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Dancing With children or dancing for children? Measuring the effects of a dance intervention in children's confidence and agency

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ABSTRACT

Dance has benefits in children's development, including increased self-confidence, physical and mental growth. While much research explores preschool children's experiences in dance courses, most studies involve pre-designed choreographies led by adults. Some argue that young children have limited ability to create their own choreography. This research challenges that by giving children the opportunity to co-create choreographies, with practitioners, using music of their choice. A new dance framework, *Dancing with Dr E*, was implemented over 5 months in five preschool classrooms in London. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with practitioners. The findings revealed numerous instances where children's participation increased, showing excitement and multimodal communication. There was a noticeable increase in children's confidence, by becoming more vocal about their needs and ideas. Due to the limited number of participants and the absence of a control group, further research on the effects of dance education in children's confidence and agency is recommended.

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Introduction

Dance is one of the many areas that influence the early years curriculum in the UK. It falls under the arts as a specific learning area; however, dance has yet to receive focused attention or detailed analysis within the curriculum. It is broadly categorized under expressive arts, alongside activities like singing, performing, and experimenting with colours.

Dancing is an activity that children naturally engage in from a very young age, without being prompted. It is a way for children to express themselves freely. Neves et al. (2020) observed dancing elements in babies as young as seven months old. This art form provides children with opportunities for holistic development, covering many aspects of all developmental areas. Rajan and Aker (2024) highlighted that dance can offer a multimodal expression using movement instead of language. When given a free and flexible dance framework, children have the chance to express themselves through movement. According to Tortora (2019), allowing for spontaneous dancing also creates opportunities for self-healing and growth. Focusing her arguments in the aspect of dance as a free personal expression, she argued that free dancing can help children reduce anxiety and build resilience. Conversely, Chun (2019) emphasized the importance of structure

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when teaching dance to preschool children, arguing that young children have limited ability to create their own choreography.

This research challenges this argument by giving children a voice in creating dance routines alongside their practitioners as a team. Considering the many developmental benefits of dance and the advantages of free dancing, this study was designed to explore its effects on children's experiences in preschool settings. The aim of this research is to investigate the effects of dance on children's experiences in preschool settings, providing a platform for children to express themselves freely and safely through movement while taking a leading role in their dance interactions.

Literature review

Dance can take many forms, from spontaneous movement to structured styles like salsa, ballet, or tango. However, at the core of all these types and forms, the essence of dance is centred on individual expression. San-Juan-Ferrer and Hipola (2020) stated that dance is an artistic expression that encompasses various elements of communication and emotion. They argued that dance can enhance emotional intelligence, serving as a platform for self-awareness and reflection. A year later, Rajan & Aker (2024) supported this view, adding that dance introduces a multimodal element to the communication process. By focusing on the interactive nature of dance, they concluded that incorporating it into educational settings can offer numerous benefits for children's personal and physical development, including improved self-discipline and sensory awareness.

Dance is an innate activity that children engage in from birth. Researchers have shown that even at a very early age, children display elements of dance in their movements (MacRae, 2022; Neves et al., 2020). When language barriers exist due to age or bilingualism, dance can serve as an effective means of communication. This is because dance allows for expression without the pressure to conform to a specific form, offering opportunities for multimodal communication (Cetin & Cevikbas, 2020).

The benefits of dance in preschool have been established through both empirical and non-empirical research. Cetin and Cevikbas (2020) conducted non-empirical research to explore the outcomes of creative dance in preschool, noting that dance offers opportunities for self-expression in multimodal ways and can promote emotional development. However, they emphasized the need for further research to more deeply understand the effects of dance on socio-emotional development. My study aims to contribute to that area by measuring the impact of dance on children's confidence and agency.

When examining empirical research on dance in preschool, many arguments emphasize the flexibility and freedom of expression that dance provides. However, a closer look at the methodology and research design often reveals that pre-designed dance lesson plans are used, offering only limited flexibility to children. Chun (2019) advocated for reasonable structured dance lessons but also with strict requirements, which can undermine the purpose of free expression, as children are required to follow rules and guidelines rather than expressing their own ideas during the dance routines.

Building on this argument, Bayanova et al. (2022) examined the effects of music and dance on preschool children. They used experimental and control groups to test their hypothesis, with a substantial number of participants in each group. While their study primarily focused on the impact of extra music sessions on children's development, a dance element was included in their methodology. A closer look at their approach to dancing interactions reveals that they treated dance as a structured model of teaching, rather than a flexible one that allows children to have a voice in shaping the outcome.

A year later, Pustovoitova et al. (2021) conducted a study on preschool children to investigate the effects of dance on their physical development. While their research produced positive results regarding the impact of dance on children's physical development, it is evident that they relied on a structured dance methodology, without offering the children the freedom to choose their own dance activities.

Another similar study was conducted by Thomaidou et al. (2021), focusing on the effects of creative dance in preschool classrooms. Their aim was to explore how a dance program impacted children's creativity and motor competence. Using control and experimental groups with pre- and post-tests, their approach provided the potential for robust conclusions. Their findings suggest that dancing has an impact on children's motor skills, but this is not significant. They attributed this to the content of the dancing activities as they provided limited opportunities for children to develop a range of motor skills. While they emphasized creative dancing, which suggests flexibility and freedom of choice for the children, there were no explicit details on how the dance lessons and activities were structured. However, their methodology did include elements of free, improvised movement, which is a positive aspect, as it allowed children some degree of freedom during the dance sessions.

The element of freedom, that was missing from the previous research projects, was addressed by the Kotaman et al. (2024) study. They conducted empirical research to prove that dance can offer benefits to children's social skills and help them gain confidence in their lives in general. They used experimental and control groups to investigate the effects of dance on children's pro-social skills, aggression and shyness. It was very positive to see that they offered some reasonable structure in the dance framework allowing children to free dance to showcase their individuality and personal input in some of the activities they offered. This had an effect on children's confidence and self-expression in the experimental group, which achieved higher scores in the post-test compared to the control group.

Concluding the literature review, it becomes clear that there is a need to examine the effects of dance education through a more flexible lens. Theodotou (2024) previously argued that children are capable of producing original outcomes when given the opportunity to do so within a flexible and open framework. This research contributes to the field by offering new empirical evidence on the effects of dance in preschool, utilizing an open and flexible environment where children can actively influence the dance interactions.

Purpose and research questions

This piece of research aimed to investigate the effects of dance on children's experiences in preschool settings in children aged 3–4 years old. The research questions are:

1. How was children's holistic participation during the dance intervention?
2. What were the effects of the dance intervention on children's confidence and agency?

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of my university prior to the beginning of the research project. I delivered a session to the participants, in their setting, in which I explained the purpose and the procedures of this project so they can give me an informed consent before they participate. They could ask questions, and they had my contact details for any questions arise after the session. Following this, a signed consent letter was obtained from the gatekeeper of the settings and the participants. It was noted that their participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw without giving any explanation.

Sample

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. I approached nurseries within my professional and personal network and explained the project's aim. Five different classrooms, from 2 different nurseries, agreed to participate, involving 10 early childhood practitioners and 70 preschool children. The settings were from the private sector, with both government-funded and

fee-paying children in London. Signed consent was obtained from the gatekeepers of the settings, the practitioners, and the parents or legal guardians of the children. Children participated voluntarily, and if any child showed signs of discomfort, they were not forced to continue but were offered alternative activities. They could rejoin the dance activities whenever they felt comfortable.

Dance intervention

For the dance intervention, I designed a new framework called *Dancing with Dr E*. It is a non-commercial framework, free of financial cost. The funding was used to cover everyday expenses and support the settings with dance resources. The framework follows a three-step process where children and practitioners co-design and co-create the dance choreography (see Table 1). It incorporates children's ideas while offering practitioners suggestions on how to progress. Practitioners implemented the framework for five months, starting after the Christmas holidays, when the children had settled into their routines. I did not deliver any dance sessions to the children. I decided to solely engage the practitioners in delivering the dance framework as children were familiar with them and they would be more comfortable with the new dance framework if a familiar person delivers it.

An induction period was provided for practitioners, giving them the opportunity to practice the three-step framework through a trial-and-error approach. During the intervention, practitioners implemented the dance framework daily for 30 min. Weekly consultation meetings were held to address any issues, provide suggestions, and discuss the practitioners' progress.

Data collection methods

To measure the outcomes of the project, I adopted an interpretivist paradigm. The reason for selecting this type of paradigm was that I wanted to gain a thorough insight of the aspect under investigation. Based on Mukherji and Albon's (2018) arguments about the interpretivist paradigm, I was interested in the different interpretations that could emerge from dance intervention through the eyes of the participants. The evaluation was conducted through semi-structured interviews held after the dance intervention, focusing on children's participation, confidence, and agency. This approach was chosen to be less intrusive, as directly collecting data from the children would have been challenging due to their young age. Implementing interviews with the children themselves would have been difficult, and direct observation might have disrupted the smooth flow of the dance activities. Therefore, the data were collected from the children's practitioners, who were more familiar with the children and could provide more accurate insights than an outsider. Interviews took place at the nursery setting of the practitioners in a private room at a date that

Table 1. Dancing with Dr E steps.

Step	Description
1. Let's start	Select the theme/topic e.g. happy song, salsa, butterflies. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's interests during their play • Practitioners' observations • Unexpected event • Daily announcement Discuss with children and confirm the topic of interest
2. Music	Find songs/music related to the topic. Listen to them with the children. Decide on their favourite one
3. Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Warm up</u>: Suggest simple movements to begin. • <u>Song/Music</u>: Listen to the song and start moving. Slowly ask for the children's ideas in forming a choreography. Use prompts to motivate children. Example: How could an elephant dance? How could dance a YES? If 'Hello' could dance, how would this be? How would a green man dance? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Perform</u>: Build the choreography and present it to an audience of your choice. • <u>Cool down</u>: Simple movements to cool down the muscles

was convenient to them. I used TEAMS to record the interviews that offer an auto-transcribe option and then I checked it for accuracy.

The interviews were organized into three different categories:

1. Children's participation
2. Children's confidence
3. Children's agency

The first interview category was used to gather data for the first research question, while the second and third interview categories provided data for the second research question. The interviews included questions about the differences they could see in children's participation, confidence and agency, providing examples of such situations focusing on different cultural backgrounds and languages.

Data analysis and discussion

To analyse the data, I used thematic analysis. This was undertaken wherein data were organized into three overarching themes, according to this study's main areas of investigation (Children's participation, confidence and agency), with the interview transcripts being reviewed 10 times to ensure accurate categorization. I was the only person who reviewed and analysed the data. During this process, nine additional subthemes were identified, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the effects of the dance intervention. A new theme was decided if more than two participants mentioned the same aspect. The themes that are analysed in the following sections are those that more than five participants have mentioned. To eliminate bias in this process, I asked a colleague to check the organization and interpretation of the data.

Children's participation

To address the first research question, children's participation was a success from the outset of the dance intervention. This success was characterized by the children's readiness and willingness to engage. According to practitioners, children quickly embraced the new dance methodology and began offering their own unique ideas to create choreography for each song. They also started suggesting their own song choices e.g. Gummy Bear, Green Green grass by George Ezra, Happy by Pharrell Williams, demonstrating how comfortable they were with the entire process.

Dance comes naturally to children, especially when they are not required to follow strict choreography. It is a fundamental aspect of early childhood (Yetti et al., 2021). The element of fun and enjoyment is crucial in any activity the practitioners implement with children. It is widely understood that no one, particularly young children, will participate in an activity if it isn't engaging and enjoyable. Bond and Stinson (2000) argue in their meta-analysis that children become motivated and excited when they engage in dance experiences. Findings support this, as practitioners emphasized the fun aspect of the dance intervention. Practitioners noted that they found it amusing and enjoyable to think creatively while co-creating choreography, as did the children. This demonstrates that the intervention was well received, with children thoroughly enjoying the entire process. This sense of enjoyment is best illustrated by the following practitioner reflections:

P3: ... the one where you ask the children to participate and make their own moves. I think they found that really, really funny, and even now working in the choreography, they all want to do new moves, put their own intake. I think that was the funniest part.

P10: So, adding music and dancing like you were pizza for example. I find it really funny because it is something that came out of the box and never really thought of dancing like a pizza. Dance like a fridge or something like cheese. So, it's funny, and children find it funny because normally they expect you to say, 'show me how you

can dance like a dinosaur', they never really think 'Oh, let's dance like a computer. Oh, let's dance like potato'. So, they'll find it funny. And they're like, oh, that's silly. So, they start laughing and then they will eventually dance.

Engagement is another crucial aspect practitioners seek when implementing activities with young children. When individuals are fully engaged in the learning process, they are better able to absorb new information and make it their own. According to Temple et al. (2020), dance has the potential to enhance active engagement in children and improve their knowledge in other areas of learning. Findings support this, as practitioners reported high levels of engagement during the dance intervention, which led to significant gains in other learning areas.

P7: I think everyone was very intrigued. Everyone really liked it; I think that was the most engaged I've ever seen them in anything. So, they were really engaged

P8: They even know the word dancing with Doctor E. It's gonna be what's coming next or what are we going to do next? It is dancing with Doctor E musical movement dancing with Doctor E. So yeah, that's another vocabulary that they picked up and they look forward to. They really enjoyed it.

Finally, dance offers a platform for free expression that is not limited to conventional means of communication. Young children, especially those who are bilingual or multilingual, often rely on multimodal forms of communication since verbal language can be a barrier for them. Through dance, they can express themselves non-verbally (Cetin & Cevikbas, 2020). When effectively integrated into children's interactions, dance can create a meaningful space for multimodal expression (Rajan & Aker, 2024). Our findings provided great examples of this in practice. Practitioners noted that *Dancing with Dr E* helped children to communicate when verbal language was an obstacle, particularly for those from households where English was an additional language.

P1: English is not his first language. It is really important that he was able to express himself in that way. So that he found music and dance as a way of expressing himself without using words. He found *Dancing with Dr E* as a way of expressing himself.

P5: It kind of boosted the confidence at that point in time. They're more open to us at that time. Because we use body movement, refresh ourselves freely and meaning that they couldn't do just about anything they want to do.

To briefly summarize, the dance intervention had a significant impact on children's participation in their daily activities. The data showed that children were more engaged and found alternative ways to communicate effectively when language barriers existed. The intervention also supported children's growth in other areas of learning, highlighting its valuable contribution to their overall development. In the next section, I will analyse the impact of the dance intervention on children's confidence and agency.

Children's confidence and agency

To address the second research question, our dance framework helped children build confidence and empowered them to make choices during their time in the nursery. It was positive to see shy children gain the confidence to speak up and share their ideas. The benefits of the dance intervention were also evident in children becoming more vocal about their needs and more aware of their actions. Additionally, children demonstrated increased responsibility, transferring the skills they gained through dance to other areas of their lives.

Confidence is a key aspect of children's personal development and can significantly influence their participation and engagement levels. Dance education can boost children's self-confidence, as dancing often evolves from games that are already part of their daily lives (Gong, 2019; Temple et al., 2020). Dance creates an open environment where everyone is free to participate, motivating and exciting children. Rajan and Aker (2024) demonstrated that dance can also help at-risk children find themselves, strengthen their self-identity, and build self-trust. Findings revealed numerous opportunities where children either gained or enhanced their confidence in expressing themselves and participating, especially when other teaching methods were less effective.

P8: Children who were initially very expressive, started to become more expressive. Having to watch other children like themselves help them to come up with ideas. And everybody likes joining in. This encouraged the other children who would have been otherwise quiet and withdrawn to be more, more expressive. That was a good thing. As a matter of fact, I even understand what could have worked better for the other more quiet children.

P2: Some of the shy children, now they start to be more confident in our room. For example, if you put the dancing music now, they don't forget. I think Dr E is now with them because if you put music now, they start to do actions they like they do here with Dr E. And even the shy children they enjoyed, they participated.

When children feel confident in their setting, they begin to reveal their true abilities and skills, as they feel safe and secure in an environment away from home. Successfully integrating dance into the curriculum can positively impact children's self-discipline (Rajan & Aker, 2024). Dance activities can also foster self-control (Yetti et al., 2021), empathy, and emotional regulation (San-Juan-Ferrer & Hípola, 2020). Findings showed that dance helped children extend their skills, become more responsible for their actions, and demonstrate greater awareness of others, even regulating their emotions after the dancing sessions ended. This is a particularly positive outcome, as it highlights the lasting effects of dance beyond the intervention itself.

P9: They will have to tidy by putting away their props and helping one another. If they see any props lie around, they help to put it aside for the next day because they understand that we will need it again for the next day. They have now an understanding, more like taking care. So that has helped them to be more organized in terms of looking after their things. It's not just for the dancing session. They are now starting to understand the need to look after the stuff. Before we had the children breaking the play resources. But with the dancing with Dr E they look after the props, they are different.

P3: They've learned turn taking. The next day will be myself and that other person. For them to remember that you have to be chosen, and that child is not throwing the tantrum is a huge plus. They seemed to understand now.

Confidence can also lead children to be more vocal about their experiences after leaving the early years setting. When children talk about what they did during the day in preschool, it indicates that they enjoyed their experience. Rajan and Aker (2024) provided examples where parents mirrored practitioners' observations, noting that children engaged in dancing at home as well. Findings revealed that, on numerous occasions, parents reported to practitioners that *Dancing with Dr E* became a key topic of conversation at home after their children left the nursery. This demonstrates the sustainability of the project, as it became an integral part of their lives beyond the nursery.

P6: You could see the confidence that they they've got when they realized they know the moves and they can do those and do it together as a group. They were also doing it at home with their parents

P1: Even parents told us that they speak about this at home and organise their moves for Dancing with Dr E. They would do their moves outside of the dance sessions. They talk about it at home.

Finally, confidence can lead to agency. According to Houen et al. (2016), agency refers to the actions of individuals that demonstrate their capacity to choose, act, and influence aspects of their daily lives. It is important to support children's development of agency, as it enables them to make choices that matter to them and others, fostering meaningful learning. Providing real opportunities to practice agency is crucial for their development, which can be achieved through a more flexible curriculum (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2021). Dance offers such opportunities by allowing children to influence the choice of music (Gripson et al., 2022). Findings revealed numerous instances where children influenced the structure of the dance routine. They extended this skill beyond dance, confidently expressing their opinions to adults. This is a success of the project, attributed to the flexibility of *Dancing with Dr E*, which empowers both children and practitioners by giving children a voice.

P4: They realised that they could pick up the song and decide what to do. They're more eager to come in and say their own opinion about something even when they are back in the room.

P8: They have become more outspoken, more expressive. They've gained more confidence in the way that they reach out to their adult for, you know, express their need for anything. They find it the most interesting session

of the day, so that's very expressive, and that's packs of the excitement for the whole day. Once they come in and that session is done, it just packs up. They don't withdraw back again to themselves so that that expressive and feeling free.

To sum up, the findings demonstrated the benefits of the dance framework in enhancing children's participation, confidence, and agency. Practitioners reported increased levels of engagement and excitement among the children, with many transferring this experience to their home environments. They also noted that *Dancing with Dr E* helped children build confidence and become more vocal about their needs and ideas. This accomplishment was attributed to the framework's approach, which gives children a leading role and allows them to make choices that align with their personality and cultural background.

Conclusions

This research aimed at investigating the effects of dance on children's experiences in preschool settings. A total of 70 preschool children and 10 early years practitioners from five different classrooms participated in the project. The settings were private-sector nurseries in London, accepting both government-funded and fee-paying children. The *Dancing with Dr E* framework was implemented over a 5-month period, starting after the Christmas holidays, once the children were well-settled. Practitioners used the framework on a weekly basis. An induction period was provided before the project began, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews at the end of the project.

The data highlights the benefits of the intervention on children's participation, confidence, and agency. According to practitioners, children became more eager to engage in activities during the intervention and found ways to express themselves when language was a barrier. They reported increased levels of satisfaction and enjoyment, which contributed to the development of creative skills. The intervention also had positive effects on children's personal development. Findings showed that the dance framework enhanced children's agency and confidence, with practitioners noting that children became more vocal about their needs and had the courage to approach adults and express their desires. This, in turn, led to greater responsibility for their actions and a willingness to support others in doing the same.

These findings could be used as a response to Cetin and Cevikbas's (2020) arguments about the need for more research about the effects of dance in children's socio-emotional skills, as this study shows the benefits of dance in children's confidence and agency. It is also a response to Chun's (2019) arguments about the need of a reasonable structure in dance activities with children that also provides freedom, as 'Dancing with Dr E' provided both. Finally, this study extends Kotaman et al. (2024) findings as it provides further evidence about the impact of dance in children's social skills.

Before drawing any general conclusions, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. The first limitation relates to the data collection methods. While it would have been ideal to gather first-hand information through direct observation or by involving the children in the interview process, this was not feasible due to their age and the ethical considerations of disrupting their daily routine. Secondly, the sample size is a limitation, with only 10 practitioners participating in the data collection process. A larger sample could have provided more diverse perspectives and experiences. Thirdly, this study did not include control and experimental groups, which would have verified the effects of the dance intervention. Lastly, the duration of the project could also be considered a limitation, as extending the intervention over a full school year might have offered a more comprehensive understanding of its long-term outcomes.

Reflecting on my role and background as an early childhood practitioner and a researcher, it is important to acknowledge the influence it might have in the research process. I am in favour of the use of arts in the early childhood education and care and experienced the benefits early on during my career. Due to this experience, I thought that every practitioner and child feel the same, as dancing comes natural to me. However, this belief has changed throughout my research

as I realized that not everyone feels comfortable in exposing themselves through movement and it can take some time for people to warm up and embrace dancing and movement. This made me mindful on the way I approach my participants and the time I give for settling and induction. I kept a journal of my experience and reflected on these elements during the project, making actions of my next steps to eliminate any bias during the project.

However, it should be acknowledged that the research design was robust, adhering to ethical procedures and providing weekly consultation meetings to address any issues that arose. As a result, the findings can be considered valid for the sample involved. Further research is needed to examine the effects of the dance intervention on a larger population, ideally using control and experimental groups, and more data collection methods such as direct observations of children, as the promising results from this study suggest wider potential benefits. This research project showed the importance of dancing in developing children confidence and agency in early childhood education and care. This paper could be useful to early childhood practitioners for their planning and provision and for researchers who want to delve into the area of dance in the early years.

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