

Arts & Movement Education for Young Children

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE
Southern Early Childhood Association

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Movement and the arts provide critical links to success in school and life.

Imagine a world without architecture, music, theatre, dance and the visual arts. Most of human culture would not exist if academic ability were the whole of our intelligence. Many ideas, feelings and sensations can only be understood or expressed through arts and movement. "Poetry, music, painting, dance, and other arts are not frills to be indulged if time is left over from the real business of education; they are the business of education." (Silberman, 1971)

SECA believes that arts and movement learning enriches, inspires, and enables profound human expression important to children's emerging capacity for joy and sense of well-being.

The benefits of multi-arts and movement programs to society and our communities are obvious. In areas where schools are struggling to close achievement gaps, and for children who need remedial instruction, arts and movement education play critical roles in boosting learning, achievement, and over-all development. "At a time when creativity and communication skills are at a premium, the arts should be used for their rich potential to captivate and engage students in learning" (Former Secretary of Education Riley).

As children sing, dance, paint and sculpt, critical links to achievement are forged. Through multi-arts and movement activities, foundational patterns and dispositions needed for success in school and life are set up and reinforced. New experiences are integrated and anchored within the brain, enabling children to unlock mysteries of our symbol system, make sense of their world, and learn to live and work peaceably with others.

SECA recommends that we support and fully fund arts and movement programs because of the foundational importance of these programs in promoting and enhancing all aspects of growth and development of young children. All children should be provided movement and arts experiences every day.

In schools struggling to close achievement gaps, arts and movement programs can be a key to success. Young children who participate in the arts for at least three hours, three days a week for a year are (Catterall, 2002):

- 4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement,
- 3 times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools,
- 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair,
- 3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance,
- 4 times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem,
- 2 times more likely to read for pleasure, and
- 4 times more likely to perform community service.

Gains in dispositions for learning are critical outcomes of participation in arts and movement programs.

SECA believes that arts and movement learning are an integral part of a balanced, quality core curriculum and recommends that arts and movement experiences be integrated throughout the curriculum.

The arts develop the basic components of creativity such as originality, elaboration, fluency, and flexible thinking. These are essential skills for success in school and in life; they enable us to solve problems, predict outcomes, and develop ideas. Evidence of transfers of learning from the arts to academic and social development is substantial.

For example:

• **Reading and Language Skills:** As children sing, dance, paint, enact, listen to and compose music and poetry, they internalize the rhythms and patterns of our language. Fluency, vocabulary, and phonological abilities enable children to perceive and discriminate subtleties in sounds and patterns. Children's efforts to break the phonetic code and associate letters, words and phrases with sounds and meanings are supported. The arts also nurture comprehension, event-sequencing skills, sense-of-narrative, understanding of character motivations, and most importantly, dispositions to read.

• **Writing:** Spatial reasoning skills, developed through music and movement activities, improve children's ability to plan and organize writing. Forms in music compositions coincide with literary elements such as: introductions, main ideas or themes, theme development, transition devices, and concluding statements or summaries. Symphonies, operas, even simple songs, contain many of the same elements that written verbal compositions contain: the ideas are just expressed through a different set of symbols. Practice with one symbol system reinforces skills in the other.

• **Mathematics:** Music reinforces brain patterns and connections in much the same way as mathematical thinking. As children clap, sing or dance rhythmic patterns and sequences, they develop the spatial reasoning, spatial-temporal reasoning, and patterning skills that are fundamental to solving math problems and creatively engaging in scientific processes.

- **Sensory-Motor:** Sensory-motor learning is fundamental to every aspect of development for all children, but for the kinesthetic learner, arts and movement provide the keys to learning.

- **Creativity:** Multi-arts and movement experiences strengthen abilities that affect every aspect of intellectual accomplishment. Without these capacities, poetry, invention, constructions, music and literature would be impossible.

- **Social and Emotional Competence:** The desire to pursue and sustain learning is essential to achievement. For children to be successful in school and life, they must want to learn. Skills such as engagement, disciplined and sustained attention, persistence, and risk-taking are practiced and reinforced in arts and movement programs.

In addition, children who regularly participate are absent from school less often, have fewer referrals for discipline, and report higher educational aspirations. They also show higher levels of confidence, impulse control, self-identity, problem-solving, conflict resolution skills, empathy, and social tolerance.

SECA recommends that teachers provide information to parents and policymakers concerning the foundational role that arts and movement learning play in children's development and that we assess our arts and movement community resources to determine how to further promote and provide arts and movement opportunities for children.

When parents and business leaders are polled regarding their expectations for children's education, they list (Catterall, 2002):

- the cultivation of integrity
- cooperation
- leadership abilities
- social compliance
- conflict resolution skills
- collaboration skills
- emotional health
- tolerance
- moral development
- citizenship.

All of these abilities are developed or enhanced through regular participation in arts and movement programs. In times of shrinking revenues or when policy makers feel pressured to focus on academic achievement, arts and movement programs are in danger of being eliminated. Early childhood teachers understand that to eliminate these programs would be counterproductive and even damaging to children, robbing them of opportunities for developing potential. All who

serve and act on behalf of children must inform the public about the value of arts and movement in the lives of children.

The working professionals in our arts and movement communities can provide wonderful mentoring opportunities for young children. As children have first-hand experiences with artists and their work, an understanding of the representational nature of the arts, a sense of wonder, and the capacity for aesthetic responsiveness are fostered.

SECA believes that arts and movement opportunities for children should be developed by utilizing current research-based knowledge and best practices.

We need to ensure that our instruction in the arts and movement is based on sound research and knowledge of practices that are appropriate for young children. Children will only receive the benefits described above if the experiences we provide are informed by our own investigations and study. To teach effectively, we need a background of study in arts and movement as it should be applied in settings with young children.

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