

Arts in Mind  
Dance: The Original Public Education  
By Lori Gloates

It is somewhat paradoxical to realize that the arts, which so many public school systems have not been able to afford to fund, were really the original school. Think about it — Back in the day when mankind lived in tribes, clans, and villages, it was through the arts that people learned. It was through dance and music that the rich history of a people was shared. The stories of the past were acted out through dance moves to the strains of tribal instruments. Young warriors watched, mesmerized, as experienced elders danced the hunt by firelight and drums thundered. Celebrations and rituals that defined a culture were taught and passed down through songs, chants and precise steps.

I sat down and talked with Alan Scofield, the Founding Director of Young Imaginations, who, through funding from Kiddo!, teaches dance in the Mill Valley Elementary Schools. He has been a professional dance educator for the past 30 years and is a member of the dance faculty at the College of Marin.

While dance was the original public education, I wanted to find out what role dance has in educating students today. I expected Alan to tell me about the physical expertise gained from it — balance, rhythm, coordination, and the like. While those skills are indeed learned (okay, some of us never learn rhythm!), I discovered that dance also still provides a well-rounded education, much as it always has.

History and social studies are two of the lessons we continue to learn through dance. While teaching children the dances of previous generations, Alan also imparts the historical and cultural lessons found in the California State Standards. For instance, swing dancing, popular during World War II, answered a cultural need to boost our morale, with its boisterous and cheerful moves. The country was going through a period of great difficulty, dealing with separation, loss, and economic depravation. Swing dance was good medicine. And when Alan teaches this fun dance to children, they also learn its historic context.

Mathematics is another integral part of dance. It is present in the “architecture of music” through structure and beat. Learning to recognize pattern is a fundamental skill in mastering both dance and math. Awareness of order and logical sequencing are key components to being proficient in either subject.

The important principals of cooperation, teamwork and following directions are also crucial to the success of dance. “Through dance you learn that you are part of a whole, that sometimes you put the group’s success over your own.” Alan explained. There is an amazing sense of accomplishment in that. Life skills such

as these start in the classroom and will aid in achieving adult success in the real world.

Do the children really grasp all this in his classes? According to Alan: “Dance is richly emotional, and when emotions are charged, it has been proven that the brain learns faster and retains knowledge longer.” Engaged in lively activity, the lessons of culture and history go deeper than any lecture. Is dance core curriculum? The answer echoes back from the roots of time — Yes.

“Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Lori Gloates is a Kiddo! Board member and a parent in the Mill Valley School District.