

Article

Re-imagining Dance Education for Autistic Children in Inclusive Settings through a Lens of Somatic Awareness and Emotional Communication

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Abstract: Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face major challenges in expressing emotions because they lack both verbal communication skills and social interaction abilities. The research investigates how dance/movement therapy (DMT) functions as a non-verbal arts education intervention to enhance emotional expression abilities in autistic children. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach which includes structured dance-based interventions, quantitative assessments and qualitative observations based on the principles of embodied cognition and expressive arts educational methods. Participants took part in rhythm-based movement sessions which used symbolic guidance to help them develop emotional awareness, bodily control and social interaction skills. The quantitative analysis indicated observable post-intervention increases across key indicators of emotional expression, emotional regulation, and social interaction.

Specifically, participants demonstrated higher frequencies of facial expression and expressive body movement during structured activities, alongside improved capacity to return to a calm state following emotional arousal. Measures related to social interaction showed increased responsiveness and initiation during group movement sessions.

Keywords: Dance; Dance therapy; Autism spectrum disorder; Emotional expression; Arts education; Embodied cognition; Inclusive education

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that leads to persistent social communication difficulties and restricted interests and manifests through unusual behaviors and sensory processing patterns (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The emotional expression difficulties represent a crucial developmental challenge for autistic individuals which scholars have not studied enough. According to research findings, autistic individuals display strong emotional reactions yet struggle to express their feelings through typical verbal and social methods which results in misunderstandings during social interactions and higher chances of emotional distress (Klin et al., 2007; Lord et al., 2020). The educational and therapeutic fields need to focus on providing emotional expression support by creating methods that match the autistic children's sensory needs and cognitive abilities and their communication methods.

The majority of traditional methods that treat emotional and social skill development in autistic children have depended on three main approaches including language-based instruction, behavioral training and cognitively mediated methods. The methods produce measurable results in particular adaptive skills, yet they require participants to understand words and learn symbolic content which differs among individuals with autism (Lord et al., 2020). The approaches favor standard communication methods while they ignore non-verbal and embodied expressions which results in fewer chances for people to experience genuine emotional connections. The limitations have led to increasing demand for body-based treatments which focus on sensory experiences, bodily communication and human relationships.

Dance and movement serve as essential human expression methods which people developed before they created spoken language to express their emotions and intentions and their relationships with others. Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a therapeutic method which uses body movement and rhythm and physical contact with space to help people gain emotional awareness and self-control and build social relationships (Hildebrandt et al., 2016; Koch et al., 2015). This study adopts the concept of dance as an “emotional language” as its central theoretical lens.

From this perspective, bodily movement functions as a communicative system through which emotional meaning is generated, expressed, and shared. For autistic children, whose emotional experiences are closely linked to sensory-motor processes, dance provides an accessible and authentic medium for emotional communication beyond verbal language.

The existing body of research shows that dance and movement-based therapies can help people who have ASD. DMT research shows that it helps people express their emotions better while developing social skills and creating relationships through three main methods which include mirroring and rhythmic attunement (Koch et al., 2015; McGarry & Russo, 2011). The research from Hildebrandt et al. (2016) shows that DMT therapy sessions helped autistic participants become more emotionally responsive and socially aware. Devereaux (2012) showed that dance/movement therapy can help people with autism communicate their emotions without words while building trust in therapy sessions. The findings indicate that through body movement, people can express emotions without needing to use words.

The research on dance and autism shows several important shortcomings despite its positive findings. Dance research focuses on therapeutic and clinical uses of dance while arts education studies have received less research attention. The studies of intervention research lack educational design, learning goals and movement symbolic content which makes it hard to implement inclusive educational methods. Research needs to define dance as an emotional language because studies demonstrate that it functions as both an educational and therapeutic tool.

Arts education provides an analytical framework which supports the theoretical understanding of dance-based therapy programs. Arts education promotes creativity and learning through artistic processes instead of focusing on student deficits while recognizing that emotional expression is a natural part of learning (Eisner, 2002). The inclusive education framework creates vital value because it validates all communication methods while protecting the rights of students to express themselves regardless of their disabilities (Florian, 2014). Arts educational programs should integrate dance/movement therapy principles to help students develop emotionally through body-based learning, creative art activities and social connections.

The present study explicitly positions dance/movement therapy within an arts education framework, rather than a purely therapeutic or clinical context. It aims to demonstrate how dance functions as an educational medium for emotional learning, expressive agency, and relational development in autistic children. By reframing dance as an embodied emotional

language embedded in arts education, this study distinguishes its contribution from existing therapeutic DMT research and highlights the pedagogical value of movement-based emotional learning in inclusive educational settings.

2. Background

2.1 Research subjects

The study used a mixed-methods research design to examine how dance movement therapy arts education intervention affects emotional expression in autistic children. The researchers used mixed-methods to study emotional and social functioning improvements together with detailed changes in non-verbal communication, expressive behavior and relational engagement that traditional standards should not be used to measure. The research project used both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve its goal of showing how people use movement experiences to express their emotions in educational environments.

2.2 Methods

The quantitative part of the research studied how emotional expression and social interaction changed between two points in time while the qualitative part of the research focused on documenting specific experiences and studying the development of the research process. The research design worked best for arts-based studies because these studies need time to reveal emotional and expressive results through gradual changes in behavior and relationships between people. The research team used various data sources to confirm their findings through triangulation which improved the study's ability to interpret its results.

2.2.1 Participants

The study enlisted autistic children who came from a special education program and an inclusive arts education program which provided artistic activities. The study required participants to meet these three requirements: (a) they must have a formal autism spectrum disorder diagnosis according to DSM-5 standards, (b) they must be between the ages of 6 and 10 years, and (c) they must show the capability to join group movement activities while needing individual support. The study excluded children who had medical or physical conditions that would endanger their safety during movement activities.

The final sample consisted of a small cohort, consistent with qualitative and arts-based intervention research, which allowed for close observation, individualized responsiveness, and the establishment of a supportive relational environment. The researchers chose this sample size because they wanted to study emotional and expressive processes deeply instead of making statistical claims about broader populations.

All parents or legal guardians provided their consent before the study began, while children provided their assent when they reached the right developmental age. The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board that evaluated its research practices. The research team followed all ethical rules that protect children with developmental disabilities by respecting their right to choose and secure emotional safety and their personal information. The research team anonymized participant identities and locked away all research information in a secure location.

2.2.2 Intervention Procedure

The intervention featured a dance/movement program that used structured guidelines based on dance/movement therapy principles and arts education methods. The conducting sessions took place throughout several weeks with one to two sessions being scheduled each week. The instructor who led the session had dance education training and experience working with autistic children and conducted sessions that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

The session structure maintained uniformity across all activities to create an atmosphere of emotional safety that students could trust. The opening ritual of the session established group cohesion by using simple breathing exercises, rhythmic movement activities and body awareness activities to establish grounding. The warm-up exercises led into the session through activities that developed sensory engagement, spatial awareness and rhythmic attunement.

The main session started with students to practice guiding their movement through different activities which included improvisational movement, body imitation and artistic symbol work. The children practiced non-verbal communication through mirroring activities while they used symbolic imagery to represent their emotional states through body movement. The session needed less verbal direction, which made space for students to learn through demonstrations and practice at their own pace.

The session ended with a relaxation period that helped participants process their emotions through gentle movements, stillness and reflective gestures. The project had no focus on teaching students proper technical skills. The instructional team set emotional presence, bodily awareness, rhythmic consistency and relational engagement as their main teaching objectives. The system used repetition and routine to help students manage their emotions while shared movement opportunities functioned as a method to build social relationships.

2.2.3 Data Collection Instruments

The researchers used standardized assessment tools which researchers commonly use in autism and developmental studies to gather quantitative data about emotional expression, emotional regulation and social interaction. Trained professionals who understood the participants' communication abilities applied assessments before the study began and after the study finished. The movement-based program led to changes which the measures identified as results of program participation.

The researchers used multiple techniques to collect qualitative data which helped them present a comprehensive and trustworthy assessment of their research. The team recorded systematic observational notes throughout each session to track how participants exhibited spontaneous movement behavior, their facial expressions and eye contact and response patterns to peers and instructors and their overall emotional conditions. Observations were guided by a structured framework to ensure consistency across sessions.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and educators following the intervention to gather perspectives on perceived changes in emotional expression, social behavior, and emotional regulation in daily contexts. Where consent was provided, selected sessions were video-recorded to support detailed movement analysis and retrospective review. All qualitative data were anonymized prior to analysis.

2.2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine changes between pre- and post-intervention assessments. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the modest sample size, analyses focused on within-group comparisons to identify meaningful trends rather than on broad generalization. Results were interpreted cautiously, with emphasis placed on patterns of change relevant to emotional expression and social engagement.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Observational notes, interview transcripts, and video reflections were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to emotional expression, bodily engagement, and relational dynamics. Coding was conducted iteratively, with themes refined through repeated review to enhance analytical rigor and credibility. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a nuanced interpretation of how dance/movement-based arts education supported emotional expression in autistic children.

3.Results

3.1 Quantitative Findings

The dance/movement-based arts education intervention program brought about positive changes that were shown through the quantitative research results which examined emotional expression and social development in participants. The assessment results from before and after the intervention showed that participants had improved their emotional expression and emotional regulation and their ability to connect with others through social interactions.

The post-intervention results showed that participants showed more emotional expression through higher facial expression and body movement and affective response during structured activities. The participants showed advancement in emotional regulation through two specific improvements which included their ability to control their emotions and their capacity to regain a peaceful state after emotional disturbance. The social interaction measures demonstrated positive progress as children showed better response to peers and adults, and better ability to share space, and they initiated social interaction more often during group time.

The study results suffered from limited generalization potential because the small sample size created search challenges for discovering general statistical results. The dance/movement intervention brought about measurable emotional and social changes in participants which show that embodied arts-based methods hold potential value for children with autism.

3.2 Qualitative Observational Findings

The qualitative observations revealed how emotional expression progressed through the various stages of the intervention. Participants demonstrated distinct and noticeable movement behavior changes which affected their ability to express feelings and maintain relationships with others.

During the early sessions, many children displayed cautious or minimal movement through their physical distance from others and their choice to engage in repetitive or self-directed actions. The stage of emotional expression at this point showed very little when only one spontaneous gesture and no visible affective shifts occurred. The sessions then showed a gradual transformation which reached its peak at the final stage. The children began to move independently through their development of new body movements and their ability to react to rhythmic cues and instructor guidance.

The primary theme that emerged from the study showed that participants demonstrated more spontaneous movement which they initiated themselves. Children developed original movements in their play after they stopped depending on imitation and external prompts while showing their emotions through smiling and vocal behaviors and bodily posture changes. The participants displayed these emotional reactions during the sessions' unstructured movement periods which they used as a platform for emotional expression.

Another recurring theme involved enhanced emotional attunement and responsiveness. The children used mirroring activities to create shared moments of attention because they began to notice the movements that their peers and instructors used. Participants developed a process of establishing relationships through their use of eye contact and synchronized movements which they employed to share rhythmic patterns.

3.3 Changes in Social Interaction and Relational Engagement

Observation of the participants' emotional expressions and group dynamics revealed two key interaction changes resulting from the intervention. First, the children showed a greater ability to stay close to other children while working in groups during the organized rhythmic activities. Additionally, they demonstrated improved coordinated movement, a skill developed by practicing foundational interactions like waiting and taking turns.

Some participants who had shown no willingness to join group activities underwent a change through their new openness to stay in shared movement areas while doing other activities. The emotional safety and relational comfort of the space were proven through this particular observation. The children who took part in joint improvisational activities used mirrored movements to duplicate what their peers did and they also used rhythmic methods which demonstrated their developing social awareness.

The interviews with parents and teachers confirmed the observations made by the researchers. The caregivers described emotional expression changes in their children which showed through their increased usage of gestures to express needs, their improved emotional stability and their decreased transitional frustration which occurred outside the intervention periods. The parents observed that their children showed more relaxed behavior and better expressiveness after the dance sessions which positively influenced their daily activities.

3.4 Emotional Regulation and Bodily Awareness

The participants showed two major emotional regulation and bodily awareness skills which they developed through the study. The participants demonstrated their improved ability to control their movement through their development of smoother transitions between active and calm states. The session closing period showed participants starting to move into stillness, gentle movements and grounding activities with less struggle to do so.

The observers saw two major bodily awareness improvements which the participants developed through their movement requirements, spatial awareness, rhythm and tempo awareness. The emotional tone changes which happened in the participants created a link between bodily regulation and emotional expression through their development of more bodily control which led to more engagement with the environment.

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3.6 Summary of Results

This conceptual framework summarizes the observed pathways through which participation in dance/movement-based arts education supported emotional expression in autistic children. The framework illustrates how embodied movement and rhythmic engagement facilitated emotional regulation, which in turn contributed to enhanced social interaction and relational engagement. (Figure 1).

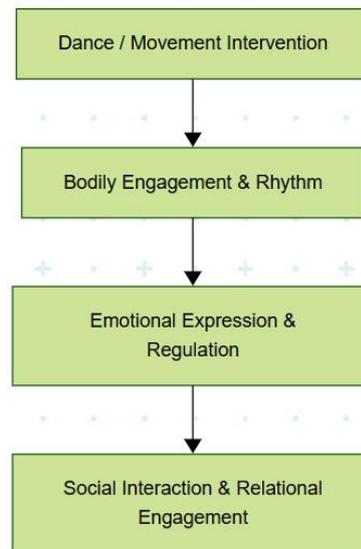


Figure 1. Framework of Observed Changes Through Dance/Movement Intervention

The findings suggest that the dance/movement-based arts education program was associated with observable improvements in emotional expression, emotional regulation, and social interaction among participants. The quantitative data showed improvements in emotional and social skills while the qualitative data revealed how participants experienced these changes through their body movements and their social connections with others. The results establish a basis for understanding how dance functions as a physical form of emotional expression, which will be examined in more detail in the upcoming discussion.

4. Discussion

4.1 Restate Thesis

As illustrated in Figure 1, the observed changes suggest a progression from embodied engagement to emotional regulation and social interaction. The study assessed how dance movement therapy functions as an arts education approach to help autistic children develop their emotional expression abilities. The results showed that rhythmic movement programs helped participants develop their emotional expression skills, emotional regulation abilities and their social interaction abilities. The findings of this exploratory study indicate that participation in dance/movement-based arts education was associated with positive trends in emotional expression, emotional stability, and relational engagement.

From an arts education perspective, the primary contribution of this study lies in redefining dance as an educational language for emotional learning rather than solely as a therapeutic technique. While previous DMT studies have emphasized clinical outcomes, the present findings foreground expressive agency, embodied meaning-making, and emotional participation as educational processes. The extension of the body system through spontaneous movement increases affective responsiveness and non-verbal communication abilities according to body cognition theories which claim that people experience their body and then

make sense of their feelings (Gallese & Sinigaglia, 2011; Shapiro, 2019). Autistic children who experience emotional feelings through their sensory and motor experiences benefit from using movement to express their emotions instead of using language-based methods.

The research results match previous studies which proved that dance movement therapy helps autistic people develop their emotional understanding and their ability to show their feelings (Koch et al., 2015; Hildebrandt et al., 2016). The research extends existing knowledge about dance by positioning it within an arts education framework which supports expressive agency as a treatment method. The process of emotional expression developed during this research study through body movement activities used in the study because body movement defined their individual progress.

4.2 Summarize Main Points

4.2.1 Emotional Regulation Through Bodily Engagement and Rhythm

The study found that improved emotional regulation through body movements should be recognized as an essential process for developing emotional control abilities. The participants showed better movement control because they could change their movement strength and switch between active and peaceful states during rhythmic body motions. The findings match existing research which shows that rhythm and coordinated movement patterns help people control their emotional state and their body functions (Thaut & Hoemberg, 2014).

The neurodevelopmental study showed that rhythmic movement activates brain areas which control timing and executive function and emotional control, including the prefrontal cortex and limbic areas (Srinivasan & Bhat, 2013). The movement patterns of the intervention program which provided both predictable and flexible movement options, helped users stay emotionally stable while they expressed their individuality. Dance movement therapy and arts education both practice structure and freedom as their main principles because autistic children who need predictable environments require their creative abilities to be explored through artistic practices.

4.2.2 Social Interaction and Relational Attunement

The research results show that emotional expression can lead to important changes in how people relate to each other and socialize with others. The dance-based treatment program improved social relationships because it helped participants develop better space-sharing abilities and better peer interaction skills and new synchronized movement abilities. The earlier research results show that autistic people can develop social connection abilities through their abilities to copy movements and synchronize their actions (McGarry & Russo, 2011; Koch et al., 2015).

The participants established social connections through group movement activities which developed naturally in the study without any teaching methods or behavior guidance. The study proves that people build social relationships through shared emotional and sensory experiences which both connect them and create mutual understanding. The neurodiversity movement supports this approach because it states that social skills training needs to take into account how autistic people handle social relationships instead of requiring them to develop traditional social skills (Milton, 2012).

4.2.3 Contributions to Arts Education and Inclusive Practice

The study shows how dance movement therapy functions within an arts education framework which helps to advance better inclusive educational practices which support expressive learning. Arts education creates an educational environment which values all student expression forms through its focus on creative work, educational processes and meaning

creation activities (Eisner, 2002). The research shows that educational institutions which incorporate movement-based artistic practices can help students with different neurotypes to develop their emotional skills.

Educational programs in inclusive settings usually require students to display emotional expression through their schoolwork or their behavior instead of letting them express their feelings. The emotional well-being of a person determines their learning capacity and their ability to participate in life activities which affect their overall well-being. The current research shows that dance-based educational programs provide essential support to existing educational systems by helping autistic children learn to express emotions and build relationships in ways they can easily understand and feel validated (Florian, 2014).

4.2.4 Comparison With Existing Literature and Theoretical Implications

Dance movement therapy has therapeutic benefits for autistic patients, but most studies have focused on either clinical outcomes or specific skill areas. The study shows that emotional expression, bodily regulation and social interaction work together as one complete system. The complete perspective supports development models which describe emotional development, movement development and relationship development as interconnected processes (Koch et al., 2019).

The research study uses a mixed-methods design to develop an arts-based and embodied approach which Leavy 2015 describes as necessary for detailed research methods. The quantitative measurements showed changes that occurred while the qualitative data showed how people lived through their changes. The research method combination enables deeper findings interpretation while researchers and practitioners gain useful information from the research.

4.2.5 Limitations and Future Directions

The research study presents three main limitations which should receive acknowledgment. The research results return exploratory status because the study used a small sample size which restricts findings to specific contexts. The researchers could not determine cause-and-effect relationships because they lacked a control group to compare against the treatment group. The researchers assessed short-term effects of the intervention but they did not study its long-term consequences.

The researchers need to expand their participant base and study different cultures through their research by using longitudinal studies and intervention groups which they will compare against one another. Dance-based arts education research should examine how different age groups, cultural contexts and educational environments can use Dance-based arts education. Research should use objective measures like motion analysis and physiological markers to study how people experience emotional changes through their bodily movements.

The research study demonstrates that dance/movement therapy becomes an effective method for helping autistic children express their emotions when it is part of an arts education program. Dance helps people use their bodies to express their emotions which helps them control their feelings and connect with others and express themselves. The results demonstrate that educational institutions should use creative learning methods through movement-based activities which will create better educational experiences for all students.

5. Conclusions

The research studied dance/movement therapy which functions as an arts education method to help autistic children show their emotions. The study tested how people use their bodies to learn through structured movement exercises by using expressivenessbased learning techniques to show their emotions and their ability to control emotions and develop social skills without having to use spoken words. The research showed that dance/movement therapies

helped participants to show their emotions better and become more emotionally stable while building better relationships with others which researchers proved through scientific data and personal accounts.

The main value of this research study rests on its definition of dance as an emotional expression form which uses physical movement as its main form of communication. The research demonstrates that people create emotional meanings through body movements instead of needing to learn about emotions through verbal teaching methods or behavioral change programs. Through rhythm, movement, and relational attunement, autistic children were able to express affective states in ways that were authentic, individualized, and accessible. The viewpoint demonstrates that society holds mistaken beliefs about autism which impacts emotional abilities while educational and therapy programs should acknowledge students who use nonverbal communication methods.

The research adds new knowledge about dance/movement therapy through its study of arts education because it shows how dance/movement therapy helps students develop their self-expression abilities while helping all students learn. Arts education provides a pedagogical environment in which emotional expression is valued as a core dimension of learning rather than a secondary outcome. The present findings suggest that dance-based arts education can play a meaningful role in supporting emotional development while honoring neurodiversity and diverse communicative modes. The educational setting requires particular methods for people with disabilities who have emotional challenges because they need to establish their belonging which is essential for their educational progress.

The study delivers useful information, but its exploratory design and small sample size require careful evaluation. The research displays evidence of change, but the findings cannot establish complete results because they show only potential outcomes. The upcoming study will extend this research through longitudinal studies which involve bigger groups of people who come from different backgrounds while testing different methods to study how dance helps people learn emotional skills for their entire lives. The study requires more investigation about how people use their body language to express emotions across different environments which include home, school, and community locations.

The research shows that dance/movement therapy functions as an effective method which helps autistic children express their emotions when used in arts education practice. The heart uses the body to express emotional language through which dance creates space for people to connect with their emotions and control their feelings through body movements and social interactions. The research findings advance current research in arts education and autism studies about inclusive teaching methods through showing how creative activities foster emotional health and social bonds between people.

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