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Connecting with Country, Kith and Kin

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Abstract

How do we build and sustain anti-racist praxis towards an inclusive pedagogy within tertiary dance education in Australia? In the wake of the Australian Referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, many questions are being asked about the ‘cemented racism’ in the body politic of the nation (Calma & Langton 2021, p.1). Efforts to decolonise the dance curriculum often start with acknowledging the role of First Nations peoples as the traditional custodians of the land on which we dance. However, there needs to be much more fundamental change. Facilitating engagement in indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in mainstream dance education requires radical action. Undoing cultural assumptions and hierarchies in the techniques we teach and the choreographies we learn entails both practical and conceptual obligations (Swain 2020, p.xxiv). In this paper, I discuss recent curriculum developments in tertiary dance education at the University of Melbourne. In applying a critical dance pedagogy lens, I discuss what it means to teach on lands that are part of a continent with the oldest surviving culture in the world dating back more than 65,000 years (National Museum of Australia). I relate efforts to engage in allyship, ‘walking-with’ First Nations dancers towards addressing the unique challenges we encounter in the wake of colonial violence. Simultaneously, these endeavours address the urgent need to mobilize against, extractive capitalism through a re-enchantment with the generative capacities of dancing outside on Country.

Keywords: pedagogy, dance, place, choreography, space

Introduction

Dancing and choreographing on both sides of the Southern Pacific's Tasman Sea¹, I navigate the stale winds of the colonial project whilst seeking to creatively advance the potential for moving alongside and in allyship with First Nations and Indigenous students and peers. My title - Connecting with Country, Kith and Kin – situates aspirations for inclusive dance pedagogy and the creation of safe, sustainable spaces for lifelong artistic practice. This writing is a work in progress, written in the wake of the 2023 Australian Referendum on constitutional recognition of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament that failed to secure a majority.

I am a Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) dance artist and researcher living and working on the lands of Woivurrung and Boonwurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm, Melbourne. With kinship ties through Irish and English genealogies, my artistic identity resonates with the kinaesthetic milieu of contemporary dance informed by Euro-American modern and postmodern dance. This dance paradigm, shaped by figures like Laban, Graham, Cunningham, Paxton, Forsythe, and others, still dominates tertiary dance education in Australia today. As noted by Rowlands et. al, 'Dance education continues to rely on a western approach that draws upon modern dance as a foundational genre to inform students' creative and cultural knowledge' (2022, p. 4). Similarly, Benthaus and Wise criticise as 'elitist' the perpetuation of colonial values in conservatoire-based dance curricula in the University environment (2024). They call for deeper engagement between local dance communities of practice and the academy.

The persistent legacy of colonial dance education is felt not only in the arguably over-representation of a contemporary dance canon in Australian tertiary dance but also in the dominance of Western Classical Ballet as the main dance style studied in dance studios. These are the feeder studios for audition into tertiary dance courses, the so-called 'pipeline'. Recent study offers some insight into the nature of this dance education. According to the Patternmakers Survey (2025), about 4,000 private dance studios serve 800,000 young students across Australia. The Survey, commissioned by the Australian Ballet and the Australian Ballet School, revealed some stark statistics about attitudes and access to dance training. Whilst 95% of all respondents in the Patternmakers survey believe dance should be accessible for people of all backgrounds, only 56% agreed that dance in Australia celebrates diversity.

At the Victorian College of Dance (VCA) where I am based, we take these issues seriously. We have been developing new curriculum content and pedagogical processes that seek to both widen participation in tertiary dance education and broaden the curriculum to better reflect the multi-racial context of a contemporary Australian society. In this process, we aspire to enable culturally safe spaces for students and staff to thrive. Living in a city that is home to one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world also one of the most multi-racial cities in the world, calls for both cosmological and cosmopolitan modes of accountability in designing a dance education fit for the challenges of the 21st century. Making space and time in the curriculum for Indigenous Knowledges to be shared and for non-Western dancing to be celebrated, is underpinned by a commitment to dances that engage with Country and the place of dancing. In addressing the (re)storying of dance beyond its North American and European heritages of genres and styles, we have looked to the specificity of the local place

where we dance for inspiration and contextual relevance.

The locale of the dance school provides some very significant specifics. VCA Dance is located on the sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung Peoples of the Eastern Kulin nation. Part of the Arts Precinct of Melbourne, it is close to the Birrarung (Yarra River) with its rich cultural history as a gathering place for ceremony. In acknowledging Country and the ancestors who have danced on these lands, and continue to do so, we draw attention to enduring traditions of respectful engagement with people and place. A Tanderrum ceremony traditionally welcomes visitors to country through a smoking ceremony. The leaves of the wattle, cherry ballart and river red gum are burnt on a fire and the smoke is not only cleansing but is used to send prayers to Bunjil (the wedge tail eagle). This important ceremony is continuously practised. At the start of each semester, we gather to mark the seasonal return and arrival of students and staff with a Welcome to Country. Led by an indigenous Boonwurrung elder and staff from the Wilin Centre for Arts and Cultural Development, inaugurating learning through cultural ceremony situates students within a spiritual and physical milieu that is ancient and enduring.

In programming student learning outside, beyond the built architectures of the studio to stage trajectory, we embed place-responsive dancing into our curriculum and culture. In cultivating an integrated curriculum that advances Indigenous ways of knowing we look to and learn from indigenous elders, colleagues and alumni whilst being mindful of our distinctive histories and points of difference.

Resisting hegemonies / dancing the glocal

The dominance of western dance forms in dance education can be understood as hegemonic control. Hegemony as defined by Uytterhoeven is:

Power, dominance, control, leadership and rule on a political, economic, military, cultural or geopolitical level. Dominant groups or ruling classes are seen to shape culture and society in such a way that the ways of thinking, views of the world and values that benefit them and sustain their dominance become accepted as the norm and as inevitable (2019, p.428).

There is growing evidence of efforts to resist the hegemony of Western dance traditions in dance education. Global Dance Studies Discourses, following the Black Lives Movement BLM movement, have highlighted the urgency of decentering 'whiteness' within tertiary dance education. Some examples of advocacy and education work in this terrain include: Dance Studies Association's (USA) Dismantling White Body Supremacy in Dance Education; One Dance UK RIDE Representation in Dance Education in the UK resource pack; and Canadian Dance Assembly's advocacy for a national dialogue on dance practices that are anti-oppression and anti-racist (Canadian Dance Assembly). In the dance sector we have also seen changes in leadership as more black, Asian and minority ethnic dance artists and teachers are visible as leaders of mainstream dance companies, schools and programmes internationally. Whilst advances are being made in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and, until recently, the USA, to decentre dominant discourses and practices of dance, change

is uneven and there are many economic, cultural, social and historic factors that inhibit progress.

In the process of remaking dance education, colonial history and context is a significant part of the challenge. Each of Britain's former colonies in the Anglosphere were colonised in their own way. Correspondingly, the context for 'decentering' and 'decolonising dance' in former colonies differs according to when colonisation took place, and by what means. Nonetheless there are many shared issues that impact upon our competencies in developing cultural literacy in the ways we respectfully engage with indigenous knowledge from a dance educational perspective.

There are noticeable differences in this regard across the former colonies. In Australia, colonial-settler guilt and cultural blindness have created an inertia that impedes the advancement of reciprocal and respectful engagement with Indigenous Knowledges in mainstream education. This inertia is reflected in the literature. Rowlands et al., (2022) note the omission of Indigenous Australian dance from publications and pedagogy with references only starting to appear in writing by activist educators late in the 20th century in alignment with broader Indigenous education policy changes. This differs from neighbouring Aotearoa where dancer and choreographer Stephen Bradshaw claims, 'Māori culture is central and pivotal to the development of contemporary dance' (2015, p.77). Dance educator Tia Reihana notes that 'relevant and equitable pedagogy' that includes Indigenous people and their histories is part of the compulsory Arts Curriculum in schools (2020, p.178). Students develop an understanding of dance in relation to the *tangata whenua* (the Indigenous people of New Zealand). This affords a sense of being part of a nation-state where indigenous cultural identity is valued. Indigenous Knowledges are woven into the dance curriculum as a result of cultural revitalisation that took place in tandem with recognition of cultural sovereignty under the Treaty of Waitangi².

This situation is different from Canada where there is no requirement to include First Nations dance education in the curriculum. However, at a provincial and territorial level, curricula exist such as Ontario's secondary course NAC10, which includes Artistic Expression and World Views that connect dance and other arts to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit world views and focus on concepts like identity and self-determination³. There is also a call to the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, to maintain a commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including developing and implementing curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.

Whilst initiatives such as these are seen as moving in the right direction, many dance scholars are critical of the intransigence of dominant hegemonies of dance practice that impact creative justice in studio training. Canadian dance scholar Melanie Kloetzel writes, 'the modernity/coloniality paradigm ... acts as a hegemonic frame or narrative' (2025, p.330) resistant to decolonial futures. She goes on to describe how the risks of appropriation and the label of 'tokenism' can be paralysing for non-indigenous dance teachers. Kloetzel describes 'settler creep' (Kloetzel 2023) as the pedagogical appropriation enabled by the privileged positionality many non-Indigenous cultural leaders assume in settler dominant societies. It is in this context that a critical dance pedagogical perspective for decolonial futures is seen as vital.

Incorporating critical practice and creative justice within a dance education framework can

mean applying choreographic tactics for staying with the discomfort of not knowing and being outside one's familiar patterns of traditional dance teaching and learning. These values are part of our MA subject of critical dance pedagogy at VCA, which aims to equip students with the tools to cultivate an inclusive, equitable, and socially aware learning environment. We invite students to consider the impact of the unique and specific history of colonisation relevant to their place of learning. Taking a forensic lens to how this history influences what gets taught and how we teach it, students are invited to move beyond assumptions founded on imperial hierarchies of body discipline and kinesthetic boundaries through telling their dance stories and revealing their genealogies. This subject sits alongside Body Time Space Place led by Lama Lama, Ayapathu and Kuku Yalanji woman, Rheannan Port. Exploring kinship, care and the ethics of encountering place from an Indigenous dance perspective, Port carefully leads students through the protocols of dance as ceremony.

In moving towards decolonising and diversifying the curriculum, we are mindful of the systems of disciplinary control that the colonial project introduced, in relation to space (enclosed studios for dancing) and time (scheduled classes and rehearsals). This has led us to commit to dancing outside in the environment, and in dialogue with the natural world. We advocate for a deep commitment to place-informed and site-responsive dancing as vital to a dance education.

Reconciliation and reciprocal learning

'Truth-telling is one form of restorative justice' (Langton 2024, p.361).

In laying the foundation for repairing relations with the land and Indigenous peoples, truth-telling is a vital process for establishing trust. Australian people are living through a contemporary reckoning with the impact of the past on the present. Convict settler colonisation, the assumption of 'terra nullius, the policy of White Australia, and the intergenerational trauma experienced by descendants of the Stolen Generations deeply undermine the image of Australia as the 'lucky country'. To bridge this gap between image and reality, educators and artists are illuminating hidden and repressed histories, revealing what actually happened to one of the oldest surviving peoples in the world during Australia's development as a modern nation state.

At the University of Melbourne through its Advancing Melbourne strategy, we are working to address systemic issues of racism and the historic erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledges. The University has recently released *Dhoombak Goobgoowana*, an important act of truth-telling towards restorative justice. It looks at the history of the University in relation to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the state of Victoria, making clear the University's complicity:

From 1836 to 1851: in under two decades, the combined effects of violence, disease and alienation reduced the Indigenous population by an estimated 80 per cent. Even when set against the brutality of settler colonialism globally, the speed and depth of the devastation wrought by colonisers made Victoria an outlier. Over subsequent decades, Aboriginal survivors and their descendants would face continuing waves of dispossession, discrimination and family separation, while also becoming incorporated into Victoria's settler-colonial economy (Laidlaw, 2024, p48).

The impact of this cultural loss and dispossession continues to be felt in our learning environments and questions are being asked about the ‘cemented racism’ in the body politic (Langton 2024, 1). Australia has a race problem that can be seen at all levels of society but from a dance educator’s perspective, has a profound impact on who has access to advanced training and tertiary level education in dance.

What can dance do to ‘advance reconciliation and reciprocal learning with Indigenous peoples and communities’? (Advancing Melbourne 2025) In addition to economic barriers, the traditions and expectations of dominant techniques such as contemporary dance and ballet can create barriers to culturally safe pathways, particularly for First Nations dancers. Those dancers who succeed in dance often access classes and training through their communities. Jo Clancy’s Wagana Dancers is a good example of this. Jo founded her company in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales in 2007. The Wagana dancers (who performed and gave workshops as part of the daCi Conference in Slovenia in 2024) perform traditional and contemporary dances inspired by the Blue Mountains and the Central West country of New South Wales. They honour and respect the Dharug, Gundungurra and Wiradjuri peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands they dance in. In a discussion following the Wagana dancers’ workshop at daCi 2024, Clancy stressed the importance of flexibility to enable access for young people to engage in dance training opportunities. Clancy is one of several indigenous cultural leaders and artists including Tiriki Onus, Joel Bray, Ngioka-Bunda-Heath, Daniel Riley and Rheannan Port, who are leading the way in transforming pedagogies, previously embedded in colonial imperatives, through sharing their knowledge in practices of ‘listening to country’ and place-based learning (Swain 2020).

Recent curriculum and choreographic developments at the Victorian College of Arts Dance are informed by First Nations cultural leaders and take place within the wider context of ‘truth telling,’ reconciliation and place-based learning. In the following section I will discuss how moving from an emphasis on dancing spaces to dancing places brings our relationships to local peoples and into the foreground.

Moving from space to place

Human beings—along with other entities on earth—are ineluctably place-bound. More even than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit (Casey, 1996, p.19).

Our encounters with places are complex: viscerally felt, perceptually layered *places* gather in our tissues, bones and movement patterns. Dancing-places rely upon an embodied experience of place, of being ‘in place’, enabling corporeal perception in 360 dimensions, an encounter with the pluriverse (Gotman 2012; Demerson in Hunter and Turner 2024, p. 97). Pluriversal thinking acknowledges that ‘within one site, many histories of conflict and collaboration maybe present’ (Demerson in Hunter and Turner 2024, p.99). Developed by Walter Dignolo (2018), pluriversal thinking resists hegemonies of so-called ‘universalising’ dance as it acknowledges many truths and ways of knowing. It opens the possibility of moving beyond diversity initiatives that accommodate difference without addressing the systemic changes needed for social and creative justice.

Embodiment and the exploration of corporeal difference is essential to the 'inner work of decolonizing' (Demerson 2024, p.102). Rainy Demerson (2024) offers several perspectives on 'anti-colonial approaches to site-based dance' that are applicable to the Australian context:

In performance, working with the reality of a living place rather than constructing one on stage can also be an anti-colonial praxis which recalls thousands of Indigenous rituals that can only be performed in particular places (2024, p.102).

In the next part of this paper, I will outline the two initiatives that engage place-based learning at Victorian College of Arts and are part of a shift from the universalism endemic to colonisation towards pluriversal thinking: *Stories of Place*; *Pluriversal Choreographic Curation*; and *Place Responsive Performance*.

Dancing-places

*What are the knowledges of the country that we live on?*⁴

Stories of Place is a core first-year subject for all students studying a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the Victorian College of Arts. It brings several local artists and elders, diverse and seasoned Indigenous practitioners, to the Southbank campus to work with students in interdisciplinary workshops on dance, visual arts, weaving, storytelling, and music supported by teaching staff at the faculty. Boonwurrung elder N'arweet Carolyn Briggs co-designed the curriculum with the faculty. A Welcome to Country initiates a week of interdisciplinary workshops where students are welcomed with the challenge of Wominjeka to 'come with a purpose' (Briggs, 2021 n.p.).

Initiated in 2022, *Stories of Place* is led through the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Culture Development. Tiriki Onus, Dja Dja Wurrung artist academic and maker describes how it gives students the tools to engage with some of the sophistication and complexity of Indigenous arts practice, and importantly to see the relevance of this for their own art form and practice. Describing the map of Indigenous nations as a patchwork of hundreds of different language groups each with sub-dialects Onus relates:

There are histories of intersection and celebration that have always been there. ... And when we see the relevance for our own art form and our own practice, then I think it's much easier for us to feel like we've got a place in that narrative as well (Onus, 2022).

Recognising that there are over three thousand generations of artists who have practiced on the traditional lands of the Boonwurrung peoples at Southbank campus is a humbling experience for the many students starting out on their tertiary education journey with this subject. It encourages students to view their arrival as part of an ongoing cycle and to engage ethically, responsibly, and reciprocally with place. The hope is that they take a thread of this knowledge beyond the campus and into their future interactions in the world. Coming to know the stories of *this* place and their cultural value is important to a sense of belonging. For local elders such as N'arweet Carolyn Briggs' storying of place ascribes value to place bringing awareness of landscape features, animals, seasons, and deep time.

Pluriversal choreographic curation

Indigenous dance educators bring attention to the deep connections between country and kin that undergird movement on/in and with the lands, waters and atmospheres we are entangled with. How do non-Indigenous dance educators make space for this whilst walking alongside their peers in allyship? In curating seasons of public work at the Victorian College of Arts we seek to provide opportunities for students to work with choreographers who expose tensions and dissonances whilst engaging critical choreographic methods. Increasingly, the programming of our public seasons has engaged choreographers to develop mixed bills of three to four works that collectively enact a pluriversality of contemporary Australian performance.

Examples of this work include *Trevor (Another Glorious Day in the Colony, 2023)* choreographed by Joel Bray as part of the season *before, between and beyond*. In this work students don animal masks and military uniforms whilst playing on an adult jungle gym. With references to *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, convict culture, imperialism and boganism,⁵ Bray playfully parodies the persistent colonial mentality embedded in the casual cruelties of an unequal Australian society. During one memorable moment, a dancer is held aloft whilst eating a sausage roll with tomato sauce that oozes over the red felt of a colonial military uniform. Through images such as this, Bray speaks to their experience as a proud Wiradjuri man, offering a critique of what it means to be living in a 'white-washed' nation.



Figure 2. *Trevor (Just Another Day in the Colony)*. Choreographer Joel Bray, Photographer: Gregory Lorenzutti.

To negotiate with the layers of the places we dance, as distinct from spacing as embodying a volume of bare space, we encounter the storying and 're-stor(y)ing' of the places we dance. Storying as methodology involves metaphor, visual and symbolic learning, engagement of the senses, and concrete and abstract imagery (Yunkaporta 2009). Navigating the (re) storying of the places we dance through choreographic curation requires care and careful

attention to how we enter into dialogue with Indigenous dance knowledge holders and their practices if we are to avoid ‘settler creep.’

Place responsive performance

Elders ask that no matter where we come from, we work to deepen our connection to each other and the country that nourishes us (Shukuroglou 2020).

Place-making occurs at the intersection between people, land, water, non-human life and atmosphere. In developing an anti-racist praxis for dance pedagogy and creation in Australian tertiary dance education we might start with asking questions of our feet:

How do we touch the ground?

How are we attuned to how the earth touches us?

What is it to leave footprints and think through feet that carry the places we come from as well as our ancestors and their relationships?

Since 2022 Victorian College of Arts Dance students have benefitted from a collaboration with urban farmer and dance maker Gregory Lorenzutti. In 2022, Bachelor of Fine Arts Dance and Production Students created *Theatrum Botanicum*, a large-scale dance work exploring botany, soil ecology and gardening. Over 12 weeks, they worked with Lorenzutti to create a garden on the grounds of the Southbank campus. Gardening, ecological awareness and dance creation took place through choreographic curation that culminated in a public performance over five nights.

The timespan of the project followed the natural rhythms of three seasons: Summer, Autumn and Winter. The curriculum included rich collaboration with guest artists and thinkers from across the University and externally, including visits to the University Herbarium and Systems Garden on the Parkville campus. Barkandji researcher and curator Zena Cumpston’s exhibition *Emu Sky* in the University Quad was a major inspiration. Zena’s work critically and creatively reflects upon collections of early Australian ‘Scientists’, who documented, studied, classified and experimented with native plants: ‘I wondered why they couldn’t see that a wealth of knowledge about these plants existed already. There was 60,000+ years of careful observation that they failed to realise, record, respect or engage with in any proper way’ (2022, n.p.).

Reframing a dance production subject by resisting cultural blindness through attending to plant life engaged dance students in practices of seeding, planting, cultivation, and environmental care, exploring the intrinsic connections between plant life and humans. Dance students explored soil and its microbiology, seeds, plant growth and natural systems design. They devised movement and choreographic scores based on their encounters with these natural materials and processes, with many experiencing a fundamental change in their relationship with the living world.

Production students created sets and costumes with organic materials gathered from around the Southbank campus, growing much of the set on campus in the form of live plants which

could be composted after the final performance – an active exploration of sustainable production practices in the performing arts. The *Theatrum Botanicum* garden became a microcosm of wholeness.

The subject had a wider positive impact on the Southbank campus, with students transforming a patch of grass into an abundant garden, assisted by a \$7000 grant from the Sustainability Team. The garden fostered a sense of community on the campus, providing edibles such as kale, lettuce and beans for students and staff to enjoy.

Demolition of the garden in January 2023 by the University facilities team raised important questions however about the sustainability of initiatives like this in relation to established University systems and practices. The feedback I received from the facilities staff was that the students' creation was spilling over its borders and becoming out of control, wild and chaotic. This feedback was a timely reminder of how embedded settler-colonial thinking is in relation to the disciplining of the natural world for aesthetic and extractive purposes.

In 2024 we had the opportunity to revisit this project at the invitation of Faculty Dean, Professor Marie Sierra, who had an Australia Research Council Grant to look at plant blindness. *PLANT NATION*, revisited *Theatrum Botanicum* (2022) and was again conceived and choreographed by Gregory Lorenzutti in collaboration with VCA Dance and Design and Production Students. In a time of climate crisis and 'plant blindness' (Gibson, 2021, p. 87.) this new iteration of the work further developed ecological thinking in performance process and production.



Figure 2. *Plant Nation*. Choreography and Photograph by Gregory Lorenzutti.

PLANT NATION was performed outside in the grounds of the campus as an ambulatory performance by 22 third year BFA dance students. Site-specific performance invites

audience to experience dance as a potent gateway to trace and reconnect within the complex pattern of nature and make the vegetal world seen again. Through plant awareness and visibility, a choreographic score made in collaboration with plants aims to motivate a more attentive perception of the places we share with living organisms, and ultimately, how we insert humans back into circular systems of nature, as interconnected and diverse species.

Conclusion

What is our stake as dance educators in cultivating a future that is liveable?

Contributing to anti-racist futures is vital to the future of Australia if it is to truly embrace equity and human rights for all Australians. What must we overcome to remove colonial blinders and confront the realities of extractivism and ecological imperialism? As a non-Indigenous artist-academic, indigenising education starts with an acknowledgement of not just where we are but how we came to be here, through what networks of capital-colonial flows. Place-based and informed site-specific dance education offers the distinct opportunity to critically analyse and interrogate one's position in relation to colonialism and its ongoing impacts.

A pedagogy that supports place-based learning informed by Aboriginal knowledge, creates an opportunity for decolonised transformative learning (Shawana in Jones et al. 2024,63). Resisting hegemonic ideologies of modernity/coloniality, Tertiary Dance Pedagogies in Australia can engage in both a reckoning with the past, and a restoration of place-responsive and environmentally attuned dancing. This must take place whilst ensuring that routes into tertiary dance for Indigenous students are sustainable, culturally safe and led in partnership with Indigenous peers.

Through critical and caring dance pedagogy, I relate efforts to engage in allyship, 'walking-with' First Nations dancers towards addressing the unique challenges we encounter in the wake of colonial violence and in a context of climate breakdown. To counter a culture of violence and the histories of racist terror that mark the ground on which we dance in Australia, advocacy for and through dancing can be a way to move from rupture to reconnection and repair.

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1 For Māori the waters of Pacific Ocean are Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and the Tasman Sea, Te Tai-o-Rēhua, Rawiri 2025 n.d..

2 Regarded by many as the founding document of a bicultural New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi is a written agreement between the Crown and more than 500 Māori chiefs, first signed in 1840, made after New Zealand became part of the British monarchy. There are distinct interpretations of the Treaty today.

3 Grade 9 Curriculum subjects 'Expressions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Cultures' is part of the Ontario secondary curriculum and can be found here: <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/curriculum/secondary-first-nations-metis-and-inuit-studies/courses/nac1o>

4 The term 'country' is used instead of 'land' in Australia to reflect the deep, inter-relationality connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their ancestral homelands, which includes not only the physical land, but also the sea, sky, and all living things within it. Country encompasses spirituality, culture, stories, law, and identity, representing a reciprocal relationship where people belong to the country.

5 A bogan is an Australian and New Zealand slang term with classist origins as it used to describe any person whose speech, dress, or behavior such as driving a noisy car is seen as unrefined. Searches for origins of the term have led many to the 1980s, to Cold Chisel, AC/DC, Kylie Mole and Tracks magazine (Rossiter 2012).

Biography

Carol Brown is Professor, Head of Dance, Victorian College of Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne. She is a dance artist from New Zealand. Her work straddles academic, community and professional contexts and is renowned for its transdisciplinary reach. With a practice grounded in working closely with places and their communities of practice, Carol's artistic pedagogy combines deep research with speculative improvising and interdisciplinary choreographic systems.

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Becoming All Ears – ‘Embodied Listening’ in early years dance education and beyond

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of embodied listening in early childhood dance pedagogy. The improvisation-based hunting-gathering method will serve as a practical lens to explore the implications of embodied listening in dance pedagogical learning. Building upon the posthuman concepts of intra-active listening (Barad, 2007; Davies, 2014; Murris, 2016), the notion of embodied listening is introduced. Three practical implications are presented from the methodological assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of embodied listening and the hunting-gathering method (Colliander & Anttila, 2022). I claim that dance pedagogy may contribute to 1) nurturing creativity, 2) listening differently by listening to differences, and 3) transforming art teaching into making art. Finally, the aim is to transform dance pedagogy *for* children into dance pedagogy *with* children, emphasising the ethical and responsible aspects of being, doing and learning together, articulating how posthuman thinking supports early childhood dance pedagogies.

Keywords: dance pedagogy, children, intra-active pedagogy, artistic research, improvisation



Introduction

The accelerated pace of contemporary life, with constant stimuli, affects early childhood dance education. As I have previously noted, dance teachers often encounter learning situations where attending to a shared embodied process is challenging (Colliander, 2024; Colliander & Anttila, 2022). In early childhood education (ECE), an emphasis on measuring learning outcomes, coupled with limited dance-specific pedagogical expertise (Bond, 2019; Pastorek Gripson et al., 2022; Sansom, 2019), risks reducing dance to a prescriptive, technical activity lacking kinesthetic engagement (Gibbons & Nikolai, 2019). The use of digital devices to measure bodily activity may further disconnect children and educators from their sensory awareness, thereby diminishing their sense of connection with themselves, others, and the surrounding environment. These trends reflect Biesta’s (2017) concern about the disappearance of art in education. In response, this study highlights the need to revalue sensitive, embodied modes of listening, which are often overlooked in pedagogical practices (Pape-Pedersen, 2022).

This article is based on my doctoral artistic research, where I investigate how posthuman theories and the concept of *intra-active pedagogy* (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) might inform early childhood dance education. The study is situated within Finnish ECE, focusing on children aged 4 to 6 and their teachers, though the methods are applicable across various dance education contexts and age groups. Building on the work of early childhood dance scholars (e.g., Anttila et al., 2019; Koff, 2021; Stinson, 2010), I seek to challenge traditional teacher-led approaches by reimagining the teacher’s role as a learning partner (Martin et al., 2018) and a facilitator in creative dance (Anttila & Sansom, 2012; Richard, 2013). Through this research, I also aim to support peer relationships among children and foster collaborative partnerships between ECE teachers and dance educators.

Dance educational research is an evolving field, recognising the benefits of creative dance in socioemotional, embodied, physical, and cognitive learning (Payne & Costas, 2021). The importance of somatic approaches and sensorial knowledge as foundations for creativity has become acknowledged (Chappell, 2007; Weber & Reed, 2022). More recently, dance educational research has also been conducted from the posthumanist perspective, focusing, for instance, on creativity (Chappell, 2018), sustainability (Bruzzone & Stridsberg, 2023), and embodied agency as material, pedagogical and resistant (Hickey-Moody et al., 2020). Chappell and Hathaway (2018) advocated for more transdisciplinary approaches that acknowledge the co-constructive nature of dancing, which I also highlight in this article. Lenz Taguchi et al. (2016) view dancing as an entangled assemblage of bodies, ideas, and material agencies. Pollitt et al. (2021) explored dance improvisation by encouraging children to connect with the weather through their bodies, fostering a more sensitive approach to the world.

In this article, I articulate how a posthuman view of early childhood dance pedagogies offers a perspective on dance as an alternative mode of learning, founded on attuning to our embodied relationships with ourselves, others, and the environment. Building on existing scholarship, I argue how dance education may foster respectful and responsible ways of being, doing and learning with human and more-than-human agents. Through this approach, *teaching* dance can transform into a process of *making* dance collectively. At the same time, dance pedagogies *for* children can evolve into dance pedagogies *with* children,

bridging the gap between children as producers and consumers of knowledge. I will first outline the theoretical key concepts of the study. Based on my research experiences on the methodological assemblage of ‘Embodied Listening’ and the ‘Hunting-Gathering’¹ method, I suggest three implications for dance pedagogical learning events. Finally, I conclude that ‘Embodied Listening’ is a vital approach that profoundly impacts dance education by recognising the body as a site of knowledge and a medium for responsible relations.

Posthuman views on dance pedagogical artistic research

The theoretical framework of this study encompasses posthuman theorising, emphasising Barad’s (2007) notion of *intra-action*, which Lenz Taguchi (2010) introduced into the early childhood educational context. In the following, I will introduce the theoretical and practical key concepts and outline the methodologies of this study, which is situated in the context of artistic research.

Intra-activity

Whereas interaction focuses on the action between separate entities, intra-action refers to relations, where the agents and their actions are entangled and emerge within the situation. This leads to an intertwined notion of ethico-onto-epistemology, where ethics, being, and knowledge are interwoven (Barad, 2007). Dance can be viewed as a practical implementation of Barad’s idea that knowledge is not produced ‘standing at a distance and representing but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*’ (Barad, 2007, p. 49). This means that in the intra-active perspective on dance, the emphasis is on how the dance engages in, with, and through the body (Hickey-Moody et al., 2020). By focusing on relational and entangled perspectives, I seek to transcend conventional dance educational methods by challenging the current hierarchies that prioritise adults over children and humans over material forces. My understanding of ethical encounters is based on ‘response-ability’ (Barad, 2007), which in education involves attentiveness, responsibility, curiosity, and mutual empowerment (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017).

The Child as relational

My theorisation of the child as relational builds upon Murris’ (2016) posthuman reconceptualisation of the child, leading to an understanding of the child not as a separate but entangled agent. This advocates for decentering the human and child in pedagogy, challenging the traditional view of the child as a rational, independent individual (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016). The concept of the relational child provides new possibilities to view the educational settings as spaces where the child is understood to constantly engage in relationships with the more-than-human, focusing on learning as a collaborative process rather than viewing it as an individual accomplishment.

Dance as improvisatory and relational practice

This study views dance as a holistic art form with significant educational potential. My dance pedagogical practices do not prioritise any particular dance style or technique but focus on

improvisation as a participatory approach capable of generating collective ideas between moving ‘bodies-in-the-moment’ (Gibbons & Nikolai, 2019; Kloppenberg, 2010). Hence, the concept of dance in this study emerges from the physical activity of dancing as situational knowledge (Colliander & Anttila, 2022). In this kind of practice, the moving is a way towards moments of invention and production of new knowledge, creating the possibility to focus on the unspoken, relational, embodied work (Pape-Pedersen 2022).

Post-qualitative methodology in artistic research

This research is situated in the context of artistic research, with my dance pedagogical practice serving as the primary focus and method of inquiry (Gröndahl, 2023). My professional identity forms a dance pedagogue–dancer–researcher assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), where my three roles intertwine into an inseparable reconfiguration. The methodology is based on post-qualitative research (Denzin, 2013; Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; St Pierre, 2015), closely relating to the performative research paradigm (Østern et al., 2023). These frameworks have supported articulating and theorising my non-conventional, playful, and embodied research methods, such as ‘Embodied Listening’ and ‘Hunting-Gathering’, that have emerged during the study.

‘Embodied Listening’

Methodologically, I emphasise embodied ways of being, doing, and knowing throughout all phases of the research. Central to this is the development of the concept of ‘*Embodied Listening*’, which emerged through attentive, bodily engagement in dance pedagogical settings. It refers to a holistic, kinesthetic attunement that enhances creativity and sensitivity in improvisation-based dance education. The concept draws from the Reggio Emilia philosophy’s ‘*pedagogy of listening*’ (Rinaldi, 2006), which Davies (2014) reinterpreted through an intra-active lens as ‘*emergent listening*’. Similarly, Murris (2016), inspired by Deleuze, introduced ‘*listening without organs*’ as an ethical and holistic form of listening. These approaches share a commitment to rethinking listening beyond conventional, instrumental practices.

‘Listening-as-usual’ (Davies, 2014) describes the dominant educational mode of listening as evaluating and interpreting in ways that confirm existing knowledge. In contrast, ‘listening-as-experimentation’ invites openness to difference, uncertainty, and new ideas. This approach aligns with ‘Embodied Listening’, where the educator engages in reciprocal, responsive inquiry without predetermined answers (Murris, 2016). This kind of holistic listening practice suits dance pedagogy well, as the holistic sensory aspects are emphasised in dance. ‘Embodied Listening’ can be visualised through the ‘Verbs and Lines’ exercise, which was also developed during this research. After dancing, participants translate their experiences into documentation by identifying actions with verbs and visualising bodily sensations through drawn lines. In this manner, the embodied experiences within the learning and knowledge-building process are made shareable through documentation that possesses both aesthetic and pedagogical value.



Figure 1: Visualising ‘Embodied Listening’ through verbs and lines exercise. Adults assisted in writing the verbs on small pieces of paper that were placed in an outline surrounding a collection of drawn lines. The group walked slowly in a circle around the installation, allowing everyone to explore all sides of the work and listen to the experiences as the verbs were read aloud by the adults. Photo: Tuire Colliander.

The ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method

The ‘*Hunting-Gathering*’ method is an improvisation-based, participatory, and emergent practice that supports both collective and individual creativity, fostering artful transformation through dance (Colliander & Anttila, 2022). It is also inspired by the ‘Raw Board Working Style’ developed by Turpeinen (2015). Collaborative dance improvisation is central to this methodology, enabling both individual and shared processes, reflection, and somatic cognition through movement. The aim is to support children’s embodied expression and learning through the educator’s active, sensitive participation. This fosters a holistic educator–child relationship, shifting the educator’s role from instructor to collaborator. Improvisation invites unpredictable and surprising learning experiences, requiring educators to trust both themselves and the children. By resisting ready-made answers and imposed interpretations, educators may remain open to emerging possibilities, nurturing playful exploration and the joy of discovery (Hermans, 2022).

Methodological assemblage of ‘Embodied Listening’ and the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method

Building on the ideas of intra-active listening (Davies, 2014; Murriss, 2016), along with my research experiences, I present three practical implications for dance pedagogy that arise from the methodological assemblage of ‘Embodied Listening’ and the ‘Hunting-Gathering’

method. This approach may contribute to 1) nurturing creativity, 2) listening differently by listening to differences, and 3) transforming the *teaching* of art into a process of *making* art. I aim to elucidate how dance pedagogy *for* children evolves into dance pedagogy *with* children. As my research is conducted through dance, I seek to create the possibilities of embodied reading. Brief descriptions of the experiences invite readers to imagine the events and engage with my research process. These moments highlight intra-actions that have influenced my pedagogical thinking and knowledge creation.

Listening differently by listening to difference

Through my dance pedagogical experiences, I have developed a keen eye for detecting differences in the movements of bodies within the space. Simultaneously, my gaze is widely open to view the entire situation and sharply focused on the details. The ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method can be utilised by a teacher observing the teaching situation from an external perspective. In the following, I will demonstrate this through an example from a dancing session in ECE with five to six-year-old children. Emerging from their ECE learning project focused on the sea, our dance explorations are guided by children’s ideas of embodying various sea creatures, for example turtles.

Children form small, round shapes on the floor, swaying and rocking. The bodies start moving on their knees, hands and forearms gliding on the floor. ‘These are slow!’ One child sits, pointing to another child’s movements and exploring them with their hands. A medley of rising arms, waving heads, legs extending far back, and feet in the air.

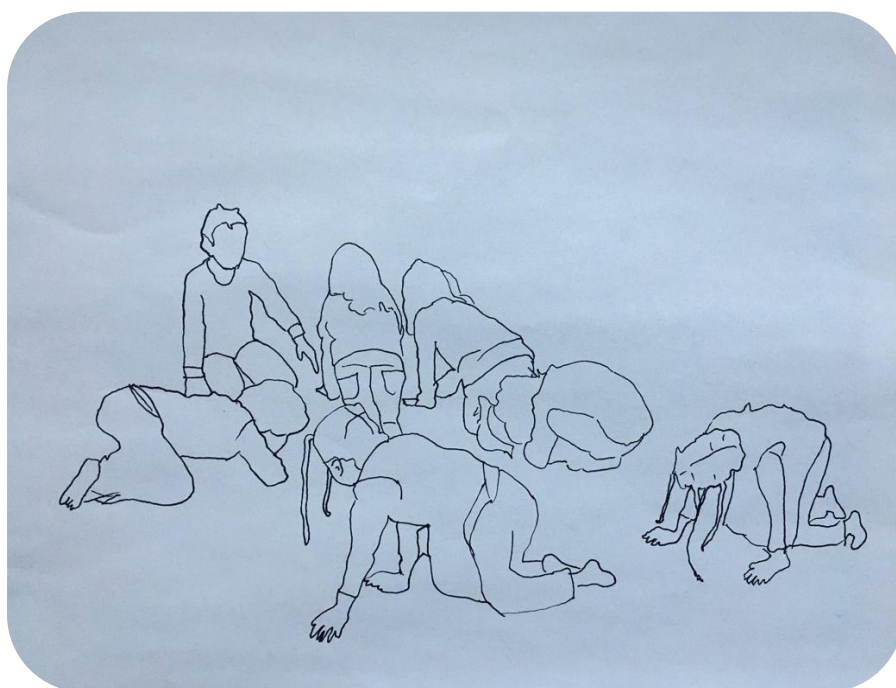


Figure 2: Improvisational dance exploring the dance of ‘turtles’. The image is created from several successive paused moments of the video footage, captured directly from my laptop screen, inspired by the work of MacRae (2022, p. 349). Photo: Tuire Colliander.

However, when realised through ‘Embodied Listening’, the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method becomes more holistic, as seeing is transformed into a physical experience of not only seeing, but also listening with the body. This resembles a process of becoming ‘all ears’, as suggested in the title of this article, and it relates strongly to what Davies (2014, p. 1) writes about emergent listening:

Listening is about being open to being affected. It is about being open to difference and, in particular, to difference in all its multiplicity as it emerges in each moment in between oneself and another. Listening is about *not* being bound by what you already know.

The educator listens with their entire body and extracts the embodied knowledge gained by mirroring children’s movements. Throughout this process, the directions of actions and movement qualities vary, fostering new movement patterns. The insights rely on openness, sensitivity, and connection to the body-mind. Experiencing through the body leads to deeper knowledge and understanding. This is an intra-active process with the world, as ‘what is being selected and formed is not completely of your choosing, because the world is improvising too; and that dance, your interaction with the world, forms you just as you form the world’ (De Spain, 2003, p. 37). Later, during the analytical phase, I engaged in ‘Embodied Listening’ through dancing with the video footage from the above moment of dancing turtles and visualised my engagement through verbs and lines exercise.

My shins and forearms rest effortlessly on the floor. Rounding my back and exhaling with a sigh helps my head reach the floor. My spine and head move in a gentle, swaying motion. ‘These are slow!’ Hearing this reminds me to move in space. The weight shifts to my palms. A child’s demonstration with their hands inspires me to play with walking arms. Stretchy, persistent lifts and weighty slow landings on the floor.

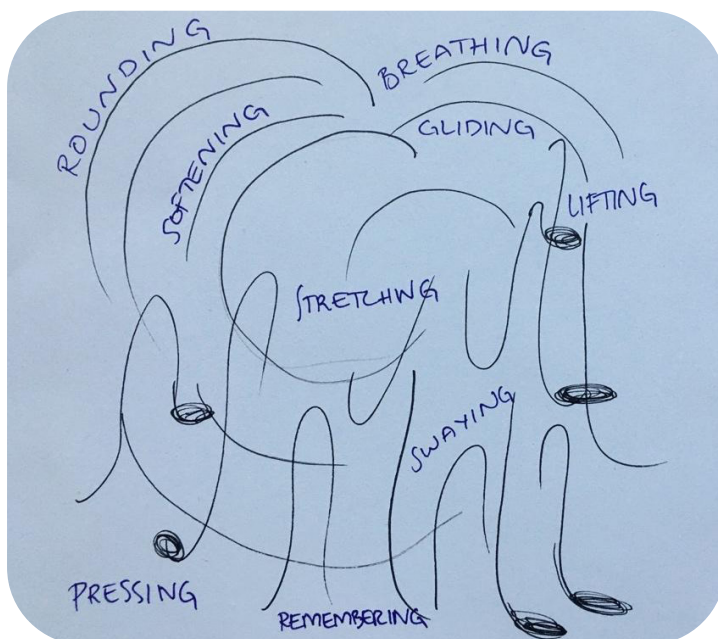


Figure 3: Verbs and lines exercise after the ‘turtles’ improvisation with the video footage. The verbs stem from my reflections on experience, while the lines emerge as intuitive visual representations of my inner sensations of movement, shapes, and directions. Photo: Tuire Colliander.

Nurturing creativity

Collective movement improvisation in the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method allows educators to actively engage as equals with children, creating a possibility and an experience for a child to ‘become *listened to* rather than asked to *perform*’ (Tortora, 2006, p. xiii). Yet when a child is unsure of what to do or how to proceed, the educator can identify something from the already existing, as in the following example.

‘What would you like to propose?’ I ask. A quiet and withdrawn child is looking away. A waiting silence. A shrug of the shoulders. I received this as an impulse. ‘I see bouncing shoulders, let’s try how our shoulders can jump.’

For the child, this can foster a sense of confidence and build security, a vital foundation for learning and creativity. For educators, particularly those without professional training as dance pedagogues, sharing artistic agency with children provides freedom from the pressure of expertise. This changes the perspective on dance from a skill to an activity accessible to everyone, enhancing the inclusiveness of dance pedagogical approaches. Ideally, the educator and the children listen to each other’s bodies in a moving assemblage of ‘relational heterogeneous community-in-the-making,’ (Davies, 2014, p.19). In this collective body, the creativity is relational and co-constructed. Consequently, learning becomes a process that does not belong to an individual but occurs at the level of assemblages and in the spaces between those assemblages. (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2016)

Transforming teaching art into making art

Earlier, I argued that the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method sees pedagogical activity as a process of *making* art, not just *teaching* it (Colliander & Anttila, 2022). In ‘Hunting-Gathering’, knowledge isn’t passed from teacher to student as found in traditional dance education. Instead, children generate movement ideas while the teacher encourages participation. Gathering movement material from the children’s bodies respects their creativity and agency rather than assuming that adults possess superior knowledge (Pape-Pedersen, 2022). Aligning with intra-active pedagogy, children become active participants and creators of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is seen as situated and constantly evolving. (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) This is demonstrated in the following example from a very first dancing session with a group of four to six-year-old children and their teacher.

We move and begin forming a shared idea of dance. I raise my imaginary antennas to the extreme and try to sense the events, attempts, and bodily thinking in the shared space-time from the interlude of my movements. I see an exciting movement made by a child and name it in front of the group. Without stopping the flow of the action, I ask the child to show it again and suggest that we all try it in our ways until we each continue with our movement again. Numerous ideas emerge, which I pick up, and we try out as if I were acting on my hunter-gatherer’s instincts (Colliander & Anttila, 2022, p.259).

Dance improvisation as the starting point and the primary tool for guiding learning events requires the educator’s attentive presence, making body-mind awareness essential. The educator becomes an ‘effective movement instrument’ (Hoeye, 2002) for the children, shifting

the pedagogical focus to sensorial encounters, embodied relations, and ethical responsibility beyond the spoken. This was evident in the previous example, where the participants’ lack of prior experience with dance improvisation led to uncertainty about how to proceed. To support the process, I chose to initiate movement as an example. However, once the children began engaging in the collective improvisation, their own ideas quickly began to emerge.

Hickey-Moody et al. (2020) theorise dance as a discursive practice that can be read as a text. The ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method encourages educators to perceive movements as a text unfolding before them, and to vocalise this text through active embodiment of the movements. This approach involves continuously balancing between allowing the improvisation to unfold organically and intervening to highlight a movement for collective exploration. As the process becomes more familiar to the participants, children may begin to independently pick up on each other’s movements, fostering a multi-directional flow of ideas.

In the context of the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method, the conventional role of the educator undergoes a transformation, whereby pedagogical endeavours become increasingly collaborative. The unexpected and surprising nature of dance improvisation shifts the paradigm from knowing to not knowing (Foster, 2003), which can be challenging for an educator. Dance pedagogical learning with children typically occurs in ‘the flux of constantly re-materialising posthuman child bodies’ and contains an overflow of creative ideas (Land, 2022, p. 74). This may appear chaotic, but it represents children’s dynamic, impulsive, and complex actions at a fluid experience interface, exposing their holistic sensitivity (Turpeinen, 2015). There is a risk that this unique quality of meaning-making is not allowed to emerge, as it is often seen as too noisy, risky, and in need of more control and order. Working in the state of not knowing entails accepting uncertainty, vulnerability, and responsibility to and for the other, while accepting that agency lies not in ‘controlling each of the others but in openness to the other and the not-yet-known’ (Davies et al., 2009, p. 145). Ellwood (2009) reassures that there is a possibility that educator vulnerability becomes a resource and a strength in pedagogical encounters.

By integrating the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method with ‘Embodied Listening’, the educator’s dance and choreographic thinking can emerge, thereby uncovering significant educational potential (Pastorek Gripson et al., 2022). The active artistic role in the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method, along with the educator’s connection to their body as an instrument of expression, transforms learning events into co-creative spaces and enhances appreciation for students’ bodies in the learning process (Richard, 2013). This fosters a sense of embodied empathy for all participants, strengthening the ethical dimensions of the pedagogy (Foster & Ojanen, 2025), creating space for a holistic pedagogical body that is ‘balancing and performing professional knowledge through the body with its emotions and motions’ (Pape-Pedersen, 2022, p. 716).

Discussion

The methodological assemblage of ‘Hunting-Gathering’ and ‘Embodied Listening’ is a vital approach that may have a profound impact on dance education. Most importantly, it offers new perspectives on educational hierarchies and acknowledges the body as a source of knowledge and a means for cultivating responsible relationships. Furthermore, it provides remarkable opportunities for educators and children to explore creative ideas and make meaning through dance improvisation. In dialogue with posthuman theories, this enables a shift from individual learning to a co-implicated activity among human and more-than-human bodies in intra-active assemblages, broadening the conception of agency.

The absence of dance pedagogical expertise can restrict the potential of dance in ECE arts education, thus reducing children’s access to rich experiences in dance. Yet, dance could offer a holistic learning mode, supporting socioemotional, artistic, and embodied learning and well-being (Bond, 2019; Pastorek Gripson et al., 2022; Sansom, 2019; Payne & Costas, 2021). In the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ approach, educators can tap into children’s creativity and embodied thinking, rather than needing to be dance experts. This approach allows children to be acknowledged and respected as capable participants in their learning experiences. At best, this enables them to transcend their usual boundaries, uncovering unexpected aspects of themselves and showcasing their creative potential in dance. The aesthetic values expressed through dance hold profound significance, an essential aspect for a dance educator to recognise. (Flønes et al., 2022) Through the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method, the movement vocabulary and aesthetics emerge from a collective journey of discovery, where everyone can be both a learner and a teacher. In this manner, dancing provides opportunities to embrace various ways of moving and expressing oneself.

The issues of inclusion and participation highlight essential educational values recognised in dance pedagogy and related research (Pastorek Gripson et al., 2022). The increasing diversity of childhood communities requires more inclusive, flexible, and diverse dance pedagogical approaches to respect the needs of heterogeneous groups of children. Acknowledging relational and multimodal voices in collective dance improvisation requires relational and multimodal listening, such as ‘Embodied Listening’ as an attention strategy. Combined with the ‘Hunting-Gathering’ method, it offers a viable approach to engaging participants in various and inclusive ways. Moreover, especially when visualised for the collective sharing of experiences, ‘Embodied Listening’ could also prove beneficial in broader educational and artistic practices across various fields and disciplines. Engaging in ‘Embodied Listening’ may enhance pedagogical sensitivity and foster a compassionate attunement to one another’s embodied expressions within dance education. This serves as a crucial counterbalance to the increasing pace and pressure to perform learning outcomes, making learning experiences more creative and joyful while also nurturing the ethical and responsible aspects of early childhood dance education.

1

The title stems from my appreciation for the educational philosophy of the hunting-gathering lifestyle, which aligns with my pedagogical values by emphasising collaborative, bi-directional relationships between children and adults and prioritising the cultivation of autonomy over the promotion of independence (Douchleff, 2021).

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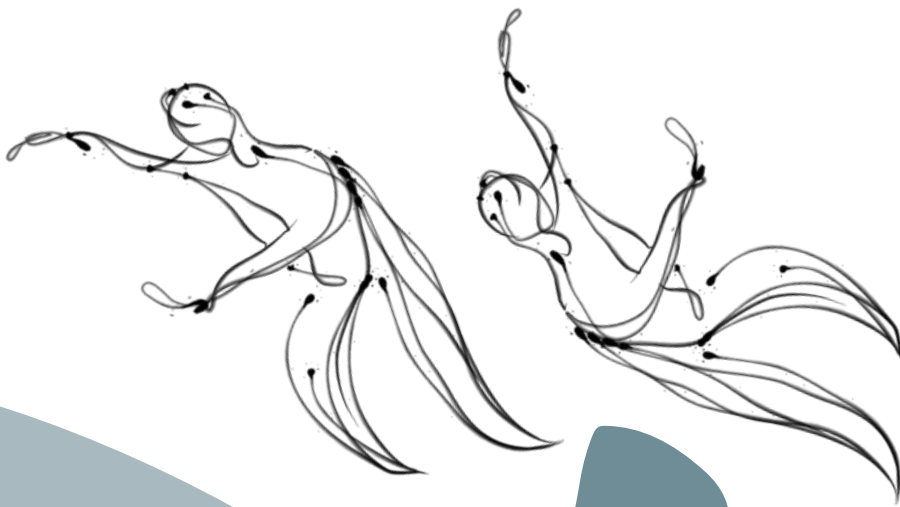
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Biography

Tuire Colliander is a dancer, dance pedagogue and PhD candidate currently working on her artistic doctoral research project at the Performing Arts Centre Tutke in Uniarts Helsinki. Her dance pedagogic background is mainly in the context of basic dance education in Finland. She also works as a freelance dance artist and is a contemporary dance company Xaris Finland member. In her doctoral thesis, she investigates early childhood dance pedagogies with a dialogical, intra-active and playful approach. She also focuses on questions of ethical, inclusive and respectful means of encounter through dance.

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The implementation of contemporary teaching approaches in ballet education

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Abstract

This article is based on the main findings of Ana Germ's recent master's thesis: *Contemporary Teaching Approaches in Ballet Education and their Implementation in Dance Programmes of Slovenia* (2024). In the first part, the following are identified: contemporary teaching approaches that would be appropriate for ballet education in the 21st century: a safe psycho-physical approach, a holistic approach, an inclusive approach, a transformative approach, a creative approach, interdisciplinarity, and the integration of new technology. As a general model, according to the current objectives of dance education, the *Midway 1989y Model* (Smith-Autard, 2002) and the use of varied teaching styles which draws on *The Spectrum of teaching styles* (STS) (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002) are proposed. In the second part, the focus is on the findings from the research section of the thesis and on ways to implement the defined contemporary teaching approaches, methods and different teaching styles in practical ballet teaching.

Keywords: contemporary teaching approaches, teaching methods, teaching styles, ballet education, implementation

Introduction

This article derives from the main findings of a recent master's thesis, entitled *Contemporary teaching approaches in ballet education and their Implementation in dance programmes of Slovenia* (Germ, 2024a). In the first part of the discussion, we identify contemporary teaching approaches, methods and styles that would be appropriate for ballet education in the 21st century and then propose the *Midway Model* of Smith-Autard (2002) and the use of varied teaching styles drawing on *The Spectrum of teaching styles* (STS), (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002). In the second part the focus is on the findings from the research section of the thesis and on ways to implement the proposed contemporary teaching approaches, methods and different teaching styles in practical ballet teaching. We considered the results of a questionnaire completed by dance and ballet teachers in Slovenia are considered in addition to a reflective analysis of the teaching performance (September, 2024).

Traditional ideas about ballet education are still visible but are gradually evolving in response to changes in contemporary society. Ballet originates from autocratic systems and therefore has a strong tradition of tight adherence to rules, particularly during schooling, to fulfil the technical dance requirements for the reproduction of the classical ballet repertoire (Germ, 2024a). The traditional, autocratic, teacher-centred ways of teaching are still very evident in vocational ballet schools, especially in former socialist countries, which have long followed traditional forms and narrative repertoires (Kunst, 2017). However, ballet (in the West) evolved during the 20th century along with modern and further contemporary concepts, choreographic processes and methods in an eclectic field of performing arts in the 21st century (Sečak, 2020). With globalisation, ballet became a transnational art and therefore companies around the globe nowadays require versatile (ballet) dancers with the capacities to adapt to various repertoires, styles and working processes (Salosaari, 2001). Further, contemporary pedagogy requires contemporary teaching-learning approaches where the focus turns to the *how* instead of *what* the students learn (Germ, 2024a). In the context of these changes, it is of great importance for ballet teachers to develop and acknowledge which teaching methods and styles would be appropriate for a psycho-physically safe and creative teaching and learning of ballet in the 21st century. In addition, it is essential to find ways to implement and apply these newly acquired teaching methods and styles in a more holistic and inclusive ballet education.

Purpose and objectives

In the first part, briefly presented are the main psycho-physical guidelines, approaches, teaching methods and teaching styles of dance and ballet education that would need to be applied and implemented in ballet education in the 21st century to close the gap between traditional ballet methods (modes) of teaching and contemporary (choreographic) demands of the 21st century.

In the second part, the focus is on the question of whether and how ballet teachers can implement these contemporary teaching approaches and styles in their teaching processes. I draw on the experience of being a dance teacher in both fields, contemporary dance and ballet to further consider the results of the survey from this master's thesis and reflect on the applied methods and styles in our teaching demonstration.



Materials and research methods

In the first part of the thesis, a qualitative methodological approach to review the existing literature on the topic was mainly used which are then combined with observation methods, description, reflection and analysis of our experiences in the field. In the second part, a questionnaire completed by Slovenia's dance and ballet teachers was used to collect qualitative as well as quantitative data. The questionnaire was designed to explore teachers' attitudes, understanding, knowledge and application of contemporary teaching approaches in dance and illuminate the results within the broader context in which they work. Finally, the lesson demonstration was analysed qualitatively to reflect on whether and how contemporary teaching methods, approaches and different teaching styles can be incorporated into ballet education in practice.

Literature review

The general inspiration for the thesis came from Anu Sööt's and Ele Viskus' article, "Contemporary Approaches to Dance Pedagogy – the Challenges of the 21st Century" (2014), in which the authors identified the main themes in developmental trends in dance pedagogy. Also considered were the contemporary teaching approaches identified by Geršak in her doctoral dissertation, entitled *Creative Movement as a Holistic Learning Approach in Primary School* (2016) and the guiding principles in the *Road Map for Art Education* UNESCO (2006). On the topic of safe dance practice and prevention of injuries, I drew on the work of authors Buckroyd (2000) and Howse (1992) as well as authors discussed in Sečak's seminars (2022). Further, I proposed a general model according to the current aims of dance education through the *Midway Model* of Smith-Autard (2002) together with the supportive views of Best (1992) and McFee (1992). For the use of various teaching styles, I drew on *The Spectrum of teaching styles* (STS) (Mosston and Ashworth 2002) together with the application suggestions of Salosaari (2001) and Gibbons (2007).

Contemporary teaching approaches in ballet education

Based on the literature, several themes were extracted regarding current developmental trends in dance pedagogy and proposed implementation of the following principles and approaches: a safe psycho-physical approach, a holistic approach, an inclusive approach, a transformative approach, a creative approach, interdisciplinarity, and the integration of new technology.

1. Safe psycho-physical approach

Ballet, even recently, has gained a negative reputation through charismatic ballet dancers who start teaching without any additional anatomical or pedagogical knowledge and therefore can (subconsciously) physically or mentally damage their students (Sims & Erwin, 2012). In their ambition to produce professional dancers, they do not accurately consider the physical predispositions and abilities of their pupils (Sečák, 2022; Germ 2024, n.d.). As Best (1992) argues, arts can encourage destructive as well as constructive attitudes; this aspect of the arts reveals the immense and unavoidable responsibility of teachers.

A ballet teacher should therefore not only master their art and craft (technique, composition, history of dance), but also provide a positive atmosphere, a psycho-physically safe environment for learners to develop their skills to their highest possible extent without injuries or mental distress (Germ, 2024, n.d.). As Buckroyd (2000) advises, ballet teachers need to be educated in areas such as dance medicine, anatomy, psychology, fitness and nutrition (p.71). Much research in sports, dance medicine and science has been done in recent years and provides us with increased knowledge about safe dance techniques, and injury management and prevention, in addition to safe execution of specific ballet steps (Salosaari, 2001). Teachers therefore must constantly revise and extend their knowledge in these areas, take into account the physical predispositions and capabilities of their students, explain the reasons for extra practice, warm-up and cool-down, as well as carefully plan the methodological introduction of ballet steps (Buckroyd, 2000; Germ, 2024, n.d.). Even if certain discrepancies with the traditional rules of conduct occur, the primary concern of educators must be the long-term psycho-physical health of their students (Salosaari, 2001; Germ, 2024, n.d.).

2. Holistic approach

The holistic model is one of the key aspects of contemporary dance education (Sööt & Viskus, 2014). It addresses a person as a whole and integrates physical, intellectual and emotional channels as well as social, aesthetic, creative, and spiritual human dimensions (Sööt & Viskus, 2014). In other words, the teacher needs to be aware that the majority of pupils enrolled in a ballet programmes will not become professional dancers, so the training should stand alone as a positive and creative experience that contributes to the development of the student as a person in every way (Buckroyd, 2000). Dance education should support the individual's general life skills, like work habits, self-discipline, creativity, risk-taking, and make cross-curricular, interdisciplinary connections to other subjects and artistic fields in which the pupils may be engaged (Germ, 2024, n.d.).

3. Inclusive approach

Although the professional engagement with ballet, necessitates certain physical predispositions (specific bodily structures, proportions and abilities)¹, the majority of pupils enrolled in ballet programmes do not meet all of these physical requirements (Germ, 2024, n.d.). As Howse (1992) advocates, 'There is no reason why most, if not all children, cannot, if they so wish, attend dance classes and learn at least a rudimentary technique, so that they can gain pleasure and enjoyment for the rest of their lives' (p. 44). For the inclusion of all learners in the learning process, a teacher therefore needs to recognise the individuality of each young person and create an environment and atmosphere that emphasises learning, self-confidence and mutual respect (Buckroyd, 2000). The individual characteristics, the varied anatomical and physical abilities of students need to be considered in accordance with safe teaching methods and injury prevention (Germ, 2024, n.d.). Affective teaching therefore would require differentiation, which enables continued participation and has a positive effect on children's personal development. The principle of differentiation will be presented further within the inclusive teaching style in the section on the use of varied teaching styles.

4. Transformative approach

The focus on *how* and *why* instead of *what* the students will learn has highlighted the importance of active, experiential and reflective learning and therefore the need for a dance teacher to have far broader pedagogical and psychological knowledge (Germ, 2024a). Active learning is a transformational approach, where the student is holistically, mentally and emotionally active, whereas the teacher's attention is directed towards the learning processes (Požarnik, 2005). Experiential learning further proceeds from experiences which engage the cognitive, physical, emotional and spiritual level and are further transformed into knowledge, skills and attitudes, (Jarvis et al., 1998). The transformation (effective learning) is completed through reflection, discussion, analysis and evaluation of such experiences (Marzano et al., 1993). Reflective learning thus leads to learning at the highest possible level; here metacognitive learning, cognition and mastery of skills are accompanied by reflection on one's own knowledge, thinking and procedures (Sečak, 2021–2022). The transformative approach can be implemented in a dance class through activities like role-playing, simulations, social/group games, creative problem-solving tasks, and guided improvisation. These types of activities are followed by sharing experiences, discussion and critical reflection (Germ, 2024a).

5. Creative approach

The creative movement method or approach derives from the theoretical justifications of Rudolf von Laban and is therefore closely related to the principles of expressive dance (German: *Ausdruckstanz*), where the focus moves away from the form to the quality of movement, towards its expressiveness and interactions between people (Geršak, 2016). It enriches imaginative thinking, enables expression, and strengthens self-confidence, self-initiative, innovation, cooperation, communication, and consideration for each other (Meško & Geršak, 2021). The implementation follows through creative processes which mainly accord with the previous approach: role-playing, role-interpreting, problem-solving tasks,

improvisation, creative tasks ranging from short movement materials and sequences to longer choreographies and dance pieces/performances.

6. Somatic approach

The idea of a somatic approach is to lead students to their bodies and to teach them to become aware of their abilities and features (Sööt & Viskus 2014). Self-awareness and self-perception connect the body and the brain and thereby, like the holistic approach, defy the long-established Cartesian dualism—the concept of disembodied knowing shifts to embodied knowing (Germ, 2024, n.d.). Somatic practices like yoga, Pilates, Alexander's technique, Feldenkrais' method, include listening to one's own body, support cognitive readiness and receptivity and can therefore improve dance skills significantly (Sööt & Viskus, 2014). Through being aware of one's senses and feelings while moving, the somatic approach relates connects with philosophical and spiritual concepts, such as 'mindfulness', 'personal growth' and 'self-spirituality'. Referring to thoughts and emotions that are expressed in dance (Hanna, 2015), embodied knowledge is connected further to the education of aesthetic experience within dance (Chapell, 2007).

7. Cross-curricular integration and interdisciplinarity

Most contemporary dance and ballet education programmes have already acknowledged that a comprehensive art of dance curriculum should expose students to a range of techniques and styles as well as to subjects such as music, anatomy and history of dance. It is recognised that this exposure enables the students to acquire and integrate knowledge and skills from the artistic, aesthetic and cultural fields of education (Smith-Autard, 2002; Germ, 2024, n.d.). A wider educational frame further encompasses interdisciplinarity in education, helping to weave connections between subjects and disciplines, and thereby giving rise to new insights and cognitions (daCi, 2024). In the field of dance art this results in hybrid forms, dance performances and installations, where creative movement/dance is only one of the modes of artistic expression (Germ, 2024, n.d.). Students who participate and co-create such projects gain knowledge of and skills related to other art forms, such as video dance, scenography, costume design, literature, poetry, lighting and graphic design, as well as of new means and devices (Hanna, 2001; Sööt & Viskus, 2014). Thus, dancers and teachers are expected to have an ever-expanding inter-artistic knowledge as well as the know-how of new technologies in artistic and production terms.

8. Integration of new technology

General technological progress and digitalisation are constantly changing our means of communication as well as ways of recording and archiving data (Germ, 2024a). Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and its tools are thus one of the essential areas of contemporary life and a direct contributor to lifelong learning. As stated in Germ (2024a), the importance of keeping up with advances in technology and mass media was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when dance classes had to be conducted remotely via

applications, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, or through platforms, such as Google and other online classrooms. The skills of editing video materials, downloading files, web and graphic design have become important skills and knowledge for teachers as well as for students. Furthermore, the phenomenon of artificial intelligence is emerging and this changes the processes of performing arts. The use of AI requires additional research and differentiation of the boundaries between human creativity and generated models of artificial intelligence. Thus, contemporary times undeniably require teachers to introduce and acquire knowledge in the field of new technologies, their means and devices.

How to implement contemporary teaching approaches in ballet education

Based on the themes and requisite teaching approaches for current dance pedagogy which have been identified, we looked further for a model and teaching styles which enables the practical implementation of these styles.

Midway model

As a general model, according to the current objectives of dance education, we propose the Midway Model (Smith-Autard, 2002), which integrates two poles in the aims of dance education which have evolved in the 20th century. These are the professional model and the educational model; the first emphasises the acquisition of dance technical skills and the other focusses on creativity which includes individuality, subjectivity and feelings (Germ, 2024b). For the integration of these dimensions in the Midway Model, it is necessary to first expose students to a range of techniques and styles so that they can adapt according to the requirements of a dance piece they are learning or know how to select movement material and character for their own compositions (Smith-Autard, 2002). Further, students should understand the meaning, structure, form, conventions and history of what they learn (McFee, 1992; Best, 1992) to finally view, review and appreciate the dances they see or create. Through mutual performing, creating, responding and reflecting, pupils progress as dancers (in their technique and performance). Furthermore, students develop as dance-makers (in creativity and choreography), and as appreciators of dance as an art form (in understanding of dance in society, describing, interpreting, and evaluating dances) which leads them toward artistic, aesthetic and cultural education (Germ, 2024b). A dance teacher therefore would need to master and apply the formal content of ballet through choreographic principles and processes, dance history, anthropology, philosophy, etc. (Gilbert, 2005).

The use of varied teaching styles

In shifting to a more integrative, non-autocratic model, the Midway Model of teaching changes the relationship between the teacher and the learner and therefore invites the use of varied teaching styles (Germ, 2024, n. d.; Germ, 2024b). The first person to formulate The *Spectrum of teaching styles* (STS) for the development of a variety of educational goals and students' differing needs was Muska Mosston in 1967. Together with Sara Ashworth

(2002), they developed their theory upon the notion that all teaching behaviour is dependent on a series of decisions—gradually shifting decision-making and responsibilities about the learning process from the teacher to the learner, first through reproductive styles (A–E) and then through productive styles (F–K) to ultimately create an independent learner. The steps are outlined in the following sections.

Reproductive styles

In Style A–E, Reproduction/Replication Cluster, the learner is asked to perform and practice. Students are mobile along three development channels: physical, social and emotional, whereas the fourth one, the cognitive channel, is being limited (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002).

In A, Command/Cued Response Style (Gibbons, 2007), the teacher makes decisions, and the students observe, imitate, execute and repeat.

In B, Practice Style, the teacher sets the task and time limit for the exercise, and the students practice, improve, adapt and develop responsibility in independent work.

In C, Reciprocal Style, the teacher sets the criteria for improving performance, and the students work in pairs and alternate roles (student-teacher). Students receive direct feedback (observe, compare, select and evaluate).

In D, Self-Check style, the student already knows the teacher's criteria and checks their performance against the set criteria. Through this style, students recognise their personal strengths, limitations, and learn to evaluate their performance (observe, compare and evaluate).

In E, Inclusion or Inclusive Style, the teacher offers various tasks or conceives an exercise on many levels, and the students decide by themselves at which level of difficulty to enter the task or activity—in other words, the inclusive style implements differentiation, which deals with varying levels of prior knowledge, abilities and physical predispositions within the same class. As explained by Gibbons (2007), the degree of difficulty may involve flexibility, balance, strength, endurance, speed, agility, precision, rhythmic ability, projection or application of qualitative feature (efforts). Students learn to evaluate their own performance (observe, analyse, choose, evaluate) (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002; Gibbons, 2007).

Productive Styles

In productive teaching and learning styles, the teacher guides, introduces, and assists the student in discovering and acquiring new knowledge, skills, and experiences. Decisions are gradually shifting from the teacher to the students. These styles mainly follow *child-centred* teaching and learning approaches.

In Style F, Guided Discovery, the teacher guides the students through conversation and

questions to the desired answers. This way, students acquire new insights, e.g., in the technique ('What is a balance?' 'What propels your *pirouette*?').

In Style G, Convergent Discovery, the teacher asks a question or gives a movement task in which there is only one correct answer or solution (e.g., students can be asked to transfer the exercise to the left side or *en dedans*).

In Style H, Divergent Production, the teacher asks a question or gives a movement task that has several answers or solutions (e.g., students can be asked to compose an exercise, create a conclusion or part of a sequence, choreography, etc.) In this style, it is important that the criteria and goals of the task are made clear by the teacher.

In Style I, Individual Program/Learner's Design, the teacher creates a programme for one student, e.g., for a particularly talented student (additional classes for competitions, solo performances, etc.) or for one who needs supplementary lessons.

In Style J, Learner-Initiated, the student decides to undergo further lessons or programmes (e.g., to perform somewhere, take part in a ballet competition or create their own composition or choreography), but in doing so, they need a mentor who helps them and supervises their work.

In Style K, Self-teaching, the student no longer needs a mentor. Outside the school system, they learn from feedback on their artistic engagement from colleagues, critics, or from their own criticism—the teacher's internalised 'voice' (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002; Gibbons, 2007).

Implementation suggestions

After considering the general aims in terms of the Midway Model and teaching styles, we have further looked for more specific application suggestions in the field of ballet teaching. In Slovenia, the results of the questionnaire showed that traditional teaching methods are no longer dominant in Slovenia, but rather that teachers are quite divided in their approaches and methods, a few following traditional, product-oriented methods, half following process-oriented methods, and close to 45% employing the *Midway Model*. This result was partly associated with the origin of a teacher's education and the level of the educational programmes they teach. (In Slovenia, ballet education is carried out at music schools on two levels: basic ballet programme and extended ballet programme and further secondary-professional ballet education is carried out at conservatories for music and ballet in Ljubljana and Maribor). In general, findings revealed individuality of approaches based on personal experiences, values, and knowledge of the questioned concepts and approaches. The division was further related to the geographical position of Slovenia between the East and West and to the key political and economic term after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the notion of transition, which defines the self-understanding of Eastern European dance as a delayed practice (Kunst in Kowal, 2017). Further, the research showed how dance programmes in

Slovenia need to be transformed and complemented through additional teaching hours and subjects (like physical preparation, contemporary and character dance classes, etc.) as well as cohesive aims in dance (ballet) pedagogy. It seems to be crucial that ballet teachers gain knowledge not only about the concepts of contemporary dance pedagogy, but also about the 'know-how', that is practical knowledge about the ways to apply and implement these approaches, methods and styles into their teaching in practice.

Teaching in practice

The teaching performance was carried out in September 2024 in 3rd and 4th grade (11–12-year-old students) of the basic ballet programme in Slovenia as part of the empirical section of our thesis. It enabled a demonstration and analysis of how contemporary teaching methods, approaches and different teaching styles can be incorporated into ballet lessons in practice. The guidelines were to follow a safe psycho-physical, holistic and inclusive approach, to meet the Midway Model within performing, creating and appreciating, and to use varied teaching styles during the lesson.

Purpose and objectives

Introduced firstly was the appropriate physical preparation of students through supportive practices, such as Pilates, Kinesiology and PBT (Progressing Ballet Technique). Students were led toward gaining awareness of their bodies and their capabilities (somatic approach). The inclusive approach (inclusive teaching style and differentiation) was applied by taking into account the varying levels of knowledge, abilities and physical predispositions of the students. Within the acquisition of techniques, various learning styles: the command style, practice style, reciprocal style and self-check style were applied. The productive teaching style—divergent production, was introduced through a creative task.

Teaching performance

The lesson performance covered half (45 minutes) of the usual class (90 minutes), so the demonstration did not include the usual sections of a ballet training: warm-up, exercises at the barre, exercises in the centre and jumps (*allegro*). The aim of the lesson was the introduction and physical preparation of turns on one leg (*pirouettes*). The students first performed supportive exercises for the activation of the centre (transverse abdominal muscles), stabilisation exercises (body alignment, posture and activation of the adductor muscles), and coordination exercises (coordination of the head, arms and body movements during turns). To do this, tools were used, such as elastic bands, exercise balls, and yoga mats.



*Figure 1: Using a balance board, pilates circle, and elastic band.
Photo: Ana Germ.*

At the beginning, two exercises were presented, demonstrated frontally, and the students performed the exercises reciprocally in pairs. The next four exercises were performed by the students in pairs at their 'stations', where they took turns in pairs so that all students completed all four exercises.



*Figure 2: Exercises at 'stations' in pairs.
Photo: Ana Germ.*

In addition to the reciprocal style, the self-check style was used, where the role of the teacher) was to circulate and give individual feedback. In pairs, the students continued with a coordination exercise for the movement of the head, hands and eyes between turns, after which the students briefly exchanged feedback. This was followed by balance exercises in the *relevé passé* position next to the bar and in the centre with an interweaving of the command, inclusive and self-check style. The principle of differentiation was included in a way that students could perform the *relevé passé* from a parallel position with a parallel *passé* or from the *en dehors* position (third or fifth) with an open (*en dehors*) *passé*.



Figure 3: Implementing the principle of differentiation.
Photo: Ana Germ.

In preparing and learning pirouettes in the middle, students were directed to perform 1/4, 1/2, whole or double turns according to the principle of differentiation. By asking questions about what helps us in turns or throws us out of balance, we lead the students through the style of guided discovery to realise the principles of *pirouette* rotation.

In the last part of the lesson, the creative approach was introduced through the style of divergent production. Students were given a collaborative creative task in which the teacher determined the music and the length of the music (2 x 8 for 3rd or 4 x 8 bars for 4th grades) and the ballet steps that the dance composition should contain: *pas de bourrée*, *balance* and a turn or *pirouette*. When designating groups, the wishes of the students or their level of knowledge (3rd or 4th grade) were taken into account. The students were introduced to the criteria of dance composition, which, in addition to certain dance elements, should contain a beginning, core and end, as well as a meaningful connection of dance elements in space and time, taking into account the music (preparation, rhythm and dynamics).



*Figure 4: Introducing the criteria of the dance composition.
Photo: Ana Trstenjak.*

The purpose of the creative task was for the students to work together in groups to create a dance composition according to the given criteria, which they could repeat/complete in the next lesson. They could then continue with the demonstration and evaluation of the created dance composition. The students were encouraged to give feedback to their classmates about the dance they saw according to the given criteria, thus concluding the three basic concepts of dance education after Smith-Autard, 2002): performing, creating, and evaluating dances.

Analysis of the teaching performance

In the thesis, the reflective analysis of the teaching performance extended over several pages, therefore only the main findings will be summarised for the purpose of this article. In general, all the set aims of the lesson were met. A safe psycho-physical, holistic and inclusive approach and applied varied teaching styles during the lesson were followed. The last, divergent production within the creative process was introduced, but not concluded in terms of viewing and evaluating dances in the same lesson. Working in pairs, as well as the implementation of differentiation in two groups, became time-consuming and was energetically more demanding than working in frontal forms using mainly the 'command style'. To meet the aims of the Midway Model, there was a need to spread the objectives over several lessons. The students started to create their own compositions, but they finished, showed, discussed and evaluated their creations during the next few lessons.

The time it took to complete the introduction and implementation of contemporary concepts, approaches, styles and methods of teaching and learning into practical teaching can therefore present an obstacle in the basic ballet programme. In Slovenia, we have only four teaching hours per week in 3rd and 4th grade, which means that there is generally a lack of time for acquiring and consolidating technical content and to prepare students for yearly performances. Thus, the time needed for the implementation of the acquired

concepts, is certainly one of the main hindrances to the use of creative problem-solving tasks, discussions and reflection in classes. It is recommended that physical preparation and preventive practices are introduced at the beginning of the school year or as part of a special lesson (e.g., before/after holidays and performances), and that creative tasks are introduced as a part of creative processes for parental or annual performances, within which students can compose their own sequence or choreography and perform it in front of others. For the future development of ballet programmes in Slovenia, additional hours as well as complementary subjects like physical preparation (including practices like Pilates, Kinesiology, PBT), contemporary and character dance are recommended to meet a comprehensive art of dance curriculum.

Conclusion

While some ballet academies and schools have already recognised and integrated contemporary aims and approaches in their programmes and curriculums, several are still struggling with the autocratic attitudes of their ballet teachers. Therefore, it is proposed that ballet teachers, regardless of their achievements in their active careers, transform their content knowledge through reflective pedagogical, physiological and psychological studies for teaching and learning in the 21st century (Germ, 2024b). Through mutual performing, creating, responding and reflecting in a dance class, pupils can gain comprehensive artistic development. Teachers additionally have to be aware of the wide field of professions that their students will engage in and have the responsibility to guide them safely (mentally and physically) through their dance education. Even if the implementation of various modes, approaches and teaching styles may be time and energy consuming, it is our responsibility to adapt in order to nurture reflective, independent and creative individuals for the future development of the field.

1 Physical predispositions in ballet encompass slim posture, small head, long neck, long arms, long and straight legs, straight back, narrow hips, a pronounced arch of the foot, natural “turn-out” in the hip joint, long Achilles tendon, etc. (Warren 1989; Sečak 2022).

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Biography

Ana Germ studied classical ballet at the Secondary School of Music and Ballet in Maribor and continued her studies in the field of modern and contemporary dance at the Conservatory in Vienna (Musik und Kunst Privatuniversität Wien), where she graduated with distinction in 2011. She gained professional experience as a dancer through engagements at the Slovene National Theater in Maribor, including in the work of Edward Clug, within Kjara's Dance Project in Ljubljana, and at Tovarishia Dance Company in Maribor. Since 2012, she has been teaching dance and ballet at the Music School Slavka Osterca Ljutomer, and since 2019 theatre movement at Gymnasium Franca Miklošiča Ljutomer. She recently completed her Master's Degree in Dance Pedagogy at Alma Mater Europaea University.

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Puppet Atelier – From atelier to puppet and creative movement performance: An interdisciplinary artistic research project

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Abstract

This paper presents a study on the role of puppetry and creative movement in recognition of the importance of the arts in the life of individuals and society, as identified by students who participated in an arts project. The project took place in the 2022/2023 academic year in a cooperative venture of the Department of Preschool Education of the Faculty of Education (University of Ljubljana), the Academy of Fine Arts and Design (University of Ljubljana), and the Ljubljana Museum of Modern Art, who joined forces in the project entitled “Puppet Atelier – From Atelier to Puppet and Creative Movement Performance”. One of the works presented in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was the painting *Atelje* (Atelier) by Gabrijel Stupica. The painting served as a starting point for students in the elective subject of Puppetry to conduct artistic research aimed at deepening their understanding of the arts and discovering its impact. The purpose of the present study is to examine how students who participated in the development of a puppetry and dance performance perceived the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the project. A SWOT analyses was conducted with twelve students after the completion of the performance.

Keywords: puppetry, creative movement, visual art, artist, cultural institution



Introduction

Through cultural and artistic education, we can develop a wide range of skills that not only relate to the creative aspect of development but also contribute to the overall development of everyone's personality. In this way, we can encourage aesthetic sensitivity and awareness of culture and cultural expression, as well as promoting lifelong learning (Bucik, et al., 2011). As highlighted in the *Road Map for Arts Education* (2006) and the Seoul Agenda: *Goals for the Development of Arts Education* (2010), creativity and a diverse education that includes arts and culture are seen as crucial factors in creating a better world. A learning process that includes artistic practices consists of different pathways that allow individuals to explore and creatively express their own views and experiences. As Kroflič (2022, p. 32) explains: "The artistic first-person experience is considered one of the most effective educational situations. It involves a dialog between the person being taught and the artwork or content being represented through artistic means."

The project presented here is process-oriented, with a focus on exploring and combining different artistic disciplines and collaborating with artists and cultural institutions. The planning and implementation of the project is based on the authors' theoretical framework, which emphasises the importance of involving artists and cultural institutions in the creation itself. Smrtnik-Vitulić et al., (2022) state that a wider and better network of partnerships between educational and cultural institutions, and further training of professionals in the field of cultural and arts education, is necessary for better quality cultural and arts education. This was implemented in our project, in which students were matched with a cultural and artistic institution and a puppet, dance and visual artist. International and Slovenian research on arts in education emphasises the need for more permanent partnerships between teachers and artists (Bamford, 2009; Kenny, 2020; Podobnik & Borota, 2022). This type of model was developed within the project Developing Communication Skills through Cultural and Artistic Education (SKUM, 2022), which aimed to establish links between educational institutions, on the one hand, and artists and cultural institutions, on the other, to create innovative and open learning environments supported by new didactic approaches that strengthen the communication skills of children/students/young people. The positive effects of involving art and artists in the educational process have been established by research (Jeler et al., 2022) which shows that creative artistic projects of this kind are of great importance for students' emotional expression. With the help of creative movement, a body puppet and a sock puppet, the students in the present project had an opportunity to express their feelings and experience the world.

Interdisciplinarity of artistic languages: literature review

The interdisciplinary integration of dance, puppetry, music and visual arts in cultural and artistic education projects is an important approach for promoting holistic artistic expression, creativity and innovation in the educational process. Such integration enables the development of different skills and competences, while contributing to a better understanding of artistic means of expression and their synergy. The integration of dance, puppetry and visual arts opens new avenues for creative expression and offers students an opportunity to explore and develop their own artistic identity in an interdisciplinary context.

Different art forms promote particular kinds of development, and an interdisciplinary approach can help to integrate these possibilities. A study (Jurjevič & Geršak, 2024) focused on the integration of visual arts and dance, emphasising the preservation of each discipline's unique characteristics while enhancing the learning experience through their interplay. This approach allowed students to explore self-expression through both artistic and movement-based languages, providing them with an opportunity to physically embody selected themes. As a result, they were able to deepen and internalise their understanding on a more profound level. Additionally, students engaged actively throughout the entire creative process.

One of the main purposes of the integration of the arts is to promote the holistic development of the individual and specific art forms contribute uniquely to this holistic development. For example, puppets help with story development and dramatization, dance allows the expression of emotion through movement, and visual arts allow the visual exploration of themes and concepts. When these art forms are combined, participants develop different skills simultaneously. Puppetry offers expressive and creative opportunities. The inclusion of puppets in artistic creation has a significant impact on social development, as it allows the development of communication skills, empathy, collaboration, and creative expression. Puppetry offers a safe and metaphorical space in which individuals, both children and adults, can explore social relationships, express feelings, and understand social dynamics. Majaron (2017) claims that the puppet offers the child a shield, a sort of disguise behind which they can hide. A sensitive teacher who follows children's puppet play as a co-actor in their improvisation or as an audience member will perceive the child's messages about how they experience the world hidden in their story. The use of puppets facilitates verbal and non-verbal communication, as individuals often feel more comfortable expressing themselves through puppet roles. Research on the implementation of puppet theatre activities using a process development approach, based on the principles of creative drama (Korošec & Batistič-Zorec, 2020), showed that puppets contribute to positive changes in children's social behaviour. After a three-month period, educators observed a decrease in aggressive behaviour, greater participation of withdrawn children, an increase in prosocial behaviour, and improved attention and perseverance in activities.

Like puppets, dance offers opportunities for self-expression and development. Creating through movement and dance plays an important role in shaping self-awareness, developing peer relationships and group cooperation, and facilitating and maintaining an understanding of the embodied learning material (Anttila & Svendler Nielsen, 2019; Overby, 2014; Geršak et al., 2020). The results of a study in which the authors (Rupnik & Geršak, 2021) integrated creative movement into distance learning showed that creative movement workshops conducted during distance learning were meaningful for students. The workshops gave them an opportunity to express themselves through movement, have fun and realise their own dance potential.

Complementing the benefits of puppetry and dance, Cooper (2017) writes that drama offers children and youth an opportunity to explore the world through story. In the safe shelter of fiction, young people develop empathy and cooperation and learn to control their emotions. One of the key advantages of a puppet creative project lies in the opportunity to co-operate and learn social skills while preparing a common project. According to various authors (Ivon, 2013; Petrović, 2013; Korošec, 2015; Forsberg Ahlcrona & Ösman, 2018), creating a puppet project offers wide-ranging opportunities to link art to the curriculum and supports the development of social skills.

When planning and implementing cultural and artistic education projects, we must not forget that theatre, whether puppetry, drama, or dance, is not only a place where stories are told and feelings expressed, but also an important carrier of aesthetic values. Aesthetics in theatre goes beyond the mere visual image; it encompasses the dramaturgical structure, the poetics of performance, the method of interpretation and a holistic artistic experience that encourages reflection, sensitivity to artistic expression and critical evaluation on the part of the audience. As Majaron (2017, p. 311) writes about puppet theatre:

“A puppet theatre already brings together many artistic components that are combined into one message; the literary model, the unlimited imagination of visual art and puppetry, sound, light, movement, animation and play only together form a whole. The entirety of the theatrical forms of expression that we understand today under the name of contemporary puppet theatre comes closest to what we call total theatre.”

At the Faculty of Education University of Ljubljana, we have been developing a model of learning and teaching through artistic experience for many years. This model represents innovative approaches to learning that are implemented in the entire vertical of the education system, from preschool to university (Geršak et al., 2024). With this approach, we follow the guidelines of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and the Arts in Education (2024), which emphasises that:

“Learning in, through and with culture and the arts can develop a wide range of cognitive, social and emotional skills and behaviours, strengthen holistic learning and sensitivity to the natural environment, and promote intercultural dialogue, cooperation and understanding, which are crucial for sustainably addressing global challenges and transformation processes. They are therefore indispensable for a comprehensive learning process that meets the demands of today's and tomorrow's world.”

Both culture and art are essential components of education, with which we ensure the comprehensive development of the individual.

Research framework and methodology

The aim of the present study is to investigate how students who participated in the artistic process of a puppetry and creative movement performance experienced the meaning of this type of project in terms of puppetry, creative movement, arts education, and personal and professional development.

Research question:

How did the students who took part in the art project perceive the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the project?

The sample consisted of 12 third-year preschool education students, aged 22, who were participating in an elective puppetry course. The students divided themselves into three groups, within which three independent artistic projects were created. The whole process took place from February to June of the 2022/2023 academic year. The aim of the project was to provide an in-depth encounter with the performing arts, thus enabling the participants

to enhance their understanding of artistic activities and discover the positive impact such activities have on us and, consequently, on the children we work with. The project resulted in the creation of three short puppet shows combining different artistic genres.

The Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana and the Museum of Modern Art worked together to realise the project Puppet Atelier – From Atelier to Puppet Theatre. One of the artworks presented in a temporary thematic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was the painting *Atelje* (Atelier) by Gabrijel Stupica (1913–1990), one of the most important Slovenian artists and a popular national figure. The painting *Atelje* (285 × 415 cm), which took six years to create and remained frozen in one place, is not on display in any permanent exhibition and represents a special achievement of painting in our region. The temporary, high-calibre exhibition containing the work in the Museum of Modern Art caught our attention when we were looking for a suitable, inspiring starting point for our artistic work.

The students experimented with different styles of and approaches to puppetry, exploring creative movement and visual art as important components of a puppet theatre performance. We spent several weeks rehearsing the puppet shows and searching for suitable dramatic characters, stories, ideas and thoughts. Finally, three different puppet shows were created connected by a common starting point: the painting *Atelje*. After three months of participation in the process, three completely different puppet shows were created, two for adults and one for children. The stories created during the process were the students' own work, and the students themselves decided which audience their performances were intended for. The students were supported in their choice of artistic techniques and dramaturgy by artists from the fields of puppetry, dance and visual arts. In all of the shows, puppetry was interwoven with the art of dance. For the children's audience, the show *Dream Factory* was created, in which shadow theatre and body puppet animation were interwoven with movement. In the second piece, entitled *The Thief*, the students combined dance and large marionette puppets, while in the third piece, entitled *Loss*, the students created a performance with masks, shadow theatre and movement.

The research question was answered by carrying out a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, based on the research participants' feedback recorded in a table a few days after the end of the project. Through qualitative analysis of the material, we explored how the students experienced the meaning of this type of cultural and arts education project.

In analysing the material, we carried out a quantitative thematic analysis, in which we divided the key words/meanings listed in the SWOT table into broader categories, and then systematically counted, sorted and interpreted the occurrence of specific words, concepts or ideas. In the interpretation of the data, the SWOT analysis is supported by statements from the students.

Results

After completing the project with a performance in the Ljubljana Museum of Modern Art, a SWOT analysis was carried out with the students to find out their perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of engagement in this project. From the notes of all 12 students, the most frequent answers in the categories are listed in Table 1:

- STRENGTHS, GOOD SIDES of art project work and working with an arts organisation or artists, having a positive impact on me personally and on my work as a preschool teacher.
- DISADVANTAGES, WEAKNESSES that I perceive in myself and in the kindergarten when undertaking art project work and working with an arts organisation or artists.
- OPPORTUNITIES that this type of work brings.
- OBSTACLES, THREATS: possible negative effects over which we ourselves have little influence when we carry out project work in the field of cultural-artistic projects and work with an arts organisation or artists.

Table 1: Results of the SWOT analysis, most frequent student answers

S: STRENGTHS	W: WEAKNESSES
- Collaboration and teamwork - Contact with art and culture - Creativity, innovation and new ideas - Personal development and self-confidence - Experience in the performing arts - Art in the educational process	- Time and organisation - Psychological aspects: self-confidence, stage fright - Spatial conditions and boundaries - Co-operation, responsibility, systemic problems
O: OPPORTUNITIES	T: THREATS
- Collaboration and networking - Creativity and artistic fulfilment - Personal and professional development - Contact with art and cultural institutions.	- Temporal constraints - Organisation and space - Co-operation and group conflicts - Fear of failure and overload - Specific technical and content-related problems

The results of the SWOT analysis showed that the categories of strengths and opportunities are often repeated and interlinked in the students' perceptions.

The strengths and opportunities emphasised by the students clearly show that this type of cultural and artistic project has a great impact on their personal, creative and professional development. As one participant commented, *"I experimented with different artistic media, which allowed me to expand my skills and express my creativity through art. I learnt to set goals, manage time, coordinate different tasks, and ensure that the project is completed according to the given guidelines."* Such projects not only enrich students' artistic and educational skills, but also enable them to acquire important life skills, such as communication, collaboration, adaptability and critical thinking, which will be useful in their future work with children: *"I realised that the final process requires patience, trying out ideas, creativity and the courage to think outside the box, as well as good planning and teamwork";*

"I liked the challenge from painting to production, because I have never done this before, and at the same time, we can transfer it to a kindergarten for preschool children"; "During the creation process, we gained many new ideas and skills for our work in kindergartens". Several students noted that participating in this type of art project enabled them to realise personal ideas and express their feelings through different artistic languages, while the creative process helped to strengthen self-confidence: *"The project undoubtedly enabled me to explore and express my creativity in different ways. I had the opportunity to shape my own ideas, create artistic products, and express myself through different artistic media"; "I was also creative and flexible throughout the process, and the work taught me that behind every problem there are solutions".*

The students also highlighted the importance of teamwork, which is crucial in an educational environment, as it encourages mutual support and respect for different points of view: *"I gained experience in teamwork, as the project required a lot of networking, collaboration, division of labour and sharing of ideas"; "It was interesting to work together, then split up, observe each other, give feedback, create a space together, observe each other's work and try to connect it to ours..."*.

The students realised that contact with various cultural institutions, such as galleries, theatres and museums, enables them to broaden their horizons and exchange knowledge and experiences with experts: *"Until then, I could never have imagined that with a single work of art, so 'simple', and the subsequent process of surrendering to one's imagination and 'going with the flow', trusting and following one's instincts, one could arrive at such a complex, profound, ambitious and definitive result as we have achieved. Visiting the gallery changed my view of art and encouraged me to think and understand it in a new way".*

The project also enabled professional training with artists – a puppeteer, a dancer, a visual artist, a dramaturg – and learning to adapt to different new spaces/institutions and enrich the educational process through new artistic approaches: *"I liked the fact that in the introductory lessons we actually went to the gallery and looked at the paintings there, because that increased the inspiration and ideas. I liked that we were able to interact with different artists, faculty, the gallery, and so on. We had a really interesting experience with the whole process".*

The students viewed this type of art project in collaboration with a cultural institution as an opportunity for their later work in kindergarten, enabling them to introduce children to works of art and to overcome socioeconomic differences between various groups and individuals: *"I think I also gained a lot from being able to prepare a performance for the kindergarten, and I now have some experience of how to organise and carry out something like this. I was given a lot of guidance on how to start and finish it".*

The analysis of weaknesses and threats also established a significant link between the current weaknesses of the project as perceived by the students and the threats they might encounter in this type of work in future pedagogical practice.

Among the weaknesses of the cultural and artistic education project highlighted by the students was the lack of time to carry it out thoroughly, as the students have many other commitments in addition to the project, which can affect the quality and thoroughness of

the project work: *"We could have given the project even more polish if we had not been under time pressure from other study commitments at the faculty"*. The students noted that creative blocks and periods of lack of imagination can occur, as well as a lack of confidence, nervousness and doubts about themselves and the final product: *"I would like to point out that it was very difficult when I first visited the gallery and looked at the painting. I had some doubts about what kind of performance could be created and how difficult it would be to achieve. I had mixed feelings (from trepidation and fear to joy)"*; *"The whole process was extremely interesting and often challenging for me, as we had to find an answer to every why and how. Often, we didn't succeed, or we had a kind of block in the development of our performance"*.

The students identified a number of *threats* to carrying out a cultural and artistic education project in their future practice, which can be divided into several categories: temporal, organisational, social and psychological. Among the temporal obstacles, they mentioned limited time to carry out the project due to other commitments of the group of preschool children, not enough time to implement the planned work, and coordination with institutions. As organisational threats, the students mentioned financial constraints (difficulties in providing materials and organisation) and the distance to the institutions, which can make cooperation and the implementation of the pedagogical process more difficult: *"As a disadvantage of cooperation with a cultural institution, we would highlight the fact that it can be more difficult for kindergartens that are not based in a city to organise and carry out such projects, as a visit to the Modern Gallery, for example, would take up too much time and energy"*; *"Cooperation between a cultural institution and a kindergarten usually only takes the form of a visit, an excursion"*.

The participants also had concerns about a lack of co-operation and responsibility, which makes successful planning and implementation more difficult. If they have the support of mentors and artists, the project is easier to implement, but if they are left to their own devices in practice, implementation is a greater challenge: *"There is not enough cooperation and planning in this area in the kindergarten (nobody dares to take responsibility)"*.

As social obstacles, the students mentioned different perceptions of art that make group work difficult, possible conflicts and disagreements in the group that make work difficult, and unwillingness to cooperate: *"There can be conflicts between group members, nervousness, friction, disagreements, because members have different views on art and the art project..."*. Possible psychological obstacles include anxiety about the performance, feeling overwhelmed by the final production, and a loss of motivation during the process (the feeling that nothing is going according to plan): *"Motivation for the work can drop during the process; you feel like nothing is going right."*

Conclusion

Students' reports on their experiences illustrate that projects integrating different artforms increase students' motivation and commitment, encouraging them to experiment and innovate. This not only enriches their artistic development, but also equips them with essential life skills, such as adaptability, teamwork and critical thinking. The model of learning and teaching through artistic experience developed at the Faculty of Education, University of

Ljubljana, aligns with UNESCO's framework (2024), emphasising the role of culture and arts in education for holistic development and global understanding.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, the advantages of the cultural and artistic education project clearly outweigh its weaknesses. The students gain valuable experience in the field of artistic expression, pedagogical work and cooperation with various cultural institutions. The project allows them to develop creativity, self-confidence and organisational skills, while training them for teamwork and adaptation to various challenges in the educational process. Further research could address challenges in projects of this kind for example conflict or time management.

The students emphasised that interdisciplinarity and the integration of various artistic practices allow for a broader view of art and its role in education. Despite time and organisational constraints, the project remains an important part of the students' development, as it helps them to shape their own pedagogical methods and artistic expression. The holistic experience that students gain contributes significantly to their professional development and their ability to create innovative educational environments for future generations. Cultural and artistic education projects play a key role in the development of aesthetic sensitivity, as they give young people an opportunity to encounter various forms of theatre and artistic expression. By including theatre in the educational process, we develop in young people an understanding of aesthetic principles, critical evaluation of works of art, sensitivity to detail and symbolism, as well as creativity and innovation. By weaving different arts into different activities of the project week in terms of cross-curricular integration, we found that students who are usually more reserved, less confident and passive in class were active participants in all the activities (Jeler et al., 2022).

Overall, the project was a valuable experience for the students, enriching their professional knowledge, personal development and pedagogical skills in the field of cultural and artistic education. The integration of theory and practice and the collaboration with various experts and institutions enabled the students to develop a range of skills that will benefit their further professional development.

Consistent with research findings both in Slovenia and internationally (Ijdens et al., 2018; Smrtnik-Vitulič et al., 2022), we conclude that artistic experiences make an important contribution to experiencing and expressing oneself in art languages, as well as enhancing other areas of individual development.

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Helena Korošec (PhD) is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, where she teaches creative drama and puppetry in preschool, primary, and special education programmes. Her educational and research work includes the role of puppets and drama in learning and teaching and in child and adolescent development. In recent years she has also been involved in the use of therapeutic sounds with individuals and in group work in different settings. She is a member of the international UNIMA commission "Puppets in Education and Therapy" and a member of IDEA -International Drama in Education Association.

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Story Makers – Many Voices, Many Lives: Cultivating inclusion, creativity, and resilience through storymaking

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of participatory storymaking among socially marginalized youth, developed through an Erasmus+ project across four European countries. Using puppetry, creative movement, writing, and digital storytelling, the programme aimed to cultivate inclusion, creativity, and resilience. The project design, curriculum structure, and context-specific adaptations are presented alongside the main findings from both youth and youth workers. Results indicated that young participants reported increased confidence, motivation, creativity, and a stronger sense of social inclusion, while youth workers developed greater competence in applying arts-based methodologies. The integration of dance and movement provided additional non-verbal pathways for expression and resilience-building. The study highlights storymaking as a valuable interdisciplinary approach, bridging education, community arts, and therapy, and offering practical tools for youth engagement and empowerment across diverse contexts.

Keywords: storymaking, youth inclusion, creativity, resilience, participatory arts, dance education

Introduction

Storytelling and storymaking are ancient art forms that combine personal and collective expression. While storytelling traditionally refers to the oral transmission of narratives, storymaking expands this practice by incorporating diverse artistic media—such as writing, drama, puppetry, and dance—into the construction and reinterpretation of stories (Kennedy et al., 2020). These practices unfold in shared spaces where individuals listen, create, and respond to narratives, engaging imagination, memory, and cultural identity (Lam-Knott, 2020; Spiegel et al., 2020).

In recent years, the role of arts-based methodologies in fostering social inclusion has received increased scholarly attention. Beyond their creative dimension, such approaches have been analysed as pedagogical and therapeutic practices that can empower marginalized groups. Abkhezr et al. (2018), for example, emphasized how narrative storytelling allowed refugee youth to articulate career aspirations and negotiate identity in contexts where they often felt voiceless. Similarly, Sunderland (2000) stressed that storytelling offered children a safe distance from their difficulties, facilitating emotional exploration through symbolic means. These studies highlight the capacity of narrative and storymaking to function as mediators between personal experience and collective recognition.

At the same time, scholars have questioned whether the effectiveness of arts-based practices can be sustained over time and across diverse cultural settings. Reason and Heinemeyer (2016) noted that participatory storytelling demands sensitivity to group dynamics, as well as careful facilitation to prevent superficial engagement. This raises critical questions for projects like Story Makers, where the combination of different art forms—dance, puppetry, writing—may amplify opportunities for expression but also complicate facilitation. Therefore, while the benefits of storymaking are well documented, there remains a need for systematic evaluations that examine how and why these practices succeed in specific contexts.

This study addresses that gap by combining quantitative and qualitative data across four countries, enabling a nuanced view of how storymaking supports resilience and inclusion. By foregrounding dance and movement, it also contributes to literature that increasingly recognizes embodiment as a central dimension of learning and identity construction (Heinemeyer, 2018). The following sections detail the design of the project, present its results, and situate them within ongoing debates in arts education and community practice. In contemporary contexts where opportunities for dialogue and face-to-face interaction are limited, storymaking offers young people inclusive, creative, and non-threatening avenues for expression. By combining verbal and non-verbal modalities—including movement and dance—it enables participants to negotiate identity, voice emotions, and build resilience (Abkhezr et al., 2018; Singleton et al., 2019). The use of metaphors, re-telling, and embodied expression supports psychological safety and allows participants to explore difficult experiences from a creative distance (Reason & Heinemeyer, 2016; Sunderland, 2000).

In addition, several scholars have highlighted the therapeutic dimensions of storymaking. Dent-Brown and Wang (2006) developed the 6-Part Story Method to help individuals process complex experiences, while Dwivedi (1997) edited early collections on the therapeutic use

of story. These works provide a historical grounding for the approach taken in this project, linking narrative processes with psychological healing. Clauss-Ehlers (2020) emphasised resilience and identity formation in youth, while Eglinton et al. (2017) showed how digital storytelling can engage Indigenous youth in arts-inspired inquiry. Together, these studies support the idea that storymaking is more than creative practice—it is a psychosocial tool for wellbeing and empowerment.

At the policy level, both the European Union (2020) and the United Nations (2020) have stressed the importance of youth participation and creativity in achieving broader social goals, including the Sustainable Development Agenda. The Story Makers project aligns directly with these agendas by equipping young people with expressive resources that reinforce inclusion, participation, and resilience. Examples of similar approaches can be seen in the work of Freeman et al. (2020) with Indigenous communities in Canada and Wexler et al. (2012) in Alaska, both of which illustrate how digital storytelling can preserve culture, strengthen intergenerational bonds, and promote positive development.

Kester (2004, 2006) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how participatory arts foster dialogue and community, while Lambert (2010) has pioneered practical methods in digital storytelling that inspired parts of the Story Makers curriculum. These contributions, along with more recent critical voices (Spiegel et al., 2020; Wales, 2012), show that storymaking must be understood both as a tool of inclusion and as a site of negotiation where issues of power and representation are always present. This potential is particularly relevant for socially excluded youth, who may face discrimination and barriers linked to ethnicity, gender, disability, language, or economic hardship (Council of Europe, 2020). Storymaking fosters inclusion and empowerment by valuing personal voices, strengthening agency, and promoting dialogue (Kester, 2004, 2006). Dance and movement provide embodied opportunities for self-expression and community connection, making them powerful tools within storymaking practices.

Methodology

1. Project presentation and aims

The Story Makers: Many Voices, Many Lives project (2020–2022) was funded by Erasmus+ and implemented in the UK, Poland, Portugal, and Cyprus. It sought to promote social inclusion, creativity, and resilience among socially marginalized youth through participatory storymaking. Its aims were:

- to train youth workers in arts-based methods (puppetry, movement, writing, digital storytelling).
- to deliver inclusive storymaking sessions with young people.
- to evaluate the pedagogical and social impact of these practices.

2. Research aims and participants

The research aimed to assess the impact of storymaking on youth participants' socio-emotional competences (motivation, creativity, confidence, self-esteem, group relationships)

and to examine youth workers' professional development in applying arts-based pedagogies.

- Youth participants: 651 socially excluded young people across four countries.
- Youth workers: 50 trained facilitators from diverse professional backgrounds.

The methodology was further informed by the Storymaking Manual for Youth Workers (Schejbal, Kajmowicz-Sopicka, & Lebre, 2022), which synthesised theoretical perspectives and practical exercises tested across the partner countries. The manual emphasised flexibility, allowing facilitators to adapt puppetry, dance, and digital tools to specific local contexts. Such adaptability was essential for reaching youth from migrant backgrounds, youth with disabilities, and those facing socioeconomic barriers. The manual's emphasis on co-creation and reflective practice also ensured that youth voices were central throughout the project design and evaluation processes.

3. Research methodology: Qualitative and quantitative procedures

A mixed-methods approach was applied:

- Quantitative: pre- and post-intervention questionnaires using 5-point Likert scales, completed by youth workers and youth participants. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to compare pre- and post-scores.
- Qualitative: open-ended feedback from youth workers regarding session delivery, challenges, and observed impact on young people.

4. Scope of this paper

This paper presents the quantitative findings from youth workers' and youth participants' evaluations, complemented by selected qualitative feedback to illustrate experiences. The focus is on the outcomes of the six-week storymaking sessions rather than the training process of youth workers.

Results

The evaluation revealed consistent and significant improvements across all measured dimensions, both from the perspective of youth workers and from the self-reports of young participants.

Table 1

Youth workers' perceptions of young people before and after storymaking sessions (N = 54)

Variable	Mean (Pre)	Mean (Post)	Δ Mean	p-value
Enthusiasm for future	3.6	4.2	+0.6	< .001
Imagination & creativity	3.4	4.4	+1.0	< .001
Active engagement	3.6	4.5	+0.9	< .001
Motivation	3.7	4.4	+0.7	< .001
Self-esteem	3.5	4.2	+0.7	< .001
Confidence	3.4	4.3	+0.9	< .001
Relationship with the group	3.6	4.6	+1.0	< .001

Note. Variables measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests applied.

Youth workers (Table 1) observed clear progress among the young people they worked with. The largest improvements were reported in imagination and creativity (+1.0), relationship with the group (+1.0), and active engagement (+0.9). These findings suggest that storymaking not only stimulated individual creativity but also enhanced group dynamics and social bonds. Increases in confidence (+0.9) and self-esteem (+0.7) further indicate that the process had a strong impact on participants' sense of self and agency.

Table 2

Youth participants' self-reported outcomes before and after storymaking sessions (N = 477)

Variable	Mean (Pre)	Mean (Post)	Δ Mean	p-value
Enthusiasm for future	3.4	4.2	+0.8	< .001
Imagination & creativity	3.3	4.2	+0.9	< .001
Active engagement	3.3	4.4	+1.1	< .001
Motivation	3.3	4.3	+1.0	< .001
Self-esteem	3.2	4.2	+1.0	< .001
Confidence	3.2	4.2	+1.0	< .001
Relationship with the group	3.3	4.4	+1.1	< .001

Note. Variables measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests applied.

Youth participants (Table 2) largely confirmed these observations. They reported significant gains in active engagement (+1.1) and relationship with the group (+1.1), indicating that the sessions created motivating and socially supportive environments. Improvements in motivation (+1.0), self-esteem (+1.0), and confidence (+1.0) highlight the role of participatory arts in building resilience and a positive outlook. While all areas showed significant growth, the most striking outcomes were the strengthening of group cohesion and the fostering of creativity.

Overall, these results confirm that participatory storymaking, integrating verbal and non-verbal modalities such as puppetry, writing, and dance, can successfully promote both individual and collective dimensions of resilience. Beyond measurable outcomes, qualitative feedback from youth workers underscored the high levels of enthusiasm and openness observed during the sessions, as well as the adaptability of the Storymaking Manual to diverse cultural and social contexts.

Discussion and conclusion

Beyond the immediate findings, these results should be critically situated within existing research. Previous studies of arts-based interventions have consistently found improvements in creativity, confidence, and group cohesion (Abkhezr et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2020). Our results corroborate these patterns, but they also highlight the especially strong role of group relationships and active engagement. This suggests that storymaking may be particularly effective in fostering collective, rather than only individual, outcomes. The emphasis on community resonates with Kester's (2004, 2006) work on dialogical aesthetics, where the value of art lies not in individual products but in shared processes of meaning-making.

Nevertheless, some scholars have cautioned against romanticizing participatory arts. Spiegel et al. (2020) warned that storytelling in contested social contexts can reproduce power imbalances, particularly if narratives are appropriated or instrumentalized. While the Story Makers project sought to mitigate this through facilitator training and local adaptation, further research is needed to examine how issues of representation and agency unfold in practice. Similarly, Clauss-Ehlers (2020) argued that resilience cannot be understood as a uniform outcome but is shaped by cultural, social, and personal factors. This underscores the importance of contextual sensitivity when designing storymaking programs.

The interdisciplinary integration of dance is another point for reflection. Dance has long been recognised as an embodied form of communication, offering non-verbal ways of expressing emotion and negotiating identity (Reason & Heinemeyer, 2016). In our project, movement-based activities appeared to lower barriers to participation, particularly for young people with limited verbal skills or language barriers. This aligns with Heinemeyer's (2018) argument that participatory storytelling and the arts must embrace indeterminacy and embodied improvisation as sources of creativity. This implies that dance is not merely an addition but a central mode of meaning-making that strengthens resilience through physical engagement with self and others.

Methodologically, the study's mixed-methods design allowed for a more comprehensive picture of impact. However, limitations must be acknowledged. First, while the sample size was substantial (N = 651 youth), the duration of interventions was relatively short (six weeks), which restricts claims about long-term sustainability. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as participants may overstate improvements due to social desirability. Third, differences between national contexts were not fully explored; more fine-grained, comparative analysis would enrich understanding of how culture mediates outcomes. Addressing these issues requires longitudinal studies, triangulated data sources, and participatory evaluation approaches that include youth voices in the design of assessment tools.

Despite these limitations, the implications for practice are significant. For educators, the findings suggest that storymaking can be integrated into curricula to foster socio-emotional learning alongside academic goals. For community practitioners, the results provide evidence that creative processes can generate social bonds and resilience in marginalized groups. For policymakers, the project illustrates the value of supporting interdisciplinary, cross-sector collaborations that address youth exclusion through culture and the arts. Future research

should investigate not only whether storymaking is effective but also how different artistic modalities—dance, puppetry, writing—contribute uniquely to resilience and inclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Story Makers: Many Voices, Many Lives project demonstrates the transformative potential of participatory storymaking. By bridging individual expression with collective dialogue, and by integrating verbal and embodied practices, it offers a robust model for engaging youth across diverse contexts. The critical reflections presented here highlight both the promise and the complexity of such work, highlighting the need for continued evaluation, theoretical refinement, and adaptation to local realities.

These findings resonate with a broad body of literature. For example, Parfitt (2014, 2019) has shown how storytelling acts as a catalyst for conversation and learning, which echoes the observed improvements in group cohesion. Lugmayr et al. (2017) proposed the concept of ‘serious storytelling’ as a framework for applying narrative methods beyond entertainment, which supports the structured, outcome-oriented approach of Story Makers. Rakt (2022) further argues that storytelling has become an indispensable tool in communication and education, reinforcing the idea that its deliberate use with youth can have powerful effects. Narrative has also been discussed in psychology as a mechanism for assimilation of problematic experiences (Stiles et al., 1999). Sunderland (2000) extended this argument by demonstrating how storytelling can support children therapeutically. These insights provide a lens to interpret the self-reported increases in confidence and self-esteem in our participants. At the same time, Gersie (1990, 1992, 2002) advanced the idea of ‘storymaking’ as an educational and ecological practice, highlighting how stories can guide individuals through social and environmental change. The current project reflects this tradition by positioning storymaking as both pedagogical and transformative.

Some challenges remain. McCullough et al. (2020) warned that youth storytelling may also involve risks, particularly when stories expose vulnerabilities or are circulated beyond their intended audience. Moola et al. (2020) similarly highlighted the delicate balance required when children share stories of illness or disability through visual media. These perspectives remind us that while storymaking has great potential, ethical considerations around consent, safeguarding, and representation are paramount. Spiegel et al. (2020) also underlined that in contested contexts, stories can be co-opted for political purposes. For this reason, youth workers must be trained not only in creative facilitation but also in critical reflection and ethical safeguarding practices.

The implications of these results are significant. For practitioners, storymaking offers a flexible, interdisciplinary tool to foster socio-emotional competences while simultaneously supporting community building. For educators, integrating storytelling into curricula can strengthen creativity and resilience alongside formal learning outcomes. For policymakers, the study offers evidence that investment in participatory arts can contribute to youth inclusion and wellbeing in accordance with European and global agendas. Future research should further examine long-term outcomes, cross-cultural differences, and the specific contribution of embodied practices such as dance. Expanding the timescale of interventions and employing longitudinal designs would also provide stronger evidence of sustainability. This study therefore validates the potential of storymaking as a youth engagement strategy but also points to new directions for interdisciplinary research and practice that warrant sustained scholarly and policy attention.

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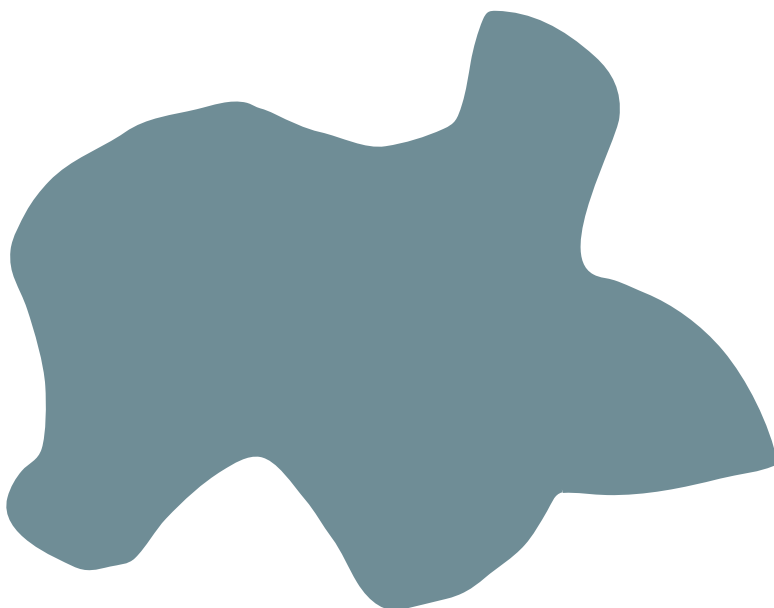
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Enacting (Re)Actions: Affect theory and embodied resonance in improvisational contemporary dance and compositional pedagogy

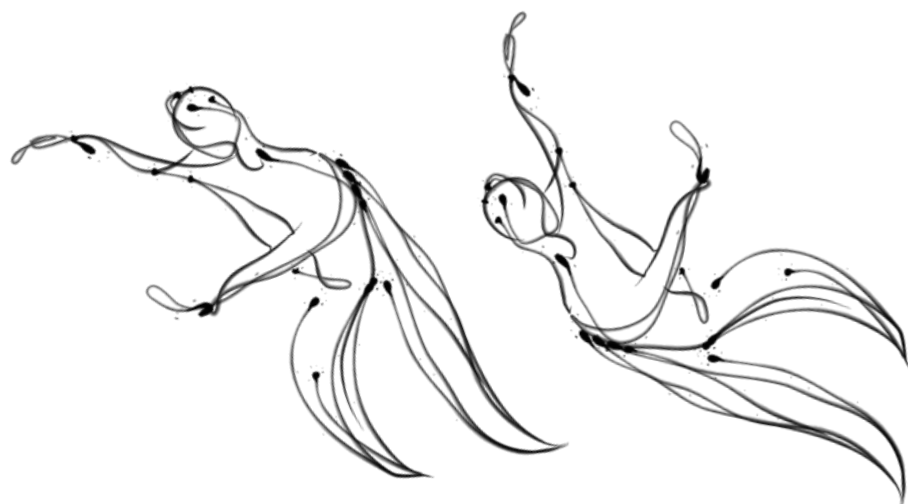
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Abstract

The NSW Dance syllabus limits choreographic potential by emphasizing conventional compositional structures while neglecting improvisation as a key choreographic tool. Current frameworks for learning and assessment exclude contemporary choreographic practices, relying on outdated literature over 20 years old. This restricts the evolution of dance education, despite the field's continuous transformation. *Enacting (Re)Actions: Affect Theory and Embodied Resonance in Improvisational Contemporary Dance and Compositional Pedagogy* explores improvisational practice through affect theory, examining concepts such as mind-body consciousness, embodiment, and corporeal resonance. Improvisation fosters creativity by engaging the mind and body in real-time responsiveness, demonstrating its value in choreographic development. Affect theory highlights improvisation's role in enhancing creativity and choreographic potential. A deeper theoretical understanding of improvisation supports its integration into dance education, emphasizing embodied resonance and consciousness as creative tools. This thesis advocates for reforming dance curriculum by incorporating improvisational pedagogy, ensuring alignment with contemporary choreographic practices locally and beyond.

Keywords: improvisation, compositional pedagogy, creative practice, affect theory



Introduction

Dance improvisation is a compositional practice that translates immediate experience into movement material (Foster, 2003; Midgelow, 2019; Sheets-Johnstone, 1981). The practice can elucidate an instantaneous, immediate and ephemeral response, facilitating the dancer to enact their semantic and somatic potential through corporeal exploration – *dancing*. Improvisation realises the body's thinking, converging corporeality and cognition in the present to pursue an on-coming action. The unification of mind and body facilitates the immediate response, which relies on a kinaesthetic awareness, corporeal knowledge and embodied consciousness. Improvisation is a *practice* achieved through its *process*, which has been built into the contemporary dance field as a valuable skill for movement generation and compositional pedagogy. This paper is a revised excerpt from a higher degree research project completed in 2022, *Enacting (Re)Actions: Affect Theory and Embodied Resonance in Improvisational Contemporary Dance and Compositional Pedagogy*. As an artist-theorist and educator in NSW, I focus here on the theoretical framework behind improvisational practice and share excerpts from the broader research to articulate the role of affect in defining improvisational acts.

One of the research aims was to analyse improvisation to discover if affect theory (Masumi, 1995) is an adequate and appropriate discursive model for understanding improvisational acts; to discover whether embodied resonance, consciousness and modes of habituation as discussed in affect theory (Masumi, 1995) are useful in explaining aspects of improvisational practice. I interpret Affect as the initial somatic and semantic discovery experienced from an action. It generates a (re)action instantaneously and autonomously, evoking cognitive, sensory, and emotive responses to be withheld in affect before a response occurs. Affect arises after an action has made an impact on the individual; prior to recognition and registration, and unfolds amid the state of in-between, or as philosopher, Brian Masumi refers to it the 'missing half second' (1995, p.89). For improvised dancing, affect pivots my understanding of the movement that can be generated through bodily spontaneity. Additionally, the full research paper utilises my experience as an artist-theorist engaging with improvisational practices alongside the theoretical approaches of a variety of dance scholars to substantiate my understanding of improvisational theory. With this framework, I was able to delineate my observations as an educator in the field, with discussion of empirical evidence, observations, literature reviews and comparisons of compositional methods.

A central aim of the research was to explore ways of enhancing improvisation in educational contexts, in particular, secondary schools. I have had extensive experience with the Higher School Certificate (HSC) Dance syllabus, both as a high school and university student and also as an educator teaching in high school, tertiary and pre-professional contexts. In my investigation of improvisation, I have come to recognise that some curricula, particularly within my context of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, omit the frameworks explored within this practice. The research proposed that a greater understanding of the key concepts underpinning improvisation, along with an acknowledgement of the historical and contemporary applications improvisation holds within compositional practices for dance, may encourage curricular frameworks to consider adopting improvisation to enhance creative methods for school learners.

By analysing theoretical concepts in the field, including mind-body consciousness, embodiment, corporeal resonance and modes of instantaneous reception, the research showed that affect theory is valuable for analysing the core of improvisation. This finding supports observations on the creative value and potential of choreographic development through developing improvisational skills. The pairing of mind and body in continuous engagement and responsivity from actions to reactions that improvisation enables results in creativity in dance choreography. This approach is supported by key theoretical evidence highlighting improvisation as a method that fosters greater creative potential in choreographic outcomes and can be applied to compositional pedagogy.

With the support of affect theory, the paper deciphered and articulated the modes of consciousness through which improvisation is elicited. However, this excerpt overviews the research aims that were addressed, and describes the approach to compositional pedagogy, articulating affect to define improvisational dancing. The receptivity of the body and mind in certain encounters and experiences informs scholarship in cognitive science and phenomenological philosophy. These frameworks can be effectively applied to improvisation, and both aim to decipher how one experiences, encodes and reacts in and through movement in a given encounter. Cognitive theory addresses the processing of the mind as it catches up to the experience of an encounter. Like affect theory, phenomenology supports the mind and body as equally active and perceptive when it comes to understanding experiences, and the philosophy places significance on the autonomic corporeal subjectivity of one's response. However, as these theories cannot be addressed in depth in this paper, I only note such approaches. This philosophical approach draws me to experiences that initiate improvisational acts, and how they enhance creativity; how in-between thoughts, logic and perceptions impact the next motion which arises, and through this, how improvisation has the potential for creative exploration. I recognise the value this process holds for creative composition practices. Utilising affect to define improvisational acts will thus facilitate my search for appropriate creative resources to encourage improvisational tasking that develops somatic and semantic creativity. This will encourage a deeper understanding of a model of improvisation that would be communicable to high school students and educators. The research drew on aesthetics and theory as a rigorous research process to arrive at a new model of dance compositional pedagogy. This paper argues that the proposed model could inform practices in the dance education curriculum to enhance its research base and relevance.

Overview of current curricular approaches to compositional practice

In NSW secondary schools, improvisation is not a specific focus or learning outcome within the Dance curriculum despite its integral function in compositional work in dance. Rather, the curriculum encourages students to produce compositional material through their execution of movements manipulated to produce *motifs* as evidence of choreographic resourcefulness. A motif is a repeated action that presents as a movement symbol and directly supports the concept or theme of the dance composition. In the context of the NSW HSC, it is applied throughout the entirety of the dance to reflect and communicate the work's meaning. Dance education scholars Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin state that a motif is 'a single movement or a short movement phrase (usually shorter than a theme) that is used as a source or a spark for development into an integrated gestalt' (1982, p.102). Similarly,

the HSC syllabus defines motifs as ‘the earliest stage of development of the theme or composition; a movement starting point’ (Board of Studies, 2009, p.48). It is clear that the HSC definition appropriates that of Blom and Chaplin, as both identify the motif as key to developing choreography, ‘the essence for the complete piece’ (1982, p.102). Engagement with motifs is encouraged in schools and is set in the resources and activities that prompt students to generate movement only from a motif. This is the choreographic process that achieves compositional merit in the HSC.

This method of compositional practice employed in the curriculum may be useful in teaching young choreographers to develop movement material that is identifiable to examiners who mark the HSC. It also allows for a checklist approach to creative practice, enabling an identifiable scaffold for dancers completing HSC Dance composition to be moderated across the state. The use of motifs is suitable for assessment models and for developing some compositional material in educational settings. However, the emphasis on this particular method has little relevance to how contemporary choreographers work in the arts in the twenty-first century, both nationally and globally. As an artist-theorist and educator, I also suggest that this compositional method relies on outdated source material and could be remodelled in curricula to incorporate the valuable skill sets offered by improvisation. The focus on motif development as the prominent movement generation skill is a missed opportunity to bridge compositional devices in learning environments to those of recognised industry skill. Moreover, motif-driven choreography also enforces the production of overly literal movement, as the motif is generally an actioned symbol of the intention. It would be generally agreed that this model is not the sole method to achieve an understanding of the curriculum objectives of abstraction and personalisation. Improvisation can be an efficient method to extricate personalisation and abstraction from the dancer, who can easily fall into imitative and prescriptive movement vocabularies. This seems to be an ongoing pattern that I have observed and as such can impact the culture of dance and the arts significantly.

This leads to the following question: How does NSW’s curriculum reflect the knowledge and values in dance composition as they occur in the profession? The curriculum’s focus is on providing learners with relevant knowledge that is applicable to post-school contexts. However, the current compositional model in Dance Studies lacks applicability in preparing students for higher education, training and fieldwork. The discourse stemming from the NSW curriculum’s requirements, alongside the creative outputs achieved within the current curricular expectations, are hindering the choreographic development of students that would be relevant for workplace roles in choreography, dance, teaching or the arts. By not preparing students with the most applicable and valued industry skills or not broadening their abilities as dancers somatically because of a lack of facilitation of bodily awareness, a gap in industry knowledge and creative productivity is created. I reinforce the current focus on motif manipulation as choreography to be centred around pre-determined or known movement vocabulary. Thus, the current model risks perpetuating repetitive and potentially non-personalised choreography from school to industry. Owing to its lack of rigour in creative exploration, the prescriptive and pre-determined nature of creating movement in this way poses limitations on movement creativity, personalisation, abstraction and expression which can all be explored through improvisation.

Whilst the research advocates for *practice* as opposed to *prescription*, this paper focuses on affect as a method to discover how improvisation achieves an exploration of movement that embodies the creative, personal, expressive and abstract. Improvisation is *affective* because

the individual experiences actions and reactions as creative material. This leads to ample opportunities for the choreographer to develop movement via an exploration of embodied consciousness and resonance that is solely experienced by the individual. I identify this as *creative potential*. The improvisational state allows the dancer to take creative ownership of these actions as a personalised movement vocabulary; enacting their experience through dancing develops their personal choreographic style.

Personalisation in composition can refer to the individual's authenticity in choreography. I refer to authenticity in dance composition as the individualised attributes or characteristics incorporated in the choreographer's work. These features are personalised and may include detectable influences from other choreographic methods or styles. However, like any other creative discipline, the choreographer strives to produce an original trademark that is reflected in their choreography. Authenticity can also be the true reflection, creation and response to stimuli when engaging conceptually. This may occur when the choreographer provides attention to the concept they are exploring and/or practice without being influenced by other individuals' projections of that idea, copying or being 'artificially staged' (Le Roy, 2007, as cited in Burrows, 2010). Further, there are varying benefits that improvisation proposes as an approach to creativity and as a method to critical and complex cognitive and evaluative abilities 'which go beyond a mere instructional level' (Biasutti, 2013, p. 138). Improvisation exercises a higher somatic awareness and deeper critical cognitive application to movement and practice as additional learning skills. I agree with artist-theorist and improviser Kent De Spain when he says, 'improvisation is a form of research, a way of peering into the complex system that is a human being. It is, in a sense, another way of "thinking" but one that produces ideas impossible to conceive in stillness' (De Spain cited in Cooper Albright & Gere, 2003). I recognise the potential improvisation holds for compositional output that perpetuates highly original products, devoid of pre-meditative, imitative, repetitive and non-original responses to movement (re)actions and creative stimuli. This thesis promotes improvisation as a highly necessary compositional skill to prepare dancers for higher education, training and the industry.

In relation to compositional methods and improvisational practice, there are additional questions around educators not being equipped with their own understanding of improvisational craft. To my knowledge, teachers are aiming to work strictly towards syllabus requirements to successfully guide their students through the HSC, rather than thinking about the suitability of this practice for an industry career post school. High school teachers also require additional support in teaching improvisation as the syllabus provides little detail of activities that can encourage this practice to create choreography. This research is a contribution not only to a potential renovation of pedagogical frameworks but suggests improvisational tasks and resources that can aid teachers and learners through translatable improvisation practices that adhere to what improvisation can actually achieve.

The broader research project of *Enacting (Re)Actions: Affect Theory and Embodied Resonance in Improvisational Contemporary Dance and Compositional Pedagogy* delved into the choreographic foundations and purpose of improvisational practices, reviewing improvisation throughout history and aligns its values to its 21st century application (Foster, 2003; Midgelow, 2019). In Europe and America, both the educational and professional dance domains have remained relatively contingent on one another. UK-based dance scholar Jo Butterworth explains that throughout American and European history, there has been little conflict between the professional and educational realms due to their interdependence,

particularly in the university sector (2009, p.154). Thus, the values in both sectors and the 'aesthetic functions' are seen as highly compatible. In the United States of America, the creative methods that were employed by dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis and Martha Graham, who 'performed in the university sector with such innovative educators' as Margaret H'Doubler, saw the alignment of education and practice as an inseparable influence (Butterworth, 2009, p.155). Butterworth (2009) goes on to state that unlike the United States and Europe, the higher education system in Britain from 1980 'still displays a vision of the continuing dichotomy between apprenticeship and knowledge' (p, 155). Butterworth explains the long-standing separation between vocational/professional and the educational sector in the United Kingdom. The Dance Educators Professional Association of NSW notes that the NSW Dance curriculum was conceived from discussions that 'were not dissimilar to those occurring in Great Britain between the late 1940s and the early 1970s as described by Jacqueline Smith-Autard' (Dance Educators Professional Association of NSW [DEPA, NSW], n.d.). Thus, a consideration of the educational pillars and what they uphold as best practice requires consideration. Educational frameworks require revision to consider the applicability of the skills learned in the syllabus to that of the industry which evolves over time alongside the practice itself.

Refreshing the pedagogical approach to choreography may also provide a bridge between secondary and higher educational expectations that exist within universities, and pre-professional and professional dance contexts. Drawing on manuals that are not outdated and more suitable to contemporary compositional practice and what it achieves, this research suggests a translatable approach to composition. Contemporary compositional manuals created in the twenty-first century by dance scholars and artists such as Jonathan Burrows, Melinda Buckwalter and William Forsythe place improvisation at the source of creative development. Thus, I suggest suitable resources with a view to facilitating composition in NSW education and realign the benefit of this alternative method as a bridge from school to post-school environments. I assert that a theoretical understanding of improvisational practice through affect theory, and an understanding of how to utilise the related concepts of *embodied resonance* and *consciousness* in practice, will support the creative potential of improvisation in dance curriculum.

Defining improvisational acts

Improvisation can be understood as an instantaneous mind-body unification, executing embodied cognition through (re)actions. The research revealed Affect as a means to articulate improvisation's ability to avoid *pre-determination* in movement generation, thus reinforcing the creative *potential* of improvisation for choreographic products. The evidence of improvisation as I define it through affect directed my explanations of creativity and personalisation and articulated what improvisation offers to compositional outcomes; the value of embodied resonance in improvisational practices; and my approach to resituate educational resources that align more suitably with this practice. The full scale of this research delved into the historical underpinnings of improvisational method throughout post-modern history and its application and value in the twenty-first century. The utilisation of improvisation in dance-making and performance was 'reclaiming the body from traditional, dualistic ways of thinking' by moving this somatic responsivity to the centre of the process (Burt, 2006, p. 16). The postmodern approach to creating dance moved away from the notion that the mind and body are separate, reaching instead towards reclaiming embodied agency.

Improvisation had evolved a new language for dance that insisted on the amalgamation of mind and body. In contemporary dance, improvisation remains a valued practice for choreographing in a global context, with world-renowned companies employing improvisation in performances, in classwork and training at both pre-professional and professional levels. The use of improvisation as a central creative skill and task in generating movement has insisted on its recognition as a practice within the dance industry. Therefore, it is problematic that the education framework attends so little to this integral creative skill.

A shift in current educational approaches would result in (a) improved compositional products, (b) well-equipped students and teachers with access to accurate industry knowledge and resources, and (c) a bridge between secondary schooling and tertiary, pre-professional and professional settings. Further, a change in compositional approaches may improve pedagogical standards in Dance Studies and compositional practice, and aid in generating more interest in the discipline in NSW. This may lead to further understanding and new perspectives on the form, and increased development of relevant platforms to study, create, present and critique the art form. This research promotes a deeper inquiry of and further critical analysis to decipher improvisational dancing through both theoretical and physical modes and instigates my ambition for a comparative analysis of pedagogical applications to creative practice on a national and/or global scale that I wish to pursue in further research.

Affect theory applied to improvisation: Investigating semantic and somatic discovery in movement

Brian Massumi's and Gilles Deleuze's theories reinforce that affect manifests in each autonomic action that is enacted consciously or subconsciously in everyday circumstances (1995). Affect is an abstract philosophical construct that addresses the automatic sensations evident during and following an action taking place. It draws attention to the *individualised response* that is not yet perceivable due to the uncontrollable, automatic and synaesthetic affectation that occurs instantaneously. As affect is presented in quotidian encounters, it reinforces the intensity found within the initial reactions or responses that are obtained both cognitively and somatically. Therefore, the synaesthetic nature of affect accounts for the fact that perceptions are transmissible from one sense to another. Affect's transmissibility evokes a reaction from the mind and body that causes the initial affectation to result in an effect. In this paper I intend to draw on affect as a phenomenon or tool that can be attended to and mobilised to decipher improvisational dancing.

According to Massumi, affect impacts the individual's cognitive and kinaesthetic state via a sudden impingement that is un-actualised, and yet recognisable to perception. The momentary suspension of the reaction is elusive. Massumi refers to this as the "suspension in time" which can be seen as a state of in-betweenness. He employs the concept of "intensity" to describe what is held within this time lapse as an inevitable component of experience and sensation (Massumi, 1995, p.92). Massumi explains intensity to be associated with nonlinear processes such as resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the "linear progress of the narrative present from past to future ... it is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption" (1995, p.86). Whilst the suspension in time requires no conscious effort to respond, Massumi explains:

[Intensity] is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not a kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) towards practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims... (Massumi, 1995, p.86).

Massumi elaborates on the physicalised sensations withheld in the realm of intensity, explaining them to be embodied as “purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin” (1995, p.8). This statement posits the mind and body as equally present in an encounter and in the need to formulate responses and centralises the body as the site of initial reception when encountering an action. Massumi discusses the openness of the body when engaging with an experience and forming perceptive knowledge by explaining that “stimulation turns inward” and “is folded into the body” (1995, p. 89). He continues: “except there is no inside for it to be in, because the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived” (1995, p. 89). The mind and body are equal agents to responsivity in the action–reaction circuit, as opposed to the individual being guided by the Cartesian concept of the mind as the initial point of perception to the body’s response.

This notion supports my proposition that improvisation can serve as a useful model to articulate the complex nature of affect and vice versa. The evident lapse sustaining one’s present knowledge in the action to reaction cycle is explained thoroughly in Massumi’s *suspension in time* and is also evident in his account of the *missing half second*. The un-actualised and yet-to-be-recognisable impingement presents an elusive gap in-between the moment of the encounter and response, the moment after the impinging action and before the instance in which the sensory load is processed. This is a disruption to linear time where there is an “extension as actualisation” and the outcome or recognition of what has taken place is not yet determined (Massumi, 1995, p.96). The receptive feedback that allows the individual to understand what has taken place arises after affect, and in between these two moments exists “the suspension of time”. Massumi states that the “missing half second is not empty or missed”; rather it is “overfull, in excess of the actually performed action” and active in processing the potential prescribed meaning or reaction (1995, p.90).

Affective creativity: Composing reactions from the body-mind

As a concept that addresses both corporeal and cognitive states, affect helps explain how the encounter results in experience, response and enactment. The fluid process of reacting as a result of a continuum of encounters, understood through the affective lens, provides a model for how improvisational acts unfold. An encounter that instigates the action to reaction chain echoes resonances that may be reconstituted as creative resourcefulness. Therefore, *creativity* is utilising the affects experienced within any given moment for measure and momentum in improvisational acts. Improvisation incorporates the resonances of affect upon the body-mind as stimuli into responses that serve personalisation as the encounters can only exist to the individual enacting them. For example, I may fall to the ground, but to do so would require one leg to instigate the action. As a response to the descent, my other available limbs, such as my arms and my other leg, may negotiate my weight shifting to the floor. Once I land, I might find myself in a comfortable position that prompts me to sink into the shape and linger for a moment. I may have landed in an appropriate shape or balance that facilitates another kind of exploration on the floor in response to this new-found landing or weight point. However, the landing point may be unstable or awkward, which may also

facilitate exploration, or I may rebound via a quick manoeuvre to seek softness or comfort for my body. Regardless of the outcome, there is a constant reliance on my reactions to instigate my body's directional changes and the quality they exude. In reference to improvisation, De Spain states that:

A portion of this skill is situated in the limbic system – the subconscious, pre-conscious animal brain – much of it falls within the realm of consciousness (broadly defined). How do we become aware of the possibilities there, and thereby open up the range of choices we can make? (De Spain, 2014, pp. 10-11).

By localising one's perceptions, encounters and the body-mind's autonomic reaction to such, a series of encounters facilitates a range of immediately possible scenarios that form a loop by also presenting as continual stimuli. Subsequently, this approach engages one's personal reactions as creative output that utilises the effects of continual somatic discovery and transfers it to improvisational development. Thus, the affective dimension of improvisation leads to movement innovation.

The theoretical perspectives I have connected to improvisational acts also enhance the contextual and personal attributes of an individual's understanding of how they exist in the world. Within these theoretical approaches, within any encounter, there is some degree of consideration of the personal conditions that influence the dancer as they experience themselves and their surrounds. Consequently, improvisation lends itself to creative exploration that relies on the automated reactions held in the experience of the dancer. The contextual, habitual or genealogical inscriptions of the dancer may be lost or departed from as much as they are found and utilised within the improvisation, yet this is all to be realised in the moment in which it occurs. It is this continual, changeable, kinaesthetic exchange that drives improvisation, transforming one's reactions into choreographic material. The dancer can utilise the plurality of stimuli by localising their perceptions and kinaesthetic sensibility to rely on their internal and external forces as a continual source for physical exploration. Hence, the act of improvising is entirely personal and can develop into more sophisticated levels of responsivity when practiced and approached skilfully. In conclusion, affect theory describes an active system within improvisation. It has also been utilised to explain how improvisational experiences achieve a personalised result, as it is through this theoretical approach that we can acknowledge a dancer's individual, immediate reactions and responses as contributing to their immediate and highly creative compositional choices.

The processes elicited from improvisational practices align with curriculum goals and reinforce that improvisation achieves many of the compositional aims set out in the HSC curriculum that currently have an ineffective infrastructure to support. The notion of *personalisation* and the pursuit of creating *new movement material* that reflects a highly personalised product is murky territory in HSC marking. This is due to the subjectivity of dance itself and the criteria for personalisation relying so heavily on motif development. How can exhausting the manipulations of a primary shape (motif) constitute personalisation in choreography? Students should be provided with appropriate tools to develop personalisation, and improvisation clearly achieves this. By emphasising improvisation in curricular frameworks with a more accurate depiction of what the practice achieves, the potential that improvisation holds for educational benefit is surmountable when considering its alignment to professional dance apprenticeship. By employing a greater focus on improvisational processes and practices that are adapted from professional choreographers'

improvisation reinforces a greater creative *potential* for choreographic products and consequently has the capacity to improve pedagogical standards and approaches to composition.

The somatic knowledge acquired within improvisational practices and offered in the choreographic improvisational methodologies suggested can transform the way a dancer learns and engages with their mind-body, their surrounds and dance practice, and may build creative, cerebral and somatic intelligence. I find myself imagining the kind of confidence students may possess should they have the skill set to move fluidly and capably through the uncertainty of improvisation and what this impact might present in other contexts outside of creative and dance-related environments. An emphasis on improvisation in choreographic pedagogy will better acclimatise learners to the fieldwork that awaits them in tertiary or pre-professional studies should they pursue dance post school. The inclusion of improvisational practices in curricular frameworks would also bring relevance to the HSC structure to better align schooling content to widely applicable industry skills. While the HSC Dance syllabus does develop appropriate skills for industry, within the composition area of study the methods enforced have little relevance to current contemporary choreographic practices. Unlike other disciplines in the curriculum that achieve an appropriate and contemporary link between school and industry content, the aim of the Dance syllabus appears only to master dance in the HSC context. The only exception to this is if a student were to continue tertiary study to teach this exact curriculum, which is exclusive to NSW. Post school, the terminology and creative practices are dismantled and reconstituted in the context of applicable and accurate contemporary compositional devices that are utilised in the context of the industry.

Conclusion

A comprehensive theoretical understanding of improvisational practice through affect theory supports an understanding of how to utilise embodied resonance and consciousness as creative potential. While the original research supported the development of new methods and approaches to choreographic pedagogy across local and international dance contexts, this paper examines improvisation through a framework underpinned by affect theory to define and position improvisation as inherently personal. The contemporary choreographic processes existing in Australia and beyond do not utilise the rigorous *motif-driven* movement that is comprised of multiple manipulations of primary shapes to create dance choreography. The curriculum should be endowing students with a valuable industry skill set to prepare them for industry and relevant compositional practices to assist them in their creative motivations.

It is my hope that by aligning affect with improvisational craft that explains the (re)actions that dancers make into personalised choreographic output, and the overview of improvisation's significance in contemporary dance practices, I can affirm the benefit of renovating pedagogical approaches to dance composition. Improvisation defies the rigorous structure of the syllabus, yet it provides students with choice-making skills in choreographic endeavours that are explorative and this is highly achievable by adopting the appropriate resources such as those I have suggested and utilised as examples in the full version of this research. There are many compositional resources that reflect improvisational method and practices and that evidence affective instances and tasking that I propose better accommodate both teachers and learners in developing improvisational skill sets that embrace creativity.

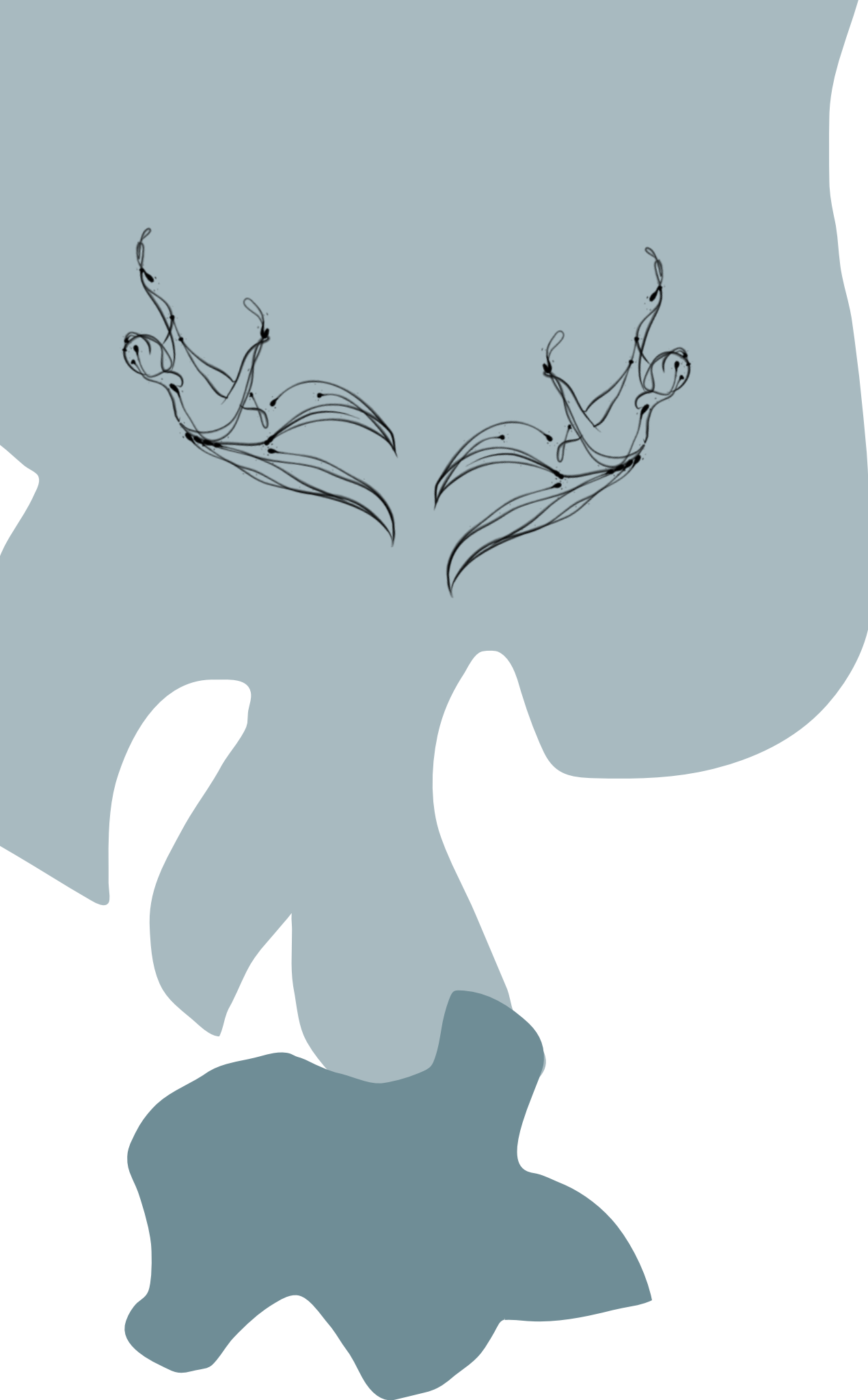
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Biography

Alexandria Panetta (Lexy) is a Sydney-based artist, choreographer and academic with a strong interest in dance performance, improvisation, writing and film. She is the Learning Associate and Teaching Artist for the Sydney Dance Company and is an Academic at the Australian College of Physical Education lecturing in Dance and Education. Her research contributes to the educational sphere in NSW and Australia and analyses the core of improvisation; supporting the creative value and potential of choreographic development through improvisational skills.

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Nurturing perception of dance students: embracing Imagery in somatic movement explorations

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a PhD research project conducted with students from the Escola Superior de Dança – Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, aiming to understand the processes experienced during a Somatic Movement Course (SMC). Specifically, it addresses the role of imagery in fostering awareness of the living and sensing body, and how imagery, when embodied by the dance student, can inform and participate in body perceptive processes. Data was collected throughout the process and included student journals, group discussions, and in-depth interviews. Students described heightened sensitivity and awareness, along with an expanded perception of self and environment. In some cases, these changes were experienced as particularly transformative. By exploring movement through metaphors and images, students were able to investigate and discover novel ways of moving, sensing, and feeling. The use of imagery fostered greater spontaneity in movement experiences and promoted a more creative and intuitive organization of movement.

Keywords: somatic movement, imagery, body awareness, plasticity of perception, dance students

Introduction

This paper presents some findings from a PhD research project conducted to understand the implications of somatic education in the dynamic construction of dance students' body images, particularly in relation to their experience, perception, and appreciation of their own movement. The research was carried out with 10 undergraduate students from Escola Superior de Dança (ESD) of the Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, with the purpose to observe, analyse, and understand the process experienced by the participants during a somatic movement course.

In the present study, we will specifically address the role of imagery in structuring the perceptual activity of undergraduate dance students within the context of a somatic education process. The research aimed to answer the following questions: How do movement explorations and improvisation guided by imagery foster awareness of the living and sensing body? How is imagery experienced and embodied by the dance student in somatic movement explorations? How does imagery inform and participate in the body's perceptual and creative processes?

Somatic education

Somatic education is a disciplinary field that privileges the somatosensory experience. It encompasses a variety of movement practices grounded in a holistic understanding of the human being, in contrast to dualistic and mechanistic conceptions of the body. These practices include systems of inquiry that approach the body from a first-person perspective, fostering processes that integrate body, mind, and emotions in relation to the environment.

Within the field of somatic education, there are numerous methods and techniques, each with distinct origins, influences, and specificities. Despite their differences, they share several core assumptions, principles, and concepts. These include a holistic view of the individual, which considers the systemic relationship between the various components of the organism, recognising its uniqueness and complexity; an emphasis on the mind–body relationship, typically in a bottom-up interaction in which consciousness emerges through the moving body; and the development of perception and sensory awareness as integral to the learning process. This occurs through self-experience and self-knowledge, enabling individuals to connect more deeply with themselves and to evolve more fully as human beings (Rato, 2022).

The fields of dance and somatic education are interconnected. Pioneers of modern dance, such as Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban, François Delsarte, and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, represent important influences in the early development of somatic methods, particularly through their emphasis on kinaesthetic awareness as a foundation for creative expression. Furthermore, several methods, including Bartenieff FundamentalsSM, and Body-Mind-Centering®, were created or developed by dancers drawing upon their embodied experience.

Conversely, the work of somatic education pioneers influenced postmodernist artistic movements in dance, including the Judson Dance Theater, contact improvisation, and contemporary dance. These intersections between dance and somatic practices have inspired both theoretical inquiry and practical studies, contributing to the emergence of new

languages and pedagogical approaches within dance education and artistic practices.

Somatic practices value the subjective experience conveyed through the body and its perceptive abilities, creative processes, and capacity for reflective practice (Dragon, 2015) and their relevance to dance education has been widely documented (Batson, 2009; Dragon, 2015; Enghauser, 2007). According to Batson (2009), somatic movement classes differ from conventional dance training in that students are not subjected to the ‘... space-time-effort constraints and psychological demands of a dance class’ (Batson, 2014, p. 2); rather, the emphasis lies in the experiential processes of the body. These approaches offer opportunities to explore and deepen awareness of subtle inner sensations and feelings. A focus on sensory awareness may enhance alignment, movement quality, expressiveness, and injury prevention of the dancers, ultimately contributing to improved dance performance. However, in this study, we want to highlight the benefits of somatic education in fostering processes of self-discovery and self-regulation, creating conditions for dance students to become active participants in their own learning (Enghauser, 2007; Green, 1999).

Imagery as an embodied practice

Mental imagery is closely linked to sensorimotor simulations (Gibbs, 2006). Even when imagery is experienced at rest, the sensory and motor systems involved in actual perception and action are activated. The capacity to generate and use mental images is not merely an abstract cognitive process; rather, it is shaped by the way we sense and engage with the world through our bodies. Olsen and McHose (1998) identify three distinct ways of engaging with the experience of imagery: to visualise refers to creating an image perceived as separate from oneself; imaging implies experiencing the image from within the body; and imagining involves fantasising about an action while feeling present within the experience.

There are various sensory modalities, such as kinaesthetic (including both tactile and proprioceptive components), auditory, and visual (Franklin, 2012), and the image may be experienced from either an internal or external perspective, depending on the viewpoint the dancer adopts in relation to their own body. In terms of mental representation, imagery can be direct—a representation of the movement itself—or indirect—a metaphorical image that represents a movement (Krasnow et al., 1997). Whether in motion or at rest, imagery supports the dancer’s experience. It promotes the interaction between thought, emotion, and the body, contributing to a functional unity of perception and action, and facilitating the body–mind connection (Batson & Sentler, 2017). Many dance teachers and somatic educators employ diverse approaches to imagery in order to facilitate skill acquisition, develop kinaesthetic sensitivity, enhance movement quality and expressivity, and stimulate creativity (Pavlik & Nordin-Bates, 2016). In this study, the focus is on the role of imagery in shaping dance students’ perception of their own movement. Imagery is a foundational concept in somatic education, as it facilitates access to inner sensations, supports self-awareness, and promotes neuromuscular re-patterning to modify movement habits (Enghauser, 2007).

Somatic education methods diverge in their use of imagery, but many of them include approaches based on the processes of creating and recreating images. Ideokinesis was developed entirely around the idea that visual kinaesthetic imagery can influence posture and movement. According to Batson (2009), this somatic method is based on the premise that visualising movement while at rest, enables the programming of efficient neuromuscular

patterns, replacing previously acquired ones and thereby preventing potential injuries, improving alignment, coordination, expression, and overall movement functionality. Many of the assumptions underpinning the Ideokinesis method have been supported by research in neuroscience and sports science—particularly findings showing that the brain areas activated during the visualisation of movement are the same as those involved in its physical execution (Batson, 2009; Hagendoorn, 2003).

Guided imagery is also utilised in the Feldenkrais Method®, helping students shift attention from habitual patterns to new possibilities, and allowing them to explore movement with less effort and more awareness in order to refine proprioception. Feldenkrais (1972) states that minimising effort and muscle tension is essential to discriminate kinaesthetic sensations. The method emphasises the perception of movement, and visualisation is employed to integrate sensory feedback: after learning a movement sequence on one side of the body, the transfer of learning to the other side is achieved through mental practice when the student imagines performing the movement from an internal perspective, drawing on kinaesthetic experience. Similarly, Gerda Alexander, the creator of the somatic method Eutony, also observed that even at rest, the intention to perform movement alters muscle tone, allowing similar results to be achieved without actual movement execution (Alexander, 1995). The method emphasises balance and regulation of muscle tone in relation to emotional states, encouraging slow movement informed by sensation. Practitioners often employ the visualisation of anatomical structures to bring awareness to the body's internal space, thereby promoting inner listening and cultivating the quality of being present in the body. In this context, movement emerges naturally from sensing the body from the inside out, exploring efficient and effortless ways to move, while imagery is used to enhance tactile, proprioceptive, and interoceptive awareness. In Bartenieff FundamentalsSM, a somatic approach grounded in movement analysis and body connectivity, the use of images and metaphors supports anatomical function. Spatial, dynamic, and expressive imagery provide resources to promote intuitive and creative ways of experiencing the body, enabling students to move spontaneously with personal images or concepts and to discover their own personal expression (Hackney, 2005).

Overall, the effectiveness of imagery in dance and somatic practices lies in its capacity to evoke rich and embodied responses. However, its use requires attentiveness to the individual meaning-making of the images. It is important to recognise that images and metaphoric language can be perceived, embodied, and interpreted in different ways, depending on an individual's cultural background, emotional associations, and experiences (Caldwell, 2018; Gibbs, 2006). Because images can evoke distinct sensations and emotional responses in students, teachers and facilitators must remain sensitive to this diversity, as the same image may lead to an experiential insight for one person while remaining ineffective or even confusing for another.

Methodology

We chose a qualitative methodological approach, which, according to Patton (2002), enables the investigation of a particular subject without losing sight of its complexity. The use of different methods allows for the collection of information regarding participants' perceptions of their lived experiences, emphasising the unique characteristics of each individual while describing and understanding processes that unfold within a specific context (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002)—in this case, the dance teaching and learning environment. Because

the investigation considers how both the participants and the researcher interpret sensory, cognitive, and emotional processes, we adopted a multi-method approach, as described by Roller and Lavrakas (2015). These authors assert that combining different qualitative methods facilitates a deeper understanding of emerging themes. The methodological procedures were designed to provide the participants with experiences in the field of somatic education, alongside opportunities for reflection on themselves and the processes involved in how they experience movement at different moments. The researcher, with extensive experience in dance teaching, was directly involved in the study's implementation throughout all phases of the fieldwork and data collection procedures. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), in qualitative research methods, the researcher functions as an instrument of investigation, both in field interaction and in the interpretation and assignment of meaning to the participants' perceptions. The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculdade de Motricidade Humana, Universidade de Lisboa.

Setting and participants

The decision to conduct the study at the Escola Superior de Dança (ESD), with a group of undergraduate students, aligned with the need to identify a population appropriate for the research objectives. It was considered that the quality of the data collected during the intervention would partly depend on the participants' ability to articulate their experiences and perceptions of their bodies and movement—an ability that requires a certain level of maturity, openness to inquiry, and reflective capacity concerning sensations and perceptions. Within the context of higher vocational education, students engage daily in a wide range of dance practices encompassing diverse techniques and approaches. These include learning processes that span not only technical training but also choreographic creation and performance. However, the undergraduate dance curriculum at ESD does not include a dedicated course on somatic techniques.

A group of ten participants—nine female and one male—aged between 18 and 22 years, was formed through voluntary recruitment. This recruitment took place at the host institution following information sessions that clarified the study's objectives, the structure of the programme (as an extracurricular training opportunity), the contents of the practical sessions, and the requirement for participants to attend at least 14 of the 20 scheduled sessions. Participants were enrolled in different years of their degree and brought diverse movement backgrounds. Their dance experience included classical ballet, modern, contemporary, jazz, and hip-hop, with practice durations ranging from two to fourteen years. All but one participant reported no prior experience with somatic education. To ensure confidentiality, participants were asked to choose pseudonyms.

Somatic movement course

The researcher designed and implemented a somatic movement course over the duration of one academic semester, drawing upon four somatic methods: Bartenieff FundamentalsSM, Eutony, Ideokinesis, and the Feldenkrais Method®. The objectives of the course were threefold: to provide participants with the experience of a somatic education process; to enable the continuous collection of data during each session and across the entire intervention; and to allow for the researcher's direct observation of the process. The 20 sessions were structured around key principles commonly found in somatic methods—

breathing, sensitivity, connectivity, intention, initiation, and imagery. These themes were identified through a literature review focused both on the specific bodies of work associated with each method and on authors who have conducted research within the fields of somatic education and dance. The pedagogical aims of the course included the development of sensory awareness, the encouragement of new interpretative and responsive movement patterns, the promotion of greater sensory autonomy, and the cultivation of students' capacity for reflection and inquiry in relation to bodily sensations and movement experiences. Each session incorporated specific exercises drawn from somatic practices, as well as movement explorations, improvisation, and reflective practice. In keeping with many somatic approaches, verbal guidance was the predominant mode of instruction, aimed at encouraging attentive and internally-directed awareness during movement exploration.

Data Collection and analysis

Data were collected continuously in each session through participants' journals, group discussions, and direct observation. Group discussions were held after practice in 10 of the 20 sessions and were primarily aimed at encouraging participants to articulate and reflect on the thoughts and sensations that emerged during practice. These discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and provided valuable insight into participants' appropriation of their lived experiences. Throughout the intervention, the researcher employed direct observation and maintained a field-note journal to record impressions and observations during the sessions. The participant's journal consisted of a small notebook in which personal sensations, impressions, thoughts, and reflections on their experience were documented through written entries and drawings. Following the conclusion of the course, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. Prior to these interviews, the researcher reviewed the participants' journals, the group discussion transcripts, and her own field notes in order to deepen the interviews and clarify emerging themes or participant perspectives.

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Some procedures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the research, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1994): triangulation of data sources, and participant validation of the interview transcripts. Participants were invited to read, comment on, and correct their transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

Findings

Increased body awareness and sensitivity

Students reported experiencing a heightened perception of their bodies during several activities based on the principles of imagery, breath, and sensing. In the movement exploration moving from breath, students were invited to allow an image to arise from their sensations and to move according to that image. Beatriz described in her journal how using imagery to focus on breathing brought about new sensations and altered her perception of the body throughout the exercise—particularly an awareness of her inner space and a sense of porosity in her bodily boundaries:

It was a new sensation ... I felt that the perception and sensation of the inner space changed completely from the beginning to the end of the exercise. I felt that the boundaries of the inner space at the end of the exercise almost vanished. The interior and the exterior were connected, as if the air came out through the skin, as if my body overflowed outside.

Another student reflected on the same activity, describing the movement as 'light and continuous... and the sensation of being a container with air inside' (Micaela's Journal). Both students experienced and articulated kinaesthetic and metaphoric imagery from an internal perspective. In some cases, these images emerged spontaneously during the movement exploration and merged with the sensory experience, becoming part of it.

The perception of bodily boundaries varied depending on the imagery embodied: at times they were felt as a clear demarcation between the body and surrounding space; at others, they were experienced as porous and receptive to that space. This indicates a degree of plasticity in self-perception, as the participants' awareness of their bodily contours shifted in response to imagery. Imagery was also used at rest, allowing students to explore sensation through internal visualisation. One such exercise aimed to awaken skin sensitivity without the use of physical touch, by inviting students to imagine breathing through the skin. In her interview, Amelia reflected, 'I loved the airy sensation I had when breathing through some parts of the body ... it felt like fresh air was entering through the pores, and the area expanded'.

Other students reported noticing variations in sensitivity across different parts of the body, 'breathing through the palms of my hands and soles of my feet was easier than in other areas of the body, and I felt that these areas woke up' (Viktória's journal).

During improvisation exercises, imagery supported students in organising their movement from inner awareness. The use of the metaphor having eyes in different parts of the body, stimulated both imagination and bodily sensitivity. As Leo noted in her journal:

I was able to 'see' the entire studio; I played with the distance and type of gaze; my whole body depended on where my eyes wanted to look. I experimented with imagining these eyes opening and closing, and that caused small contractions in my body due to the 'light'.

These experiences suggest that the use of metaphorical and kinaesthetic imagery enhanced the students' perception and nuanced their sensory engagement with both internal and external space.

Expanded perception of self and environment

In the movement explorations based on Bartenieff FundamentalsSM, students engaged with the polarities of open/close, expand/contract, and inner/outer. These explorations fostered a heightened awareness of internal connectivity and the dynamic relationship between self and environment. Amélia describes one such experience in her journal:

... I start by expanding and then contracting on the floor. The energy originates from my navel and radiates towards the extremities as if someone were drawing across

my body. The parts of the body unfold as the pen passes over them. When the pen reaches the furthest extremities, it continues drawing in the air in the same direction.

The sensation of expanding the body from its center towards the extremities, extending into the space around, translated into the image, for Amélia, of a pen tracing the lines of internal connectivity. This image of a pen tracing lines along her body emerged spontaneously, translating the sensation of energetic expansion from the centre outward. This personal metaphor helped to illuminate her perception of internal connectivity and spatial extension. The spontaneous emergence of the image also suggests how somatic movement can support individualised meaning-making, enhancing both bodily awareness and imaginative engagement with space.

In another movement exercise, students explored internal and external connectivity through the image of a starfish, encouraging them to kinaesthetically engage with the idea of expansion from the six extremities of the body—the head, coccyx, and four limbs. This image was fully embodied by the student during the phases of projecting the body into space and retracting toward the center:

... I start by expanding and then contracting on the floor ... at the peak, I feel gigantic and can see the entire room with my starfish eyes ... Next, I begin to deflate from the center, as if there were a hook pulling my belly button through my back. The body starts to retract (Amélia's journal).

Amélia experienced the image from an internal perspective, perceiving the external space from within her imagined starfish body. One of the goals of Bartenieff FundamentalsSM, as articulated by Hackney (2005), is to promote a dynamic and creative interplay between inner connectivity and outer expressivity. Amélia's account reflects this interplay. What began as a bodily sensation of expansion evolved into an enhanced awareness of the surrounding space—an extension of her kinesphere and a deepened presence in space. In her interview, Amélia also mentions the experience of incorporating the external space into her body:

I was on the floor, but I felt a big relationship with the walls and the ceiling, with the room space, more than with the floor ... I felt that my body expanded and occupied the space between the floor and the walls. I was pushing the floor so that I could expand, and I felt myself a giant starfish with big eyes looking to the space around me and occupying all the space, and then in the closing, I was carrying all the visible external space with me.

The use of imagery in this movement exploration stimulated her imagination and elicited what could be described as an altered perception of self and environment. Amélia experienced her body as both expanded and interconnected with the room. The imagery allowed her to project beyond herself and perceive a more profound interaction with the external space. In her experience, imagination and sensation were not separate; rather, they were intertwined. The relationship between the image and her embodied sensations was reciprocal: the image generated specific sensory experiences, which in turn enriched and deepened her engagement with the image.

Creative and intuitive movement organization

The use of imagery as an integral part of the instructions enabled participants to organise their movement without having to think about how to move. This approach facilitated a more intuitive and embodied response to movement tasks. For instance, Leo initially found it challenging to explore core-distal connectivity from a standing position, 'At first, it was difficult to project all six points simultaneously, perhaps because I was more closed off, more 'inward' emotionally'. However, by engaging with the image of elastic bands, she was able to shift from a cognitive understanding of the task to a sensory and imaginative engagement that allowed her to embody the concept more fully, 'With the idea of elastic bands, I managed to make my body expand and contract as a whole. I felt the energy coming and going from the center' (Leo's journal). In this case, the image functioned as a catalyst for intuitive organization of movement. Rather than consciously directing her body to move outward from the center, Leo responded to the metaphor through kinaesthetic sensation. The elastic image gave her an accessible and tangible way to experience expansion and contraction as an integrated whole-body process. This highlights how imagery can serve as a bridge between abstract movement concepts and lived, embodied experience—supporting creative exploration while deepening understanding.

Final Considerations and Recommendations

The findings of this study show that somatic movement explorations and improvisations guided by imagery enhanced bodily awareness and sensitivity, supporting students in developing a nuanced relationship with both the inner and outer experience of their bodies. Through practices centered on breath, skin sensitivity, and internal connectivity, participants reported a sharper perception of bodily boundaries, a deeper sense of self in motion, and an enriched connection with the surrounding environment. Imagery shaped not only movement but also its perception, fostering imagination and revealing plasticity in students' self-perception. Students engaged with imagery as spontaneously arising metaphors and guided prompts. In many cases, image and movement became inseparable—the image was not only visualised but also felt, embodied, and lived, often merging with sensation so that the image became movement and the movement became the image. This highlights imagery as an experiential bridge between perception and action, enabling students to recognise emerging images and use them to guide creative exploration.

Imagery also acted as a catalyst for the intuitive organisation of movement. Rather than relying on conscious strategies, students drew on kinaesthetic and metaphorical images to support exploration, improvisation, and decision-making. Through this process, they strengthened the connection between thought, sensation, and emotion. In this way, imagery informed perceptual and creative processes, nurturing imagination, attentional focus, and an expanded range of movement possibilities. The integration of reflective tools reinforced these processes, allowing students to articulate and deepen their understanding of their embodied processes, consolidate learning, and highlight their potential as pedagogical strategies in dance education.

Although this study focused on students' internal perception of movement rather than externally observable outcomes, it underscores the significance of imagery as a pedagogical

tool. Future research could explore its impact on performance-related capacities such as movement quality and expressive range, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of imagery's role in supporting both the inner and outer dimensions of dance practice.

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Biography

Rita Rato holds a PhD in Human Kinetics/Dance from the University of Lisbon, Faculty of Human Kinetics (Faculdade de Motricidade Humana – FMH). Her doctoral research is entitled *Somatic Education and Self-Perception in Movement: Contributions to the Construction of Body Image in Higher Education Dance Students*. Researcher at the Institute of Ethnomusicology – Music and Dance Studies Center (INET-md), and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *RED Magasin – Revista Estud(i)os de Dança*, where she co-edited the thematic issue *Somatic Education and Embodiment in a Digital World*. Since 2005, Rita has been teaching Dance Technique, Dance Laboratory, and Somatic Practices at FMH – University of Lisbon.

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A choreography of pedagogies: How inclusion is fostered

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Abstract

This discussion is of a meta-analysis of the outcomes and benefits arising through an engagement in community dance practice. Our research concluded that amongst other outcomes, dance is valued by diverse communities to foster inclusion, imagination and identity that in turn enhance an overall sense of well-being. The focus was on how different pedagogies fostered such outcomes. We identify 'how' pedagogical practice is facilitated in community dance classes, how facilitators achieve success and what they define as success. We paid attention to what was achieved and what the success indicators were in each study but were most interested in how the outcomes were achieved. We were curious about how the community dance activity was enlivened, activated, taught and received by the participants. Our study revealed a list of pedagogical characteristics that in turn foster positive community dance outcomes.

Keywords: pedagogies, community dance, meta-analysis, outcomes

Introduction

Community dance pedagogy is not a common focus of research. Journal articles that discuss community dance are generally focussed upon the outcomes of a particular project. Our meta-analysis therefore followed a straightforward path of data collection that identified the positive outcomes achieved through participation in community dance. It is from our meta-analysis of these outcomes that we were able to closely examine 'how' such outcomes were achieved. While none of the authors specifically stated that they used a particular pedagogy and did not appear to be attempting to place their pedagogical approach within a particular framework, we examined what the descriptions of 'what' they did and 'how' they did it to draw our pedagogical conclusions.

As with Buck (2003) we align with pedagogical relationships that are constructed between the teacher, the curriculum and the learner, situated within diverse contexts in classroom or community settings. Given the philosophical drivers of community dance, such as valuing diversity, inclusion, participation and humanity, this article focuses on discussing select relevant pedagogical approaches such as: inclusive pedagogy, humanising pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy in relation to the articles in this study.

To many experienced teachers of community dance and dance education, these pedagogical themes do not come as a surprise. However, our meta-analysis evidences that it is not chance that creates beneficial outcomes, but a reliance on known pedagogical practices, and a blend of such practices in each community context in response to group requirements. It is also worth noting that in each case there is a leader or teacher who enlivens the activity. We review the dominant pedagogies as observed in the 24 studies. It was important to understand how the teachers/leaders of community dance projects create the teaching/learning environment that evidence the following successful outcomes. Our meta-analysis was informed by the outcomes that mainly focused on community dance projects in and for disadvantaged communities, such as:

- Dance for older adults (with or without dementia or Parkinson's disease).
- Dance for at risk children.
- Dance for women with and without disabilities
- Dance for disenfranchised youth
- Dance for intergenerational groups
- Dance for diverse populations coming together
- Untrained dancers as performers
- Dance in prison
- Dance in rural communities
- Dance for people with cancer
- School students and dance students working together.

Community dance

Community dance is an overarching term that encompasses many different forms of dance (Amans, 2017). It has a focus on "Values such as inclusive practice, collaborative relationships, a focus on participants, positive participation and learning, and celebration of

diversity integrated into dance experiences” (Hills, Buck & Weber, 2022, p. 4). Participants in community dance are diverse, ranging from professional dancers to members of cultural groups, to youth at risk, mums and dads and so on. There is no presumption of skill. “There are no requirements for participants to compete or be technically ‘good’, although some participants might very well be good dancers” (Buck & Snook, 2020, p.291).

This study recognizes that community is a shapeshifting, temporal, socially constructed and a multi-faceted state and/or process. The occurrence of community can imaginatively connect individuals to a particular place and particular people. Within such imaginings of community, individuals experience a sense of belonging. Sociologist Clarke (1973) defines community in terms of people feeling a sense of security and solidarity. He elaborates further that community can be created when an activity such as dance fosters participants’ sense of solidarity and significance. Buck and Snook (2020) note that community dance provides opportunities for participants to engage with like-minded/bodies/cultures and develop a common connection, a sense of solidarity, togetherness or union. As we examine our meta-analysis, definitions of community dance become apparent that align with Houston’s (2005) statement regarding, “a set of principles founded on the idea that dance is for everyone” (p.169).

Methodology

Twenty-four published case studies were randomly selected from a google search and then analysed. We literally selected the first 24 articles, book chapters or books that were able to be accessed online. While the analysis of these studies (articles, chapters) found that outcomes varied according to the aim of the research and the group involved, we uncovered many outcomes that were common to every project. We examined all outcomes with an aim to better understand the pedagogical approaches that produced the results evident in each study.

A commonality present in the majority of the 24 articles was that they related to researchers focusing on creating positive outcomes in marginalised communities. This finding informed the direction of our study. We went on to identify and examine community dance outcomes and pedagogies where communities may have been at risk of exclusion.

Our study may best be defined as a mixed-methods inquiry where we value a range of methods from quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigms. A meta-analysis is generally the “quantitative, scientific synthesis of research results” (Gurevitch et. al., 2018). While we employ a quantitative method to identify initial data and identify recurring outcomes and pedagogies, our meta-analysis also contains many variables that require qualitative sensibilities that draw upon experience to ‘see’ the qualities of the activity enacted. The qualities of our prior knowledge as academics and community dance practitioners informed our reading of the data, and informed what we could see (Eisner, 1998). We did not wish to measure the level of each outcome but simply record if particular outcomes were discussed in each of the articles. In that way we were able to correlate the outcomes present in each of the articles. Due to the word constraints of these conference proceedings, we did not attempt to quantify the validity from a pattern of correlations with other measures (Westen and Rosenthal, 2003). We believed that within the limitations of these 24 articles, our method of qualitative correlation across the articles accurately revealed the dominant outcomes.

Our research employed a qualitative constructivist methodology that allowed us to bring our experience and expertise to the analysis of the emergent pedagogical themes. As Fosnot (2005) stated, “Constructivism is a theory about knowing and learning; it describes both what knowing is, and how one comes to know” (p. 1). In doing so we acknowledged our outsider and insider positionalities (Yip, 2023) as strengths in critically reviewing the 24 studies. We also noted how this positionality can be a weakness. Maintaining our reflexivity was essential as we completed the meta-analysis. Through our research we drew on multiple independent realities. We did not shy away from our own expertise and bias, but instead valued this, using four sets of eyes to triangulate our findings and establish trustworthiness (Fosnot, 2005). Having four authors, we were able to question and attend to any specific bias that may have emerged yet also acknowledging that all authors and reviewers have bias, yet how can we not draw on experience and values. Nonetheless, we were mindful of our perspectives and that there are means for managing this. Song, Hooper and Loke (2013) stated, “We can measure publication bias by comparing the results of published and unpublished studies addressing the same question” (p. 71). Again, as we built an analytical knowledge bank (spread sheet) listing dominant outcomes and pedagogies we could see the emergent data and could correlate this with our own experience.

We were aware that in reviewing the 24 articles we did not focus on negative outcomes as these were not foregrounded by any of the studies. On reflection, however, we could have been more critical in looking more closely for unstated, but implied negatives pertaining to specific pedagogies in different community dance contexts. As experienced community dance practitioners we are more than aware that not all community dance projects produce positive outcomes. For example, the good intent of external visiting community artists who ‘parachute in’ to work with locals is not always successful and can indeed be quite counterproductive (Poyntz, Sefton-Green and Fitzsimmons Frey, 2023). A future study may examine the negative and positive benefits in a more nuanced manner.

Outcomes

We analysed each article individually and added beneficial outcomes to the outcome bank that that were discussed in each article. The outcome bank rapidly grew to include benefits such as, physical health, wellbeing, bone strength, balance, falls prevention, flexibility, mental health, cognitive improvement, expression, imagination, creativity, inspiration, diversity, inclusivity, social engagement, collaboration, connection, friendships, empowerment, personal development, confidence, self-esteem, culture, shift of power, safe environment, caring for and valuing others, joy, enjoyment, body awareness, performance skills, education, meaning and value, therapy, spiritual engagement and identity. Presented with such an extensive data base of outcomes, we continued the comparative analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 2002), with the aim of further refining the data into a final list of dominant emergent outcomes.

The results were identified through these beneficial outcomes, noting the number of studies that contained some mention of these benefits:

- Physical health and wellbeing, bone strength, balance, falls prevention and flexibility.
Number of mentions: 14/24
This outcome could be applied to all dance, whether competitive, dance training, professional dance, dance education or community dance. Dance is based on moving the body and the above outcome would seem obvious and important to most people, especially as dance can often be viewed with a focus on for its physicality alone (O'Neill, et. al. 2011; O'Reilly-Duff, et. al., 2018). Research supports the belief that exercise reduces stress, decreases anxiety, and reduces depression, arguably fostering resilience (Buck & Snook, 2020).
- Mental Health and Cognitive Improvement
Number of mentions: 16/24
Dance can improve cognitive performance and is associated with benefits in mental health (Blanco-Rambo et. al. 2022).
- Expression, Imagination, Creativity, and Inspiration
Number of mentions: 16/24
Each of the words in the heading above hold individual meaning, but it could be argued that they each feed into and nourish the other in the same way as physical and mental wellbeing blend together. Sometimes, especially in difficult situations, dance speaks louder than words for the participants as they express not only who they are but tell their own stories.
- Social engagement, collaboration, connection, and friendships: Caring for and valuing others.
Number of mentions: 24/24
Social interaction was mentioned in all articles as being important. For many this seems one of the most important reasons for attending dance classes.
- Diversity and Inclusion
Number of mentions: 14/24
Community Dance is promoted for diversity and inclusion because it is for everyone. If you can walk you can dance – or even if you can't walk, you can dance. Such remarks are common in community dance circles when trying to explain to outsiders that a high level of performance skill is not usually required in community dance.
- Personal Development and Self Esteem
Number of mentions: 20/24
It has been established in this study that community dance emphasises connection and communication between people.
- Empowerment and Identity
Number of mentions: 14/24
A thesis in this study revealed the power of dance to change lives and empower individuals.
- Additional outcomes
 - Joy/enjoyment was recorded 10/24
 - Therapy
 - Spiritual
 - Safety

While the meta-analysis identified 7 main benefit themes as noted above other outcomes hold significance in community dance and have not been discussed. Joy/enjoyment was recorded 10/24 and although not included above, we suspect that it was present in all projects. When people are having fun, they will continue to attend a class, especially when attendance is optional. Body awareness and performance skills came up several times, particularly when the project was based around teaching dances for performance. Therapy was mentioned in relation to projects in which therapeutic outcomes were evident. A spiritual outcome was mentioned on four occasions.

Also, it was noted in several studies that the participants felt safe in the dance space. It is important to mention a safe space, as this is not only the place where the dance happens, but a place where participants feel safe to express themselves, surrounded by a supportive community.

Pedagogies

Community dance holds a set of teaching and learning values that we examine in this meta-analysis, and which may assist in creating an understanding of constituent indicators of success within community dance projects. Through this critical unpacking we identify 'how' pedagogical practice is facilitated in community dance classes, how facilitators achieve success and what they define as success.

As we analysed the randomly selected 24 case studies, we paid attention to what was achieved and what the success indicators were in each study. As pedagogues however we were most interested in how the outcomes were achieved. We were curious about how the community dance activity was enlivened, activated, taught and received by the participants. Our meta-analysis of 24 articles revealed a list of pedagogical characteristics that foster positive community dance outcomes.

While the authors did not specifically state that they used a particular pedagogical approach and did not have a focus on 'how' they taught within such pedagogical frameworks, we examined what the descriptions of 'what' they did and 'how' they taught to draw our pedagogical conclusions.

Inclusive pedagogy

With diverse populations world over, dance education aims to employ a similar pedagogy to community dance, giving all students opportunities to achieve regardless of their technical ability. In some countries, inclusive education is still thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings (Schupp, 2024). While many dance educators struggle to meet expectations around inclusivity in dance, "community dance can be seen as a means to achieve inclusion" (Bilitza, 2021, p.1).

Exclusion can be common in dance. People with disabilities are not expected to turn up in a dance class unless it is a group that has a designated focus of working with mixed abilities. Observations in this project revealed the power of community dance to break down barriers. Young people who wish to dance are often discouraged if they are not 'good dancers', even within dance education in schools where strongly held beliefs regarding who can dance continue to exist.

All of the teachers/facilitators in this present study demonstrated the use of inclusive pedagogies, where every participant was valued regardless of positionality, social or cultural identity. They were welcomed into the group and provided with rich learning opportunities. While not every study mentioned inclusivity as an outcome, it was evident when reading the articles that it was present in each different situation.

Humanising pedagogy

Freire (1970) explains how teaching methods such as dehumanisation, banking, or digestive methods in education, can elicit dehumanising practices, which culminate in oppression and domination. Such teaching methods have historically been associated with dance, but community dance offers a different pathway that is forged with and for the participants.

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1970) focuses on bringing the voices of the oppressed forward to liberate and empower them. Within community dance participants can be seen as hidden voices that, if listened to, may assist in the development of empowerment and identity. For the facilitator of a community dance class, listening to *all* participants voices can mean having a say, expressing an opinion (Thomson, 2008), or it can mean listening to what is not being said and what this silence might mean (Messiou, 2012).

In all of the projects we examined, the approach was participant centred. Those who worked with the elderly shared a common theme of the importance of allowing time for 'coffee and cookies'. Within a community dance class for older adults with Parkinson's disease, the participants were asked to follow instructional videos during Covid and come together 'performance ready' in the studio toward the end before presenting to the public (Gordon, 2023). Members of the Breakdance Program in Uganda took 30 minutes out of each session to sit down together in a circle and communicate. They spoke of everything that was important to them and were given advice on various topics. Inclusion and identity were easily identified as flow-on effects within the pedagogical practices of those facilitating the Breakdance Project Uganda. A key pedagogical approach is 'teach the learners in the room', that is – a focus on the participants, their needs and context, not the teacher's lesson plan, nor the curriculum.

Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching or facilitation is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students [participants] as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2002). The key point is about how we engage with participants and value their diverse contexts. Five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching that are as relevant to community dance as to education are: developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content, demonstrating caring, and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction (Gay, 2002).

Intercultural education as a global phenomenon continues to develop, as are dance practitioners' understandings and practices of culturally relevant or responsive pedagogies. Within the meta-analysis respect for all participants was evident regardless of differences within groups. As Buck and Meiners (2017) suggest, "Dance is an agent for reflection, for change and for transformation. Our sense is that increasingly people are seeking ways to engage with change and diverse communities, while placing themselves at the axis of that change" (p. 39). Within a community dance context where inclusive and humanising pedagogies are the norm, culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies follow.

According to Ladson-Billings, (1997) and Sleeter, (2012), teachers or facilitators who demonstrate pedagogical understandings evidence this through; conceptions of themselves and others, conceptions of social relations, and conceptions of knowledge. The knowledge related to within this meta-analysis refers to the projected outcomes within each project and how the facilitators set about achieving success. Culturally relevant conceptions of social relations were evident through fluid and positive student-teacher relationships, that encouraged collaboration.

Blend of transmissive and transformative pedagogies

While we expected that many of the pedagogical approaches in community dance would be transformative, we discovered that most projects in our study were facilitated through a transmissive pedagogy. Many transformative pedagogies were employed, but there were also some necessary elements of transmissive teaching within the sessions. The difference however between training dancers through a transmissive pedagogy and facilitating community dance through a transmissive pedagogy appeared to be in the invitation to dance and the values and intent inherent in the pedagogical approaches.

“Traditional pedagogy in dance is concerned with one-directional transmission and transfer of knowledge and technical skills from the teacher with authority to the students for performance and assessment” (Walus, 209, p. 28). When the need for the development of technical skills is removed, and the dance is neither judged nor assessed, perhaps transmissive teaching in community dance requires a different title, ‘permissive pedagogies’ perhaps where the pedagogy is both accommodating of difference and non-judgmental?

Process verses product

Particularly related to the teaching of dance is the process verses product debate. A focus on process in community dance provides a difference to what might be achieved through the training of dancers toward an end product or performance. Where community dance projects are focused upon an end performance, the process leading up to it is generally not the training of dancers, but dancers learning a dance to perform that suits their age, stage, ability and very often, a dance that participants have chosen to perform. Several of the studies that we examined did have a focus on an end product, such as Paige Gordon’s (2023) ‘Wingspan’ and Goldman’s (2013) ‘Performance matters’ projects, but their pedagogical focus was inclusive and non-judgemental, leading to other positive flow-on effects. The teaching was learner-centred, contextual, and relationally constructed. In this way, positive outcomes were achieved. We realised that where culturally relevant, humanising and inclusive pedagogies were present, process and product are equally important.

Conclusion

Those of us working in the field understand the power of dance to provide benefits to physical and mental health, joy and social connections. We believe that dance has the power to change lives. All studies were focused on the positive outcomes, and we acknowledge that the authors in all cases were examining specific projects to discover whether their intended positive outcome had been successful.

While the list of outcomes or benefits was long, the findings indicated that none of the benefits stood alone. None of the articles examined, listed one or two benefits only, despite some having a narrow research focus. We believe that within the findings of this community dance meta-analysis, physical health and wellbeing related closely to mental health, resilience, and cognitive improvement. Where people gather to dance, social engagement, collaboration, connection and friendships follow, resulting in the embrace of diversity and inclusion.

Most importantly we want to acknowledge the pedagogical outcomes that drove this study. It was clear that everyone could walk away from a community dance session with a feeling of success and that participants had opportunities to be creative and expressive (Paglione, et.al., 2023).

We believe that what has emerged from this meta-analysis is that, regardless of process or product, transmissive or transformative pedagogies, it's about creating an atmosphere where people feel comfortable. Within a framework that is designed to meet the needs and/or limitations of the participants, with an element of challenge, there is an awareness when conducting sessions that participants need to enjoy what they are doing. Besides the obvious fact that people won't attend a class if they are not enjoying it, when competition and a focus on a perfect technique are removed, it leaves participants free to relax and simply enjoy themselves without any pressure to meet high expectations.

Of all the outcomes in this study one outcome that stood out and was evident in all articles (24/24) was social engagement, collaboration, connection, friendships and the valuing of others. A participant in one of the studies stated that the best part of the session was the coffee and cookies afterwards. We did expect that the strongest outcome might have been more than coffee and cookies. Dance, however, is a form of social interaction and as an artistic expression cannot be separated from its social context. The cookies and coffee are in fact an expression of the unifying power of dance. The morning tea is not the main outcome. The social engagement, cooperation, and connection built the friendships through dance and in turn the friendships carried on deepening social engagement and friendship. Let's continue "holding the space for dialogues, creative activities and social relationships to develop" (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 2). There are many changes happening on a global level and more than ever, the values and positive outcomes attributed to engagement in community dance are more important than ever.

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Biographies

Barbara Snook (PhD) is a professional teaching fellow and senior research fellow at the University of Auckland. Barbara was the Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance at the University of Otago in 2008. She is a successful author of dance text-books widely used in Australia and New Zealand and was the recipient of an Osmotherly Award in 2007 for services toward the development of dance education in Queensland Australia. Barbara's current research is in the area of Dance education and community dance.

Ralph Buck (PhD) is an award winning teacher and academic leader. Professor Ralph's research has been featured at the UNESCO Second World Conference on Arts Education. He is on the International Editorial Boards of Research in Dance Education (RIDE) and Journal of Dance Education (JODE). He has collaborated with UNESCO in raising the profile in arts education around the world. He initiated, advocated for and planned UNESCO's International Arts Education Week. He is on the Council for the World Alliance for Arts Education. Ralph's research and publications focus upon dance teaching and learning and community dance.

Susan R. Koff, EdD. Past positions: Louisiana State University; Teachers College, Columbia University; University of Denver; Pennsylvania State University; Jerusalem Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Israel. In two of these positions, she was Director of Dance Education. Academic and service activities including Keynote, RAD Australia; Side event, UNESCO World Conference on Culture and Arts Education; WAAE. Recently Chair of the Board for Dance and the Child International (daCi), Fulbright Scholarship recipient. Publications: Journal of Dance Education, Research in Dance Education, Childhood Education. Book: *Dance Education, A Redefinition* Methuen/Bloomsbury, London.

Bronte Jones (PhD) is an emerging researcher and is a Professional Teaching Fellow, Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Auckland. Awarded with a Doctoral Scholarship, Bronte hopes that her future research will contribute to envisioning dance and dance learning as a place where individual difference can be celebrated.

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Dancing the 'I' in the Rainbow

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Abstract

Democratic South Africa is a multicultural nation with 11 official languages and diverse racial and cultural groups. Legislation during the apartheid era (1948-1994) kept different people and their cultures apart, forbidding intercultural and interracial relations. Post-apartheid South Africa has been called the 'Rainbow Nation' as a symbol of its rich cultural diversity. However, in what appears to be clearly defined bands of the rainbow, there is limited realisation of the blending of cultures or cross-cultural interactions in the lives of many South Africans. This paper presents a qualitative research project, entitled "Dancing the 'I' in the Rainbow", where 'I' refers to self and cultural identity, involving young Xhosa-speaking children in Cape Town and a culturally diverse group of university students and teachers as facilitators. The project explored the question: What affective experiences are created through shared expressions of dance teachers' and learners' cultural dance identities in dance education spaces? Data was gathered through participant observation, group interviews, participant journals, and questionnaires. The findings revealed three types of affect: 1) a sense of *reconnecting* with aspects of self and culture; 2) *rejoycing* (the spelling of the word used by one of the children); and 3) *reaching out* and beyond. The paper argues that including dance students' and teachers' diverse cultural identities in dance education spaces in South Africa offers strong potential for nurturing cultural identity and intercultural understanding among its citizens, contributing meaningfully to social transformation.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Intercultural dance, Rainbow Nation, social transformation

Introduction

South Africa is a multicultural nation of diverse people with four official race groups, eleven official languages, and various local and foreign ethnicities. In 1994, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu coined the term “rainbow nation” as an identity descriptor for the new post-Apartheid South Africa. The rainbow metaphor symbolised a nation with varied histories, distinct cultures, and genealogical roots, coming together to reflect inclusion, community, sameness, and unity (Sall, 2018). This paper presents and discusses the authors’ findings and experiences from conducting a seven-week dance project entitled “Dancing the ‘I’ in the Rainbow” with young people in a community-based dance programme at the University of Cape Town. In the study, ‘I’ refers to the self and one’s cultural identity. In relation to dancing with diversity, ‘I’ refers to interculturality and inclusion. The paper begins by situating the project within the socio-political context of South Africa. A brief mention of the theoretical framework ensues, followed by the methodology, findings, and conclusion.

Multiple voices have problematised and critiqued South Africa’s rainbow nation ideology as a myth (Sall, 2018), viewing it as a false and essentialist representation of a complex democratic nation (Ngoasheng & Gachago, 2017). Sall (2018) argues that while South Africa is culturally rich and diverse, cultural integration toward social cohesion remains elusive due to persistent apartheid legacies of racial division, white privilege, and structural inequalities. The political apartheid system that ruled the nation between 1948 and 1994 institutionalised spatial, racial, and cultural segregation policies that deliberately kept people and their cultures apart from each other and privileged the European cultural forms of the white minority. Such weaponisation of cultural and racial differences bred hatred, mistrust, and harmful ignorance of the other. In democratic South Africa today, there is still a tendency for South Africans to live and exist only within their racial, cultural, and language circles without trust for others (Marx & Delport, 2017). Ngoasheng and Gachago (2016) have further highlighted that even within a cultural group, differences in gender and abilities result in exclusionary and oppressive practices that challenge this notion of the rainbow as a common metaphor for all.

In post-apartheid South Africa, government leaders view education as a vehicle for nation-building and social transformation. Exposing learners to dances of different cultures to acknowledge and value the country’s rich and diverse cultural heritage is stated as a specific aim in the National Curriculum Statement for Dance Studies. Fostering inclusion is also a key aim of the South African National School Curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2011). However, with the continued dominance of Western dance forms (contemporary and ballet) as the major forms of study in dance education in South African schools, these aims are not yet completely realised. Correspondingly, the potency of dance as a medium for cultural education and cross-cultural engagement among South African youth is not yet a reality.

Our “Dancing the ‘I’ in the rainbow” project was framed around the research question: What affective experiences can emerge when dance teachers and learners centre, articulate and share in each other’s diverse cultural identities within the dance class? The project aimed to foster intercultural engagement among twenty young Xhosa-speaking children (ages 9-15) who regularly attend the university’s youth dance program on weekends, as well as four dance facilitators from the university. The university facilitators were a diverse group of

women who culturally identified as Indian, Jamaican, Coloured(a legislated South African identity for mixed-race persons), and Swazi (a Nguni ethnic group inhabiting the Kingdom of Eswatini in Southern Africa).

Theoretical underpinnings

The theoretical basis of this project was influenced by the work of performance theorist Richard Schechner. He asserts that 'the more we, and everyone else too, perform our own and other peoples' cultures' (1984, p.246), the more we can learn about different ways of life and attain a more inclusive understanding of the world. Schechner suggests that cultural and intercultural understanding can be deepened through active participation in, and exploration of, performance practices inside and outside our own cultures. The "Dancing the 'I' in the rainbow" dance project was a deliberate effort by dance teachers to unmute our cultural heritages within the Western-driven dance education space and create opportunities for our young dancers and ourselves to engage in intercultural learning. It was an invitation for both dance teachers and young dancers to foreground their cultural selves/identities in a shared dance experience involving the performance of each other's cultural dances.

Other scholarship considers the potential of authentic cultural exchanges. For example Indian theatre scholars Rustom Bharucha (1984) and Chandra Mohanty (2003), as well as South African dance scholars Sylvia Glasser (1991), Sharon Friedman (1997), Clare Craighead (2006), and Lliane Loots (2012), have unanimously contended that engaging in meaningful cultural exchange disrupts the power relationships between groups and can foster cultural appreciation among diverse people. Glasser (1991) further argues that appropriating cultures that are not one's own is gravely problematic, especially when an appreciation of the other culture is absent.

Through a decolonial lens, scholar Robert Vasquez (2019) suggests that in excavating and practising the cultural and genealogically rooted 'I', meaning self, 'decolonial dancers are exceeding the temporality of contemporaneity by re-membering the silenced bodies, by bringing to the fore vernacular bodies, by reclaiming earth-bodies, communal bodies, ancestral bodies that lie silenced under the oblivion of coloniality'(p. 22). In doing so, people who are not accustomed to seeing themselves reflected in the conventional mirror of dance learning can be included (Gopal, 2017). In the freedom of postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa, the present and the future of dance education must, therefore, involve unmasking and articulating indigenous, social, urban, and other cultural dances to better understand self and others, foster social inclusion, and expand learners' understanding of dance as various forms of human expressions across time, people and spaces.

Methodology

The qualitative research project lasted seven weeks. Participants included two university academics, two senior dance student teachers serving as dance facilitators, along with twenty Xhosa young girls and their leader from a community-based non-profit organisation (NPO). Informed consent was obtained from the parents, through the NPO, for the children to participate in the project and for photos and video footage to be taken of them.

Facilitators' profiles

Lwandile Vilane (LV) is a fourth-year international student studying dance pedagogy. She hails from the Kingdom of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, and has cultural roots in *kugiya* and *ingadla* dance forms. Chante Vermeulen (CV) is a third-year South African dance pedagogy student who identifies ethnically as Cape Coloured. Her dance lineage is a 'mixture' of local dance styles, including *langarm*, *sokkie*, line dance, jazz dance, *amapiano*, *kwaito*, and the *rieldans* of the Indigenous Khoi and San peoples. Lisa Wilson (LW) is a dance professor from Jamaica, with cultural knowledge and genealogical roots in Caribbean and African Diaspora dance forms. Saranya Devan (SD) is a lecturer and postgraduate student specialising in *Bharata Natyam* and South Indian Folk Dances. She is a third-generation South African Indian from Durban, with deep roots in Tamil culture, language, and religion.

Learners' profile

The Xhosa learners come from the township of Philippi in Cape Town and, as mentioned earlier, are aged between 9 and 13. They are part of a local organisation that has partnered with the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town to provide dance classes for youths from under-resourced and disadvantaged communities within a supportive and secure environment. Through the university programme, the young dancers participate in creative dance and cross-curricular learning through dance, taught by student teachers and university staff. The young dancers arrive at the dance programme with significant experience in Xhosa dances, Zulu dances, and South African urban dance styles such as *amapiano* and *kwaito*.

Procedures

The group met every Saturday morning at the university for approximately 2.5 hours to explore and share their cultural dances. These were Jamaican *reggae/dancehall*, *kugiya* and *ingadla* from Eswatini, *kolattam* and *Bharatanatyam* from South India, and *sokkie*, a unique South African social dance popular among white and some Coloured Afrikaans-speaking communities. The cultural exchange project was designed around indigenous principles of reciprocity, holism, care, relationships, and ritual to ensure respectful engagement with the dances and one another (Simpson, 2000; Kovach, 2010). Consequently, in addition to the youths experiencing the cultures of the facilitators, the young dancers reciprocated by teaching the facilitators aspects of their African culture. The cultural exchange extended beyond learning and perfecting dance movements. It involved understanding the social history and functions of the dances, their songs, and other cultural knowledge systems, such as language, food, and artefacts, thereby creating an experience of dancing cultural identity as a holistic and communal practice (Mabingo, 2015).

In the first session, we introduced the cultures of all four facilitators to the entire group through displays of national flags, traditional attire, and local foods. We also learnt greetings and how to say thank you in our different languages. The young participants experienced Jamaican and South Indian cultures for two weeks, followed by Swazi and Coloured cultures

for another two weeks. During these sessions, the dancers were divided into two smaller groups for more in-depth and focused interactions between the facilitator and the learners. From the introductory session, we observed that the younger group generally needed more time to understand the movements and write reflective notes.

Each weekly session began by fostering a sense of community and togetherness through the collective singing of Bob Marley's iconic song, 'One Love'. The sessions concluded with a Hindu prayer ritual that expressed gratitude to both the seen and unseen around us for what had been achieved during the session. After each cultural experience, learners were given 10-15 minutes to reflect and journal about what they had learnt and enjoyed most. The facilitators recorded the main cultural key points for each dance on whiteboards to support language development, as English was not the participants' first language. To further boost the children's engagement, we called upon their Xhosa-speaking leader to provide translations of our instructions in Xhosa where necessary. In the sixth week of engagement, the facilitators learnt a Xhosa dance from the young dancers, and everyone revisited the various cultural dances learnt in previous sessions. Showing appreciation and respect for what everyone had learnt, the project culminated in a communal performance in week seven. The new cultural knowledge and interactions experienced by facilitators and learners were publicly shared with an audience of invited family members, youths, and NPO leaders, who also had an opportunity to participate in some of the dances presented.

Data collection

Data was collected and documented through videos and photographs taken throughout the process; participant observation and fieldnotes recorded 'what was done, seen, heard and even felt' (Altheide & Schneider, 2012, p. 126); and learners' reflective journals and questionnaires were distributed at the end of the project to each participant. Two group interviews were conducted on the final day to further probe and triangulate the questionnaire responses.

Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was utilised to identify patterns within the raw data and to distil information into meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the process manual colour coding was employed to map similar or related ideas. Manning (2017) argues that capturing short phrases from participants' actual spoken or written words highlights their voices and proves useful when researchers engage with cultural groups that may use language differently from them. In keeping with this view, selected segments of participants' words were used as codes. To enhance trustworthiness, the primary researcher's interpretation and conclusions were shared with other team members for verification and insights. The findings were also presented to our department's research community for critical feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The study aimed to explore learners' and teachers' experience of self and cultural identities through a reciprocal exchange of dance and culture. The project specifically sought to utilise cultural dances to understand oneself and others, and to promote intercultural engagement among participants in practical ways. The research explored the experiences which are generated and felt when dance is taught through a shared framework of teachers' and learners' cultural identities and dance lineages. The study set out to expose young dancers to the local and foreign cultures of others. It particularly sought to use cultural dances to understand self and others and foster intercultural engagement among the participants in concrete ways. What affective experiences did shared experiences of centering and articulating dance teachers' and learners' cultural dance identities generate for participants?

An inductive search for patterns across the data revealed that dance facilitators and young people in South Africa can deepen their understanding of themselves while finding resonance with others by sharing and engaging in each other's dance and culture. An inductive analysis of the data identified three types of affective, embodied experiences emerging from the intercultural dance project: 1) A sense of reconnecting aspects of self and culture; 2) A sense of rejoycing (spelling used by one of the children); and 3) A sense of reaching out. These three themes will be explored in the following section.

Reconnecting aspects of self and culture

When asked in the questionnaire, what they would take away from the experience, a frequent response was the songs which they had learnt. The young dancers valued and appreciated the connection of their voices to their bodies and the movements they were learning. Learning the songs of the cultural dances allowed participants to engage additional aspects of themselves in the dance experience, thereby establishing a meaningful, deep, and memorable connection between self and the cultural worlds of others. The following journal entries provide evidence of this:

Sive: To sing the song and dance is what I will take away from the experience.

Avuyile: I will remember the Swati songs that we sang.

Lebo: I will remember the songs we sang. I loved the Mbali song. It gave me confidence to be a beautiful flower and to take care of my body.

The Mbali song, a siSwati tune, was taught by student teacher LV during the *kugiya* dance. Mbali means beautiful flowers. This dance narrates the story of young girls who take pride in their elegance and beauty and are confident that the kingdom's queen mother will protect them from the prying eyes of men. Through learning and singing the song, Lebo, who is Xhosa, found a personal connection with young Swati girls from another land and place. The Mbali song, a siSwati song, was taught by LV in learning the *kugiya* dance. Mbali means beautiful flowers. This dance carries the story of young girls who are proud of their elegance and beauty and are confident they will be protected from men's prying eyes by the kingdom's Queen Mother. Through learning and singing the song, Lebo, who is Xhosa, found personal

layers of connection with young Swati girls from another land and place. This finding resonates with similar findings by dance scholars Mabingo (2020), Wilson (2025), and Cruzbank (2010). Their dance educational research has revealed that engaging dancers with the music and movement of African-based dances creates a total experience that provides insights into the genealogies, histories, languages, social practices, religion and politics of the people and culture from which the dances emerge. This understanding is particularly critical in dance in South Africa and Africa, where dance in diverse communities tends to be multidisciplinary, involving music, singing/vocalizations, movement, masks, food, rituals, and clapping, and where dance functions as a tool of communication between people, nature, spirits and the cosmos (Welsh-Asante, 1996; Mabingo, 2020). I further argue that dance education experiences in South Africa which separate the constitutive elements of cultural dance traditions not only fragment our cultural identities, but also rupture the African soul, potentially resulting in a severance of essential layers of communication and connection to each other and the spiritual world (Onwueke, 2009).

This rich intercultural engagement was not without its challenges. The experience also resulted in felt connections of the body as a conduit for spiritual activities. As aforementioned in the methodology, everyone learnt the text and movements of the Hindu *namaskaram* prayer taught by lecturer SD and recited it at the end of our weekly sessions before exiting the studio space. When asked in the questionnaire, what they learnt about other cultures and people from this experience, Simnikiwe wrote, 'I learnt that daily prayer is essential and that I too can do this through dance.' Snovuyo expressed in her small-group interview that she felt the blessings of Mother Earth as her hands and feet touched the ground in moving the prayer. She said that, 'It was as if we connected with her presence through our hands and feet' (Personal Communication, April 20, 2024). Except for lecturer SD, none of us were Hindus. However, collectively sharing in the prayer with SD through dance brought us closer to each other's humanity and gave us a sense of harmony between body and spirit.

Finally, the children discovered kinetic connections and aesthetic similarities among the cultural dances, which we believe diminished the cultural gap between them and us, and awakened a bodily awareness of kinship. The children found ontological resonance in the 'high energy Jamaican dance', the rhythmic 'footwork of the Swati dance', and the 'language' of the Swati songs, as well as the fun and 'partner work' of the *sokkie* and the percussive 'rhythms' of the *kollatam* sticks striking each other. This feeling of connection encouraged them to be more open to exploring the worlds of the Other, and we observed increased joy and engagement as the project developed.

A sense of Rejoycing

The feeling of kinship we witnessed emerged from their first introduction to dancehall in week 2. This experience is described in the following fieldnote:

Teaching the children choreography to dancehall artist Elephant Man's 'Pon di River' song and dancing along with them yielded much insight into Black joy. "Woza!" they shouted with raised cheeks as the grins on their faces widened and their limbs organically found and moved to the beat. They grasped the dancehall steps instantly and needed no encouragement to add their personal flavours to the steps. Their response was one of power and agency...It was as if their bodies had been here

before, and the rhythm and music were already in their skin, flesh, and bone marrow. They took to the dancehall like fish take to water. I could feel their energies, and they could feel mine. I felt this profound connection in my spirit that was deeply satisfying. Collectively, it was just sheer, unapologetic, unbounded joy as Diaspora and African arms, legs, hips, pelvises, and spines coalesced, mapping familiar geographies of Black joy and freedom. Dancing back to the motherland through dancehall with these children was akin to dancing with one's reflection in the mirror.

(LW facilitator Fieldnotes, March 9, 2024)

Their joy manifested as physical exuberance, a cacophony of sonic noise, and animated facial expressions, confirming Black performance sensory affects within and across time and space, as theorised by DeFrantz and Gonzalez (2014). We observed the same life-giving response with the children learning the Swazi dances of *kiguya* and *ingadla*. The study revealed that in these moments of South-South embodied dialogues and exchanges 'not wholly dependent on any European arbiter' (Kraut, 2003, p. 450), the young children's Black performance practices and aesthetics were continually affirmed, and joy was amplified. The following responses from the young dancers provide evidence of this:

- Mbali: Wow! I am totally tired, but class was so much fun. What I like about this type of dance is that you just use your body. It's a freestyle type of dance. Wow!! It's so much fun.
- Ovuyo: Today I had a good day learning the Jamaica dance. It made me feel so happy. I am very happy about this thing that I was taught. The new steps are funny, JOYable [sic], beautiful and nice.
- Chenge: I am so happy, so happy, so happy with this dance. I go [sic] tell my mother what you are teaching us. Thank you.
- Aphiwe: I am excited today because I know this dance...I love the footwork of the *kiguya* dance.

Dancing our identities generated spaces of joy, where Black youths from a South African township, university academics, and students could dance together unstifled by and unhinged from the colonial tendency to silence and marginalise their expressions. Moving our birthright of mobile hips, loose spines and flatfeet in the studios of the academy with energetic excitement and freedom ultimately affirmed each other as kin in embodied ways that brought immense joy and therapy to the body and spirit. In a world and nation where hate speech, images of trauma, and the smoking guns of violent crimes increasingly flood our senses, amplifying expressions of joy through South-South embodied intercultural articulations is valuable for our humanity and well-being.

The power of these cross-cultural exchanges within a small dance studio can be easily overlooked or discounted. However, within the context of an asymmetrical world oriented towards Western capitalist normativity, ontologies of Blackness and the Black body itself have been sites of control and censorship even in dance education spaces (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014). Therefore, as Jamaican scholar Niaah (2008) points out, Black children constructing spaces of enjoyment for themselves is a political act of power that assaults and mocks the oppressive every day and those who construct and maintain it" (p.45). These

moments of liberation can be achieved through South-South intercultural engagements, as evidenced through this study.

A sense of reaching out

The dancers found that by actively and intentionally reaching out to others outside of their cultures, they were able to see others more clearly and with less fear. Dancing the other enabled us to discover commonalities and differences among ourselves. This outcome aligns with Schechner's (1984) assertions that through exploring the performance practices of others, we gain insights into the cultural values, beliefs, and social structures of different societies, thus building intercultural knowledge. In our study, such discoveries increased respect and appreciation for the cultures of others and our own cultures. Participants comments demonstrate this reciprocal cultural appreciation:

Yolanda: It was good teaching our culture to the teachers. I felt proud, impressed and happy.

Minah: I felt proud to teach my Xhosa culture because I love my culture and I love to dance.

Noma: I learnt to respect my background.

Sive: We will miss the facilitators and learning about the dances.

The experience also prompted increased curiosity about other cultures. All participants indicated on the questionnaire that the experience made them more likely to learn about other people and their cultures in South Africa and to make friends with people from other cultures. This is a noteworthy outcome as Zhang (2007) asserts that acquiring knowledge about foreign cultures and cultivating attitudes of curiosity towards different ways of being are key aspects of developing intercultural competence. These dispositions are seeds that ought to be consciously and consistently nurtured through dance education to improve intercultural social relations among South Africa's diverse population. The majority of the young girls in the study had only been exposed to Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, and Afrikaans cultures. Facilitator SD was the first Indian South African they had personally interacted with, as opposed to only seeing them on television. Additionally, their cultural engagement with the foreign facilitators, LW and LV, expanded their knowledge and understanding of other Black cultures and ways of being beyond their own experiences as South Africans.

The study highlighted in multiple ways that feelings of discomfort are part and parcel of the experience of reaching beyond one's cultural circles. For example, we sometimes struggled to communicate clearly and effectively with the Xhosa youths due to language differences. We, the English-speaking facilitators, found it difficult to pronounce the siSwati song lyrics taught by LV. As teachers, we were also concerned that our cultural dances might not be well-received as others. Several learners also found it hard to write their reflections in English and even in their own isiXhosa language. We believe, however, that there is value in recognising and accepting that in reaching out to others in South Africa, new aches, as well as old colonial and apartheid wounds may surface. Nonetheless, understanding that

these aches are etymologically part of the re(aching) out may help us trust the process and persevere in the journey towards finding the joy that awaits meaningful intercultural connections. By extending ourselves beyond our cultural comfort zones, both teachers and learners stand to gain, as shown by the responses to the question: 'What did you learn from the experience?'

- Nomfundo: I learnt that I can smile with others when I dance their dances.
- Karabo: I learnt that I can reach out and interact with other cultures outside my culture... It was my first time eating koeksisters.
- Thandeka: I was surprised that I could learn the Indian dance and perform it.
- Cwenga: I was surprised by the *sokkie* dance. It was actually fun and easy to do.
- CV (facilitator): As a Coloured South African, I felt a strong connection when dancing to *amapiano* with the Xhosa girls, which allowed me to express myself while also finding common ground with others. Witnessing the children's joy and openness as they embraced each culture reminded me of the beauty that lies in collaboration and shared humanity. The project created a space where blending traditions didn't erase identity but rather enhanced it.
- SD (facilitator): It is easy to assume in democratic South Africa that everyone is familiar with the rich tapestry of cultural traditions. I have become more mindful of the importance of cultural education and the role it plays in building inclusive, respectful, and cohesive relationships.
- LV (facilitator): Being a part of the project allowed me to gain more knowledge on the cultures that were explored, and it also challenged me to do more research on my culture so that I could accurately present it.

Through the experience of learning, sharing, and performing our cultural dances, all participants could simultaneously stretch inward and reach outward, thereby broadening their perspectives of self, others, and the world in which they exist.

Conclusion

We have argued that dance teachers and students highlighting their cultural identities in dance education through shared experiences with others is a powerful way to turn the mythical ideas of the rainbow nation into lived practice in the South African dance classroom. We assert that in the so-called "rainbow nation," there is a greater need for interculturalism, where other cultures are explored and appreciated by those whose roots are not in that culture. Dance is powerful in this process as it can transcend and penetrate cultures and differences despite linguistic barriers and challenges. Dancing cultural identity is deepened when the experience involves multiple performance modes, including movement, song, rhythm, language, and ritual. Songs, movements, histories, stories, language, traditional rituals, food, values, attitudes, and beliefs are all embedded in cultural dances. Such a

pedagogical approach invites our fuller selves into the process of reaching out to others and is powerful in opening the doors of communion with self and others. This is especially valuable for young children as they develop skills to understand and engage with a multicultural nation and world. This study has demonstrated that cross-cultural exchanges can foster affective experiences of deep reconnection, liberatory joy, and bold curiosity, enabling individuals to extend themselves beyond their usual circles long after the dance experience. Dancing our cultural identities together therefore has the potential to cultivate seeds of curiosity, openness, trust, kinship, care, cooperation, inclusion, and respect among the culturally diverse peoples of the 'rainbow nation', rather than build walls of fear, separation, indifference, or apathy (Wilson et al. 2021). Thirty years after democracy, will you dance with me?

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Biographies

Lisa Wilson is an associate professor and the head of dance at the Centre for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa. Her research and teaching interests encompass dance education, pedagogy, decolonial dance practices, and African/African diasporic dance performance. Her publications include book chapters and journal articles in various international journals, such as *Research in Dance Education*, *Journal of Dance Education*, *Dance Current Research*, *Intercultural Education Journal*, and the *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. She originates from the island of Jamaica in the Caribbean, where her journey with daCi began. She is the current National representative for daCi in South Africa. She also coordinates a youth dance program at the UCT in partnership with UCT dance graduate leaders developing young people in dance.

Saranya Devan is born and raised in Durban, South Africa. She is recognised for her versatility in drama, dance performance, and choreography. Saranya holds a Master's in Bharathanatyam from the University of Madras and a Master's in Dance from the University of Cape Town. She is passionate about seeking out new voices, fresh ideas, and innovative ways to tell stories, and she is not afraid to transcend boundaries. She is committed to bringing the beauty and art of dance, drama, and performance to underserved populations, and her credentials include dancing in various solo and group productions and directing drama productions. Devan is a guest lecturer in theatre and dance at the University of Cape Town and is currently registered for a PhD in Dance that explores the placement of Indian performing arts and culture through the Classical Indian Dance form of Bharathanatyam in a multicultural South Africa.

Lwandile Vilane is a recent University of Cape Town (UCT) graduate. She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in applied dance pedagogy and psychology. She is keenly interested in how dance stimulates children's cognitive, emotional and physical development. She pioneers a "Groovy Moovers" program centred around using creative dance to enhance children's holistic development and delivers this program at UCT's Educare Centre. One of her main goals is to become a dance psychologist. She originates from the Kingdom of Eswatini in Southern Africa, formerly known as Swaziland. She is currently a postgraduate dance student at the University of Cape Town.

Chanté Vermeulen is a dynamic performer, creator, and facilitator currently pursuing her Honours in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town, majoring in Applied Dance and Psychology. Her dance training began at Jacqueline's Academy of Dance at the age of seven and continued until 2021, laying the foundation for her multidisciplinary artistic journey. Chanté's work spans acting, presenting, and facilitation, and she is deeply committed to pushing artistic boundaries. She uses voice, movement, and performance to tell powerful stories that educate, challenge, and transform. Her approach to performance is rooted in authenticity and creativity, aiming to spark meaningful dialogue and shift perspectives. With a strong belief in the power of art to influence and inspire, Chanté is passionate about creating work that resonates deeply with audiences across both live and digital platforms. Her vision is to leave a lasting impact through bold, thought-provoking, and heart-driven storytelling.

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