

Success Through Dancing: Teaching Skills and Awakening Young Souls

By Tara Miles

Dance, the art that sweeps into us and awakens our souls, has an important place in the lives of deaf and hard of hearing students. It can help them with self-expression, self-worth, problem solving, team building, and academic learning. Studies reveal that dance classes can have a positive impact on student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and school culture (Bradley, Bonbright, & Dooling, 2013).

Fortunate to be the performing arts teacher at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES), part of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, in Washington D.C., I see this happen every day as children from kindergarten through high school use dance to tell the stories of their lives, to understand more intimately the meaning of English text, to work together, to express their joys and sadness, and to connect more deeply with each other.

For example, last fall a student whose family was new to the area joined my performing arts class with her mother's encouragement. She was so shy and scared; at first, she would not dance at all. Slowly she warmed up, however, and she began to show her true dance skills—which are awesome. Through her success in dance, she developed a sense of accomplishment and belonging. Dancing helped her adjust to her new school. We are still working on bringing out her beautiful personality, but I know that she has a great future ahead of her if she continues with dance.

I had a similar experience with another student who began taking classes with me when she was in second grade. She wasn't shy, but she was a little self-conscious about her body. She participated in dance and the self-consciousness evaporated. It was amazing to see her blossom, and she improved every year. In high school, she even joined a dance team. Today she is in college, putting dance on hold to focus on her studies.

In opening ourselves to our emotions and talents, dance can provide an important gateway to success. I discovered this myself when I was a student at Howard University,

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Photos by Susan M. Flanigan

At right and below: KDES students perform at MSSD for the high school students as part of a Black History Month program; (bottom right) Tara Miles dances in the Gallaudet Dance Company's 60th spring dance concert in 2015.



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the historically black college in Washington, D.C. I was one of the few deaf students there, and the only deaf student on Howard's Ooh-La-La dance team. We performed during football games, and we practiced on the field for hours.

Trying out for the Ooh-La-La dance team had been especially difficult for me because I had auditioned for the dance team in high school and been rejected. Later, as my skills and confidence grew, I would wonder about that first failed audition: Could they have rejected me because I was deaf when most of the students were hearing? Was it because I was African American when most of the students were white? In any case, as a new student on the field of a venerated university in the nation's capital I had risked rejection again, and this time I had been successful.

Frustrated by so many aspects of being deaf in a university structured for those who hear, I decided to attend Gallaudet University, the famous school for deaf and

hard of hearing students also located in Washington, D.C., only a few blocks from Howard. Right before I left for Gallaudet, I found myself in another audition—this time for the Cleveland Cavaliers, one of the nation's leading professional basketball teams. I felt uncomfortably conscious that I was competing with my former schoolmates from the same team that had rejected me. However, my former schoolmates were eliminated in the first round. I made it to the final audition, which I didn't attend as I knew I was leaving for Gallaudet.

I learned that Gallaudet had a dance company from my mother. I was shocked. Deaf people dancing? When I saw how naturally and gracefully the dancers performed, I was smitten. Joining the Gallaudet Dance Company became one of the ways that Gallaudet opened my eyes and changed my life. I still feel indebted to Sue Gill-Doleac and Diane Hottendorf, who led the company, for allowing me to dance with them.



I got my first experience teaching there, and I realized my true calling was teaching dance. In 2001, I began working at KDES. As the family educator, I serve as a liaison between students and parents. I also teach performing arts three times a week, working with third to eighth grade students.

Dance is important for all students, but it is especially important for deaf and hard of hearing students. Dance is visual, and students can learn to dance without barriers. My students love to interpret songs; this enables them to emotionally experience the songs and the meaning of the lyrics. They learn to incorporate expression in movement, create and share stories, and experience and share the depth of the message they convey.

Above all, learning to dance allows students to take risks and to be successful. Some students may learn to dance slowly, but they still learn. No one regresses. A few of our students have low muscle tone and other physical disabilities, and dancing really helps them. With an open mind and an open heart, they are able to do the movements. By the end of the school year, they are right there performing and keeping up with the other students. They are able to use movement to express themselves. This is the common goal for the students. It doesn't matter which method we use; students being able to perform and feel good about themselves is the desired outcome. Unfortunately—even in the age of Nyle DiMarco, who won the televised “Dancing with the Stars” competition—some parents don't understand that being deaf or hard of hearing is no bar to dancing. Yet there is little difference between how deaf and hard of hearing children and hearing children respond to dancing. Everyone, no matter what his or her hearing status, is born with an

innate sense of rhythm.

One of the first things we teach is rhythm exercises. Students learn to internalize counting, develop kinesthetic memory, and follow patterns and counts. We teach them how to warm up their bodies, and we practice various drills, moving across the floor in ways that will aid students in learning choreography later.

As students learn technique and gain confidence, we add more difficult steps and we teach them to work together. When performers are on stage, their bodies must communicate with each other as well as the audience. I always tell my students that they are setting an example for other deaf and hard of hearing children. They lead by example, and they may have a strong influence both on their peers and on younger students.

For example, last year we journeyed to the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), in Columbia, to participate in the school's Black History Month program. Not only did the students perform but they gave a workshop on dance. They taught the other students how to warm up and even taught them a hip hop dance. In the end, this enriched our students' self-esteem and gave the students at MSD a chance to be a part of something great!

Our students are so creative and skilled. I throw everything at them—the most complicated dance moves from the top of the advanced classes. Sometimes they try to tell me they can't do it, but I refuse to let them even say that word. They always end up able to execute their moves, and they are so proud when they succeed. Then the struggle seems worthwhile; sometimes they even tell me, “It's easy!”

Every year we put on a huge end-of-the-year performance at KDES for students in grades K-8. We also create comedy videos making jokes and telling funny visual stories. I try to empower students to come up with ideas for the videos. The performance



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showcases American Sign Language (ASL). Students perform poetry, stories, and songs translated into ASL. Large numbers of families fill the auditorium to watch the show. Each year parents are amazed at the capabilities of their children. Some of them are in tears watching the beauty of dance as their children perform.

What I have discovered is that

dancing fosters students' emotional growth. They gain confidence in themselves. Their sense of awareness heightens. Teaching dance to deaf and hard of hearing children allows them to have the same kind of experiences as those of hearing children. It allows them to be open to taking risks, solving problems, figuring out solutions, and working together. Through dance, deaf and hard of hearing children thrive and grow.

I will continue to plant "the dancing seed" in our deaf and hard of hearing students. When we give the students the opportunity to learn something or to be a part of something special, their success becomes our own. I have been teaching dance for 23 years, long enough to see students graduate, attend college, and still carry the love for dance with them. Watching them succeed is the greatest feeling a teacher can ever have.

Reference

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Summer is for Dancing

By Tara Miles

The San Antonio Deaf Dance Company is perhaps the only deaf dance camp in the United States. The company brings in deaf professional dancers, deaf actors, and deaf filmmakers. Deaf and hard of hearing children from fifth through twelfth grade learn the genres of the performing arts, including dance. It is an amazing experience.

The camp is especially important because most campers are mainstreamed in public schools and come from families where neither English nor ASL is used in their homes. Often this means the camp—in addition to providing a rich experience in dance and the performing arts—allows campers to interact with deaf professionals and other deaf and hard of hearing teens like themselves for the first time.

As they participate in camp activities, the campers see themselves as part of a culture—as members of the Deaf community—and they come to appreciate ASL for the first time. The students that I meet at the beginning of the camp are not the same students I see leaving at the end of camp! Each year, I have had the joy of watching them grow.

For example, Diana Cervantes, a shy 12-year-old when I first met her, has blossomed into a powerful student and awesome performer. Diana loves dancing, and she has returned to camp as a volunteer to help us, working with other young deaf campers and teaching choreography. So many campers, like Diana, develop self-worth through the experience of learning to dance, working with other deaf dancers, and expressing themselves through performance. They are empowered. They respond in amazing ways.

This is what inspires me the most—seeing students take what they learn and put it into action with other students. I believe that dancing is a gift that keeps on giving. It helped bring success into my life, and it continues to bring success into the lives of young deaf and hard of hearing dancers ... and it will do so for generations to come.