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Ballet & Books: Finding Community and Purpose through Dance and Literacy Engagement During COVID-19

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Background

*Ballet and Books*TM is a community-based organization dedicated to improving the lives of young children through dance and literacy. We pride ourselves on serving a diverse community of families through free and inclusive programming and representing diverse backgrounds.

I grew up as a competitive ballerina. Before starting at University, I spent a year dancing and learning in the indigenous, Amazonian town of Tena, Ecuador. After this time, I returned to the US, and conducted research at Cincinnati Children's Hospital alongside a physician focused on emergent literacy. These experiences made me curious about how dance and children's education could be fused together. In the spring of 2017, as a freshman at Cornell University, I founded *Ballet and Books*TM with the intent to bridge the worlds of dance and literacy while engaging college students in their local community.

At *Ballet and Books*TM we are committed to making dance and literacy accessible to all children—particularly those who do not typically have access to such programs. High school and college students serve as mentors and dance teachers for younger three-to-nine-year-old children. I have worked with over 90 college students to bring our programs to children in Ithaca, New York, Union City, New Jersey, and Delray Beach, Florida. We partner with libraries and nonprofits to recruit families and engage directly with community leaders. Our mentors and dance teachers are trained by national literacy, dance, and identity experts who equip our college and high school students with the skills they need for successful program completion. A literacy interventionist walks our mentors through dialogic reading strategies and highlights some of the science behind learning to read. A dance outreach facilitator encourages student leader reflection on teachers they have had in their own lives, while integrating dance strategies into the interactive session. Finally, a diversity, equity, and inclusion coach facilitate a guided session where mentors share their own identities, reflect on unconscious biases, and learn the value in vulnerability when sharing with children.

The purpose of this critical reflection piece is to describe the challenges that *Ballet and Books*TM faced and how we overcame the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges Faced

On March 13th, 2020, Cornell University sent out the email we were dreading—all classes were to immediately transition to online learning. Students were to return home. As young college students, we feared for our futures, the uncertainty of our careers, and the health of our closest support systems. In some ways, these initial fears seem insignificant now given the growing number of deaths globally and lives forever altered by COVID-19. But at the time, we could not imagine being launched after graduation into a world on pause with uncertainty at each corner.

In mid-March 2020, we, at *Ballet and Books*TM, were conducting a program evaluation to gather insight from participating college students and local families to guide national expansion efforts. We were planning for our spring showcase and multiple community volunteer events. In addition, we had just received a grant to expand to Florida. COVID-19 required us to pivot these initial plans.

My team and I decided we could not sit still. We knew that families served by *Ballet and Books*TM would be most impacted by the inequities arising from school and work closures. Even with motivation to keep moving forward, we remained distracted by the news, life changes, and challenges.

Virtual Learning

The most obvious challenge we faced was an immediate stop to all in-person programming. In-person interactions for children this young is imperative. We struggled to conceptualize how *Ballet and Books*TM could continue to stay true to its values in a COVID-19 world. However, within weeks we pivoted our mindset and decided to see this as an opportunity.

Virtual learning, when done well, has opportunities to enrich young students' lives. First, we developed asynchronous videos that were posted to our Facebook page. College students created video dance lessons, read poems, led story times, and demonstrated literacy games virtually. Dance groups from college campuses in the USA as well as international community dance groups, taught short, video lessons. Parents, in response, sent videos of their children practicing at home, pirouetting around their living rooms. This positive feedback encouraged our team to innovate further. We developed an eight week, online, LIVE summer program.

We received funding to deliver each of our Ithaca, NY families a *Ballet and Books*TM bag with books, leotards, and snacks. Home visits, socially distanced and masked, would never have been possible in a traditional school year. Seeing children in their natural environment was a powerful experience. It allowed us to better understand where they come from and to adapt our programming to better suit student needs. Personally, seeing our students after such a long, scary start to the pandemic brought me so much hope. I could tell the children were smiling behind their masks as I walked up to their doors. My students and I recognized that we were a part of something bigger—a community.

Research Efforts

COVID-19 complicated our efforts to conduct a program evaluation aimed at identifying areas in need of improvement for national expansion. We feared the pandemic would have long term implications on the quality of our programs, because we would no longer be able to complete this research in the same way we had proposed.

To adapt, we implemented real time feedback measures. Student leaders completed weekly surveys after mentoring sessions to highlight gaps in the new online curriculum. We video called parents to understand what was and what was not working for their children. Leaders observed mentoring sessions and took notes of children's responses during activities in each session. If children were distracted, or activities were too challenging, student leaders noted these pieces of the curriculum and we edited the guidance in response. Real time feedback allowed us to develop our comprehensive online curriculum. Nonprofit literacy experts offered additional feedback on the curriculum and we continue to improve the activities today. In a virtual setting, we were able to gather information from multiple data sources and analyze them concurrently to gain a holistic understanding of our program's impact.

Community Building

As the pandemic progressed, I experienced challenges to my own mental health and sense of belonging. My peers and I discussed how isolating it was to learn and live a virtual life. Not only were our college students at risk for mental health challenges, but our young three-to-nine-year-old students were also struggling emotionally (Marques de Miranda, 2020) as they missed out on social interactions during critical developmental years.

To combat these challenges, the *Ballet and Books*TM leadership team brainstormed ways to foster community. The story times, led by mentors and posted on social media, fostered a community connection. We modified our standard in-person 1:1 college student and young child mentorships pairs to a virtual format. Pairing college students with young children created unlikely friendships in lonely times. Mentors led virtual literacy and movement activities guided by our revised virtual curriculum while getting to know their young student through weekly mentoring sessions. Facilitating strategic check-ins with leaders of our chapters built a stronger and pandemic-resilient *Ballet and Books*TM family.

Lessons Learned

By tackling these challenges creatively as a team, we continued providing virtual on-demand programming throughout the spring. In the summer, we transitioned to a fully LIVE virtual program which we continue to this day. Seeing COVID-19 as an opportunity instead of a barrier, encouraged us to seek out ways to continue growing and impacting more young people. Because of the work we put in at the start of the pandemic, we are now set to expand to additional universities this spring.

As I critically reflect on what we did right, in a time where every decision I approved felt wrong, I look back at my team of young student leaders and I recognize the qualities that contributed to our success. We succeeded by bringing together a diverse cohort of college students that wanted to make a difference through engaged service learning. We incorporated each individual's passion for the arts and literacy and paired it with a communal purpose toward making an impact. Our student leaders would not let a pandemic stop them from fulfilling their innate desire for social good. We gathered the resources needed—grant funding, community contacts, relationships—and college students took these resources and jumped into their communities. Our deep passion, discovered purpose, and shared mission sustained the program.

Next Steps

Since the global pause in March, inequities have propagated. This is a critical time for our program. Our students are the most impacted by virtual learning and closure of community programs. They need extracurricular activities now more than ever as the COVID-19 achievement gap widens (Kufeld et al., 2020). Students across the nation are at risk of being left behind. We refuse to sit by and let this happen. Our students' families cannot pay for after school tutors or dance classes. Not everyone can afford "learning pods" or private schools. It is our responsibility as a society to provide equitable education and arts opportunities, even when it becomes difficult. *Ballet and Books*TM is an opportunity for educational enrichment. It is a place where children have mentors that look like them. A space where children can let their energy out and smile, where they stand up tall, shoulders back, with confidence. A community where they can be themselves. With a pivoted mindset, we saw a gap where *Ballet and Books*TM was needed; a space we could fill.

Our success does not come without continued hurdles. As the Executive Director of the program, I find it hard to balance scale and growth with cultivation of individual relationships. We still struggle to engage children on video calls—as virtual learning is tiring for all of us. We do not know exactly where *Ballet and Books*TM is going, what elements of our virtual reality will remain

for years to come, but we will not stop. If anything, COVID-19 has propelled us forward, created a greater desire in all young people to make a difference.

Conclusion

I have a team of diverse, dedicated, committed college students who are ready to step up and do all they can to make sure children across the nation have access to literacy engagement and the arts. I graduated from University in May 2020 and have since dedicated a large portion of my time to expanding *Ballet and Books*TM.

None of these successes would have taken place without the incredible support of mentors I and *Ballet and Books*TM have had throughout the pandemic. Professors in the Global Health Program at Cornell University offered feedback, guidance, and listening ears. Staff in the Public Service Center advised on growth, social justice initiatives, and nonprofit leadership. Our community stakeholders shared words of encouragement and offered their time editing our curriculum. Others donated leotards and books. The years we spent cultivating relationships throughout the Ithaca community and nationally proved essential in such challenging times. At *Ballet and Books*TM we focus on mentoring young children, yet we ourselves are indebted to the wonderful mentors that have lifted *Ballet and Books*TM up each year.

We spent the past three years building and expanding our program. The pandemic snuck in and disrupted the plans we had strategically mapped out. Yet we continue to look toward the future with goals of national expansion. We don't know exactly what we will look like when we come out of this, but we won't let a pandemic stop us. We dream of generating a movement bridging dance and literacy to improve young children's lives while making dance and literacy accessible to all.

References

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