

If students demonstrated readiness, I introduced energizing activities, often in the form of interactive games, to invigorate them further. Finally, we transitioned to a closing movement to refocus attention and prepare for the remainder of the class. This adaptive approach ensured that interventions were responsive to the fluctuating energy levels and preferences of the students, maximizing their engagement and participation. As the weeks progressed, I discovered that students responded well to game-based activities, which I concluded with a counting exercise to challenge their listening and attunement skills.

In the first week of meeting the participants, I sent a Google form to get their perspective on including movement breaks and what that means to them. As I was gathering information and making my observations from the classrooms I set out to discover how including a break in the curriculum could improve things like focus in the classroom. I asked the students in each classroom how they would define a movement break and what they think that would do for them. In the first collection of data, none of the students gave a definitive answer as to what a movement break would look like, however, something that was clear across the board was that they would find the breaks useful and they feel like they need them the most early in the morning

and right after lunch. Additionally, I kept a journal to record any observations during sessions and followed up with teachers to track attendance and academic progress. By meticulously planning and evaluating activities each week, I gained insights into their immediate and long-term effects on student engagement, mood, and behavior in the classroom.

Results

As I discussed in my method, I planned to do six weeks of movement breaks or interventions with the four classrooms that I set to engage with. In the initial phase of the study, participants were surveyed using Google Forms to gauge their perspectives on integrating movement breaks into the curriculum. Concurrently, observations were made in classrooms to assess the potential impact of incorporating breaks on student focus. While students did not provide specific definitions of movement breaks, there was unanimous agreement on their perceived usefulness, particularly early in the morning and after lunch.

In the first couple weeks of running the breaks, I had a difficult time engaging with the full classroom. The classrooms that I ran the groups with were three special ed classrooms and an ELA classroom. However, the three special ed classrooms did not only have students who were on the Spectrum but also had students in the classroom with an individualized education plan who had a learning or behavioral disability. That being said, I found I had an easier time connecting with the students in the classroom who showed signs of being on the Spectrum or had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. The other half of the class did not engage with my initial style of movement breaks, and would instead sit out of the activity and talk to themselves. Initially, I had decided that my first approach would be based on breathing exercises and yoga. I

believed that this would be a way to bring the students into a calmer state after the lunch period and help them get into a more focused mindset to finish out the rest of the school day. This was met with a lot of resistance by many of my classroom participants. When I realized that the breathing exercises and yoga poses would not connect to the population I was working with, I decided to try to incorporate my theater background into these breaks. When I added games like zip zap zop and a group counting exercise, I found that the students attached themselves to the competitive nature of it. It is worth mentioning that there was some difficulty in the inclusion of zip zap zop. Explaining the rules to all of the classes came with confusion, and it took a few rounds for the students to understand how the game was supposed to go. Even after the rules became clear the game was still not played to its best ability.

With this adapted lens to my method, I discovered that the students liked more than the competition aspect of the activities, but they simply enjoyed playing the game. A game seemed to be a nice brain break from having to sit through lectures for seven hours a day with a 25-minute rest period. With the success of zip, zap, zop, and the counting exercise, a few activities evolved to give the participants a fun break in the day. The students' favorite game across all classes was the affirmation snowball fight. This activity involved both positive and negative thoughts written on paper, with the aim of having another random person find the note and either contribute to it or write an affirmation to counter it. The movement aspect of the game involved splitting the class into two teams, who then threw the paper snowballs at each other in a dodgeball-style game. This was the most well-received activity that I had done in my six weeks of running these interventions. Even the participants who showed resistance to the breaks were engaged with the idea of having a snowball fight in class. This activity also received participation from the teachers as well, even though I had never asked them to be part of the

study. Although this activity raised the energy of the participants, I found that it was hard to bring them back down to a feeling of focus to finish out the rest of the day. I found this to be a common theme with my activities, especially those that were structured in the format of the game. These activities helped me engage with the students, however, they did not help with my overall goal of assisting with increased focus in the classroom. By the end of the third week, I had created a flow that I felt would benefit the students the most while also keeping in mind that they would have to go back to learning after the break. In the 10 to 15 minutes that I would conduct this brain break, I would start with some deep breaths and stretch for a few minutes. I would go into the activity for the bulk of the break and finally, I would end with a closing activity that would bring the energy back down. This would usually be a counting exercise or another mindful activity to have the participants go back into the mindset of classwork.

Revisiting the idea of teacher participation, I had one teacher ask me if I wanted him to make the brain break mandatory. I told the teacher that I did not want to make it mandatory, as I wanted the students to choose to engage in the activities rather than have another person mandate something for them to do. All that I said to each teacher was that I would come in for the class and observe for the first half then run a brain break for 10 to 15 minutes and then let them continue class while I observe. I worked in three different classrooms, a biology class, an English class, a math class, and an English class for non-English speakers. In all four classes, the only class that gave me consistent participation from both the students and the teacher was the English class for non-English speakers. I did not notice any correlation between the student's mood and the participation of their instructor or not. This is only true for three out of the four classrooms. The English class for non-English speakers had a much better time when their teacher was involved in the activities.

Overall what I observed in my six weeks is minimal change in terms of what I deemed to be a focused or motivated classroom. However, I did see an increase in energy and a lifted mood throughout the six weeks every time I visited these classrooms. I would have students find me in the halls and ask me if I was going to visit their class every week. They got used to the consistency and enjoyed the change in their curriculum. I also realized that the students themselves would get comfortable enough to advocate for their own needs. Towards the end of the six weeks, allowing the students to dictate the flow of the break based on their feelings and desires reflects important life skills such as self-awareness and self-advocacy. By empowering the students to express their needs and preferences, they learn to recognize and articulate their emotions, fostering self-awareness. Moreover, advocating for what they want during the break cultivates self-advocacy skills, enabling them to assert their needs and make choices that support their well-being.

Something that this did bring up for me was what my criteria for focus was. Throughout this process, my colleagues and I realized that our criteria for what constitutes focus was flawed because we hadn't taken into consideration the unique needs of the student population we were working with. It's worth noting that the classes I had access to predominantly consisted of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder or students in English as a Second Language classrooms. Consequently, our approach lacked consideration for the diverse needs of children on the spectrum. Their level of focus may differ from that of the general population.

Discussion

This thesis offers valuable insight into the limitations of the criteria used to evaluate student focus. The acknowledgment of this specific student population and its impact on focus

is crucial for designing effective interventions and activities. However, further discussion on how these limitations were addressed or could be addressed in future planning would enhance the depth of the reflection. Additionally, exploring potential strategies to adapt activities to better meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum could provide practical insights for educators facing similar challenges. Overall, this reflection highlights the importance of considering the diverse needs of students when designing and evaluating educational interventions (Open AI, 2024). Reflecting on the implications for education underscores the importance of considering the diverse needs of students when designing and evaluating educational interventions. Brain breaks offer a valuable tool for promoting student engagement, focus, and overall well-being in any classroom. By incorporating movement-based activities into the curriculum, educators can create dynamic learning environments that cater to different learning styles and foster holistic development. Additionally, recognizing the potential benefits of brain breaks for all students highlights the importance of adopting a proactive approach to support student learning and mental health. By prioritizing regular movement breaks and social-emotional learning activities, educators can create a supportive and inclusive classroom culture that promotes academic success and emotional resilience.

This project's exploration of incorporating movement breaks in classrooms offers valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of student engagement and focus. By observing various classroom settings, including special education and ESL environments, the researcher identified key periods of student fatigue and dysregulation, indicating potential opportunities for intervention to enhance student morale and concentration (Open AI, 2024).

One notable aspect of the project is its recognition of the potential influence of classroom type on the effectiveness of interventions. While the focus was not specifically on special education or ESL classrooms, the researcher's observations prompted reflection on the impact of classroom structure and support mechanisms, such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), on student outcomes. This raised important questions about the equity and inclusivity of educational environments and highlighted the need for tailored approaches to meet the diverse needs of students.

Moreover, the project shed light on the complexities of defining and measuring focus, acknowledging the researcher's own biases in assessing student engagement (Pianta et al., 2012). This critical self reflection underscores the challenge of evaluating the success of interventions and emphasizes the importance of adopting objective criteria for measuring student focus and engagement. Such insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced factors that influence student learning and performance.

While the project offers valuable contributions to the discourse on incorporating movement breaks in classrooms, it also presents certain limitations and considerations. One potential limitation is the small sample size and narrow focus on specific classroom settings, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the project's reliance on qualitative observations may introduce subjectivity and bias into the analysis, highlighting the need for rigorous research methodologies and triangulation of data sources.

Despite these limitations, the project provides a thought-provoking exploration of the potential benefits and challenges of integrating movement breaks into classroom routines. By considering diverse perspectives and engaging in critical reflection, the researcher has laid the groundwork for further inquiry into effective strategies for promoting student engagement, focus, and well being in educational settings. By continuously evaluating and adapting instructional strategies to meet the evolving needs of students, educators can create engaging and enriching learning experiences that empower all learners to thrive.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy, MA**

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Type of Project: Thesis

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

Thesis Advisor: Wendy Allen PhD, LPC, BC-DMT