

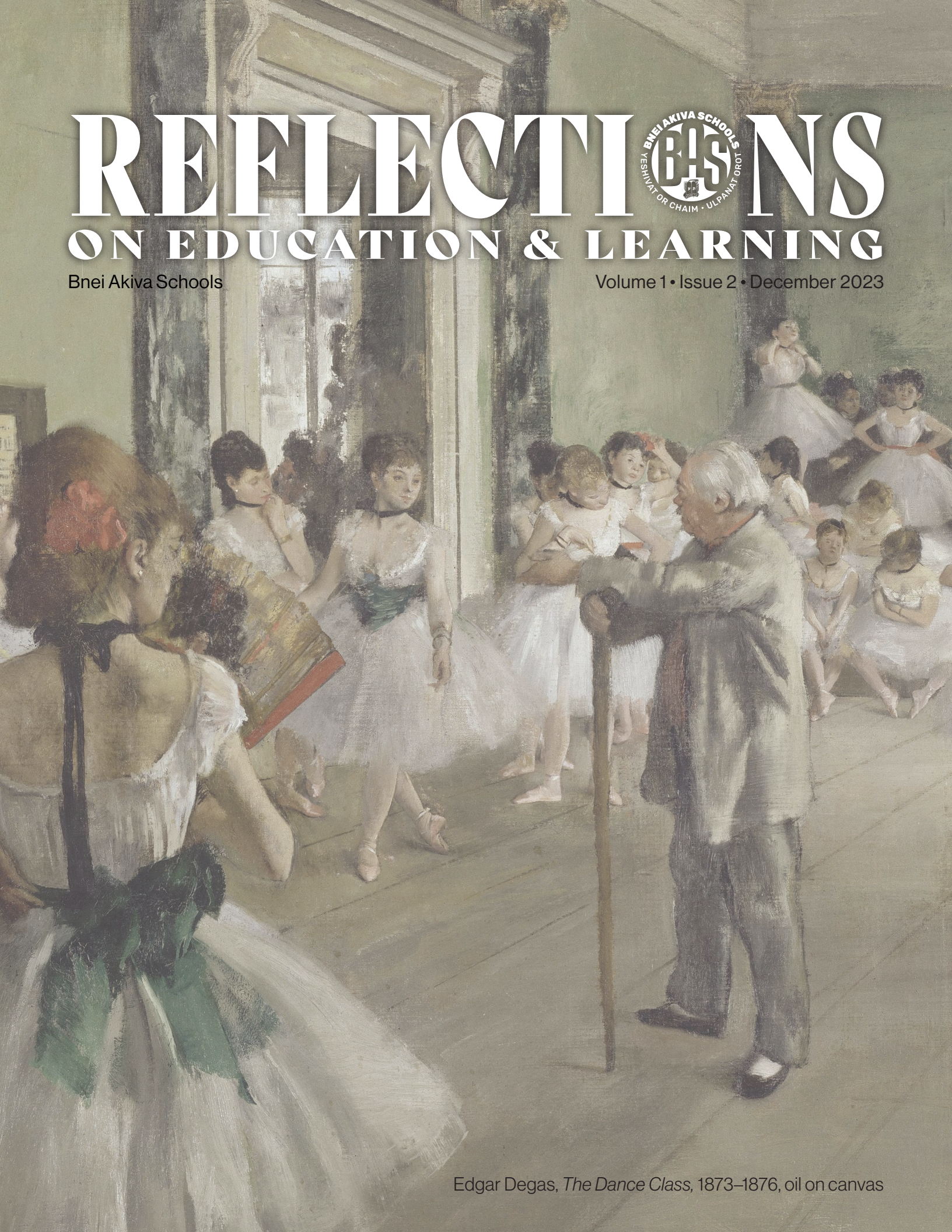
REFLECTIONS

ON EDUCATION & LEARNING



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Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, 1873–1876, oil on canvas

DANCING BEYOND DANCE

WHEN DANCING ISN'T “JUST DANCE”



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IN THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT OF Ontario Dance Curriculum Guidelines (Government of Ontario, 2010), one of the educational expectations with respect to Connections Beyond the Classroom is for instructors to “demonstrate an understanding of the purpose and possibilities of continuing engagement in dance arts” (p. 61). At a quick glance, the most obvious reason for this directive is to implant the idea that dance is good for you. After all, dance is exercise and, perhaps most importantly, it’s fun. When we go just a little deeper into the concept of “purpose” for dance, we usually arrive at the question: *What practical job(s) does dance prepare you for, and/or lead you to?* The first answers my students will give me when I ask this question are: professional dancer, performer, and dance

teacher. All of which are correct and practical answers. When the conversations turn to *dance-related work*, the list expands to such professions as physiotherapist, chiropractor, and massage therapist – though that is usually about as broad as the ideas get. This is when I jeté into action. For there are a great many benefits of dance that impact each of us in our everyday life.

When I was 17, my sole goal was to dance professionally. I had trained in ballet my whole life. I then branched out into modern dance and started learning various styles including jazz, tap, and hip hop, and world dances such as African and Latin. I was working professionally as a choreographer in a performance-driven musical theatre camp every summer to be able to put myself through university. Then, just

before the start of my Grade 12 year, I suffered a severe back injury. Countless doctors' appointments, tests, and exams all pointed to the same conclusion: Not only was I not to dance professionally, I was not to dance anymore ... ever. I was absolutely devastated. Not only was dancing my career plan, it was my source of joy. Dance was my identity. My *raison-d'être*. I was destroyed.

Despite my heartbreak, I picked myself up and decided if I could not dance, I would create showpieces for dance and I would become a director. I decided to apply to the extremely competitive B.A.A Honours Film program at Toronto Metropolitan University. I had an amazing high school English teacher whose wife was a filmmaker and I was deeply inspired by both of them. When I

was going through my back issues, my English teacher (who was, conveniently, also my guidance counsellor) gently guided me through the physical issues and emotional pain I was feeling regarding the concept of not continuing in dance, and helped plant the idea of putting dance on film. Both he and his wife reviewed my application, assisted me in the practical components, and gave me a new and enthusiastic focus. I had always loved movie musicals, so it occurred to me that if I couldn't be in them, then I could be the one to make them. I got accepted into the program and that is what I set out to do!

My first year, wherever possible, I would find ways to insert dance into my assignments (of course, without dancing myself). Then, one night, I was walking past the massive gym facility on campus and saw that a dance class was being held. Of course, I had been told by professionals that I was not allowed to dance. But my back had not been bothering me, so maybe I could just go to a recreational level class. What could be the harm? I decided to "disobey" doctors' orders and went into the class and I danced.

And I started to feel better. It turned out I had a herniated disk, an extremely painful injury which resulted in nerve pinching down my leg. However, what no one had bothered to mention was that in time, even without surgery or interference, the disk can essentially go back into place and stop

causing pain. So I kept it up and I danced a little harder, a little less carefully. Sure enough, my back pain completely disappeared.

I finished my Film degree, making musicals all the way through. After graduating, I went on to a second education in Musical Theatre and Dance (as I had originally intended), now armed with a bonus degree. Having that first degree in Film has certainly come into play throughout my career; in fact, it helps me every day. I became both a director and choreographer, something I cannot say for certain I would have been open to had I *only* pursued dance.

My heart fills with joy at the idea that dance can be so much more than "just dance."

This brings me back to the purpose of discussing the importance of dance beyond the obvious. My favourite way to enhance this conversation is based on an award ceremony that I have used as my personal inspiration in my classes since first becoming an instructor. The very dance teacher whose class I “disobediently” took at my university campus became one of my dance mentors, and had shared it with me on a VHS cassette tape (*stay tuned for my next article: What is a VHS and what is this word “cassette” of which you speak?!*) and no matter how many times I watch it, my heart fills with joy at the idea that dance can be so much more than “just dance.”

The video is a tribute to ballet dancer Jacques D’Amboise at the Kennedy Centre Honours Ceremony in 1995. He most certainly is not a household name, but was a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet for 27 years. He also danced in movie musicals of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and was a noted choreographer in his own right. However, he then had a “second act” to his career, and that is the central beauty of this tribute.

During the tribute, two adults, who do not particularly look to be dancers (stereotypically speaking) or even performers, walk on stage. They are dressed in formal attire and possess a serious look. The male goes on to say:

Good evening. My name is George James. I’m a financial consultant with Merrill Lynch. This is Erica Chung, who is studying to become a doctor at Dartmouth College. Both of us look back at the day we started with Jacques D’Amboise’s children’s classes as turning points in our lives. Not only did he teach us to dance, but Jacques taught us to believe in ourselves. (YouTube, 2021)

An accountant and a doctor. These are two careers that no one automatically thinks require “dance training” but here they are, crediting dance as turning points in their lives.

D’Amboise taught children’s dance classes throughout his amazing career and worked not only with professional dancers, but everyday kids who just needed an outlet. The focus was not that they become professional dancers or performers; rather, the classes were about developing confidence and courage. Dance was about the fun, the play, the energy, the spirit, the focus, the drive, the physicality, the grit—all of which play into who we become. Dance facilitates the very mission of Bnei Akiva Schools in that it enables our students to “grow intellectually, socially, emotionally” and it invigorates and empowers them to become “self-reliant” (Bnei Akiva Schools, n.d.). Dance training does not have to lead to a literal extension of the art itself, but it can, and should, help us connect with ourselves, to know our hearts. In turn, it can even help lead us to our future path, one dance step at a time. ■



Listen to students reflect on what dance means to them.

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