

Theories on creative dance in physical education and physical education teacher education – a narrative review

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ABSTRACT

Creative dance, part of the teaching area of dance in physical education (PE) and physical education teacher education (PETE), has been thoroughly studied over the last decades. Creative dance risks a reduced educational impact due to unclear notions of what students and pupils learn when participating in creative dance. This uncertainty can reinforce the impression that there is nothing to learn from creative dance and that this activity merely involves directionless movement. The aim of this study is to explore the key ideas and theoretical perspectives about creative dance in PE and PETE, with the ambition to clarify what characterizes this teaching area in an educational context. A narrative review was adopted to summarize, compare, explain and interpret relevant research studies. In total, 29 peer-reviewed empirical studies of creative dance in PE and PETE were reviewed. The narrative review offers insights into the research field of creative dance in PE and PETE, where ideas about various forms of experience of movement are prevalent. It shows different educational qualities of creative dance as well, as it depicts a learning environment in which embodied exploration, aesthetic experience and subjective expression are of central concern, with numerous elaborate pedagogical considerations.

SAMMANFATTNING

Kreativ dans, en del av undervisningsområdet dans inom skolämnet idrott och hälsa och lärarutbildning i idrott och hälsa, har börjat studeras de senaste decennierna. Kreativ dans riskerar att minska sitt pedagogiska inflytande på grund av oklara föreställningar om vad studenter och elever lär sig när de deltar i kreativ dans. Denna oklarhet kan förstärka intrycket att det inte finns något att lära sig och att denna aktivitet bara innebär riktninglös rörelse. Syftet med denna studie är att utforska viktiga idéer och teoretiska perspektiv om kreativ dans inom skolämnet och lärarutbildning i idrott och hälsa, med ambitionen att öka tydligheten i vad som kännetecknar undervisningsområdet. En narrativ översikt användes för att sammanfatta, jämföra, förklara och tolka relevanta forskningsstudier. Totalt granskades 29 vetenskapligt granskade empiriska studier av kreativ dans inom skolämnet idrott och hälsa och lärarutbildning i idrott och hälsa. Studien ger insikter i det aktuella forskningsfältet kreativ dans inom skolämnet och lärarutbildning i idrott och hälsa som visar idéer om olika former av rörelseupplevelse. Den visar olika pedagogiska kvaliteter i kreativ dans eftersom ämnet innefattar en lärandemiljö där förkroppsligat utforskande, estetisk upplevelse och subjektivt uttryck är av central betydelse tillsammans med många relevanta didaktiska överväganden.

Keywords: creative dance, movement knowledge, teaching, learning, physical education

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Introduction

Physical education (PE) exists in various shapes around the world. Different curricula often include forms of PE content like sports, dance and outdoor education, as well as knowledge about health and lifestyle habits. In 23 European member states, dance is a mandatory activity in the PE curriculum in primary education (Konstantinidou 2023). Creative dance, part of the teaching area of dance in PE, has begun to be increasingly taught in Swedish schools (The Swedish School Inspectorate 2018) and has gained attention in research over the last decades. Creative dance in education has the potential to, for example, allow school pupils to develop bodily competence (Ravn 2014), extend their abilities to act (Mattsson 2016) and introduce them to creative processes (Neville and Makopoulou 2021). However, creative dance is sometimes accompanied by a “there is no right or wrong way to move” rhetoric (Larsson et al. 2024; Mattsson and Larsson 2021). This rhetoric is also evident in internet posts on creative dance (e.g. Cardwell 2023; Kalivas 2011). Following this rhetoric, it is unclear what students and pupils learn in the teaching area of creative dance in PE and physical education teacher education (PETE). The uncertainty of creative dance’s educational qualities that this rhetoric brings risks reinforcing the impression among students and teachers, who often have limited experience with creative dance, that there is nothing to learn and that this activity merely involves directionless movement (Larsson et al. 2024). Furthermore, many teachers lack experience with dance and feel uncomfortable incorporating creative dance in their teaching (Mattsson and Larsson 2021). Engdahl (2024) and Orbak (2021) also note that PETE students’ inexperience with dance and vague understanding of creative dance sometimes make them feel inadequate in terms of their dance knowledge.

With the educational qualities of creative dance in PE and PETE unclear and the idea that there is

nothing to learn from it, it becomes increasingly important to elucidate notions of this teaching area, by clarifying the key ideas and theoretical perspectives on this activity outlined in the literature. Orbak and Engelsrud (2019) recently made a comprehensive overview of 87 peer-reviewed articles and six doctoral studies regarding creative dance in a school context, focusing on didactics. Their findings show that creative dance in a school context can be understood and delimited as a research field. Orbak and Engelsrud’s study also reveals how creative dance teaching is a diverse practice that combines elements from both an experience-based teaching perspective that highlights pupils’ and students’ exploration of familiar movements, and a system-based teaching perspective that engages with Laban’s movement framework in exploration of movement (see also Orbak 2021). Konstantinidou’s (2023) systematic search and narrative review of school-based creative dance programs and intervention studies in elementary education (19 studies) further shows how creative dance in elementary schools has the potential to cultivate children’s cognitive and psychosocial skills. Central to this paper, only a few studies on creative dance in education highlight the theoretical concepts and assumptions used (Orbak and Engelsrud 2019). Furthermore, there has been no study that reviews creative dance specifically in PE and PETE. On this basis, the aim of this study is, with the help of a narrative review, to explore the key ideas and theoretical perspectives on creative dance in PE and PETE, with the ambition to clarify what characterizes this teaching area in an educational context.

Before describing the study’s methodological approach, I briefly sketch how creative dance in PE and PETE has been historically depicted to contextualize the results and concluding discussion. From the middle of the twentieth century, there was an ongoing development by female PE and PETE educators of an aesthetic form of gymnastics influenced by an elaborated theory of

body and rhythm (see, for example, Lundvall 2015; Lundvall and Schantz 2013). The basis of this influence included the work on expressive or modern forms of dance by Rudolf Laban (Fernandes 2015). Teaching an aesthetic form of gymnastics aimed to enable women to learn about and enjoy their physicality, based on what today would be called a subjective experiencing of the body (Lundvall 2016; Vertinsky 2010). This teaching highlighted values of expressing emotions through movements, to liberate the body and provide space for self-education (Carli 2004; Laine 1989; Lundvall and Meckbach 2003; Wright 1996). The long and in many ways strong tradition of a female PETE culture, together with school PE-steering documents, have meant the sustained position of modern and expressive dance ideals and creative dance as part of teaching in schools (Lundvall 2015). In the following section, I describe how I methodologically approached this study.

Method

To address the aim of this study, a narrative review method was used. Narrative reviews are useful in education, since they bring many pieces of information together into a readable format (Green et al. 2006). A narrative review comprises summarizing, comparing, explaining and interpreting research relevant to a certain question or aim (Mays et al. 2005). Regularly, this method involves ways of presenting existing research that guide the reader through a complex array of material. Narrative reviews sometimes lack transparency, because they give limited descriptions of how the reviews are conducted (Green et al. 2006). To address this critique, this section provides a detailed description of the current reviewing process for transparency.

This paper consists of a narrative review of empirical papers on creative dance in PE and PETE. To find what has been written on this issue, and to provide my study with empirical material, the first stage of the method entailed an overview of the empirical studies of creative dance in PE and PETE. To identify relevant studies, three databases were chosen for their focus on sport science, pedagogy and education: Discovery, SportDiscus and ERIC. An advanced search was made with the search term “creative dance” used in titles in academic journals; the term “physical education” appearing anywhere in the article; and publication

limited to within the last 20 years. A total of 102 works across the search engines were identified in this process, with the same studies sometimes appearing in all three databases. To be included in the review, the texts needed to be peer-reviewed and concern education. For instance, articles relating to exercise and therapy were excluded. Upon applying these criteria, 33 studies remained. A total of 18 of the works discussed education broadly or did not specify the educational context, and were therefore removed. This left 15 studies that specifically concerned the educational context of PE and PETE. Due to the relatively low quantity of studies found, and to make the study more informative, one further step was made: The existing literature on creative dance, written in English, Swedish and Norwegian, in the syllabi from eight Swedish PETE institutions were included in the search. This search identified the search term “creative dance” as used in titles or abstracts. This added another 14 peer-reviewed works from four institutions, resulting in a total of 29 works on creative dance in PE and PETE (see Table 1). Twenty of the studies were published within the last 10 years.

Table 1 Overview of the reviewed sources.

Author	Type of publication	Journal/publisher	Major themes
Adamčák et al. (2023)	Peer-reviewed article	Pedagogy of Physical Culture and Sports	curriculum preference, physical education, primary education, teacher, teaching preference
Bajek et al. (2015)	Peer-reviewed article	Strategies	dance, physical education, self-expression
Carlgren and Nyberg (2015)	Peer-reviewed article	Forskning om undervisning och lärande	kunnande, knowing-known, rörelsekunnande, dans, fenomenografi
Cleland Donnelly and Faden Millar (2019)	Peer-reviewed article	The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance	creative dance experience, physical education, interdisciplinarity
Engdahl et al. (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	European Physical Education Review	knowledge in movement, practising, creative dance, pedagogy, physical education teacher education
Engdahl et al. (2022)	Peer-reviewed article	Research in Dance Education	creativity, creative dance, physical education teacher education, Deleuze, experimentation, palpation
Engdahl and Ceder (2023)	Peer-reviewed article	Journal for Research in Arts and Sports Education	movement exploration, materiality, Gilles Deleuze, post-anthropocentrism, assemblage
Erickson (2004)	Peer-reviewed article	Teaching Elementary Physical Education	physical education, team sports, creativity, dance education, elementary education
Frisk (2019)	Peer-reviewed article	Nordic Journal of Dance	dance teachers' experience, physical education and health, phenomenology, interaffectivity, interbodily resonance
Gabbei and Clemmens (2005)	Peer-reviewed article	The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance	creative movement, movement education, physical education, cross-disciplinary
Gard (2006)	Peer-reviewed article	Sport, Education and Society	ability, aesthetics, curriculum, dance, dance education, physical education
Gard (2008)	Peer-reviewed article	Sport, Education and Society	dance, physical education, masculinity
Jusslin (2020)	PhD dissertation	Åbo Akademi University	creative dance, educational design research, entanglement, intra-action, literacy education, new materialism, performative potential
Keun and Hunt (2006)	Peer-reviewed article	Research in Dance Education	creative thinking skills, creative dance, bodily kinaesthetic intelligence
Lara-Aparicio et al. (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	Movimento	COVID-19, social isolation, physical education, health
Lobel (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	Journal of Dance Education	social and creative dance forms, dance teaching, physical education
Lundvall and Maivorsdotter (2010)	Peer-reviewed article	Designs for Learning	aesthetics, meaning-making, dance education, physical education teacher education
MacLean (2018)	Peer-reviewed article	Sport, Education and Society	dance, physical education, teacher agency, collective agency, policy enactment

Author	Type of publication	Journal/publisher	Major themes
Mattsson (2016)	PhD dissertation	Idrottsforum	aesthetic learning processes, bodying, expressive dance, meaning-making, pedagogical intervention, physical education, practical epistemology analysis, transaction
Mattsson and Larsson (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy	expressive dance, pedagogical intervention, physical education, risk, transaction
Nilges (2004)	Peer-reviewed article	Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport	curriculum, philosophy, qualitative research
Ørbæk (2018)	PhD dissertation	Norges Idrettshøgskole	body, creating dance, physical education, physical education teacher education
Ørbæk (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	Frontiers in Sports and Active Living	bodily learning, physical education teacher education, creative dance, micro-phenomenology, body memory
Ørbæk and Engelsrud (2021)	Peer-reviewed article	Research in Dance Education	teaching creative dance, physical education, intercorporeality, interaffectivity, participatory sense-making
Rebelo et al. (2018)	Peer-reviewed article	Research in Dance Education	creative dance, interdisciplinary working, primary education, mathematics
Rustad (2012)	Peer-reviewed article	Nordic Journal of Dance	dance, physical education, physical education student teachers, improvisation
Rustad (2013)	PhD dissertation	Norges Idrettshøgskole	dance, improvisation, tradition, interpretation, lived experience
Steinberg and Steinberg (2016)	Peer-reviewed article	Research in Dance Education	Teaching, movement, students' view, physical education, dance didactic
Theocharidou et al. (2018)	Peer-reviewed article	Physical Culture and Sport Studies and Research	creative dance, BrainDance, health-related quality of life, primary education

Once the final empirical materials were determined, I considered creative dance in the texts by extracting all sections that featured the words *creativ**, *creating*, *expressiv**, *skapande*, *skape**, *lage*, *kreativ*, *danc** and *dans*. At this stage, I identified that all empirical materials discussed creative dance in terms of exploration. For that reason, I further extracted all sections of the texts that involved the words *explor**, *discover**, *experiment**, *elaborat**, *problem-solv**, *try**, *search**, *investigat**, *utforsk**, *prov**, *laborer**, *upptäck**, *undersök**, *prov** and *oppgag**. The sections were transferred to a separate Microsoft Word document, with extracts separated according to the titles of the texts.

The next step involved reading and re-reading the literature based on the following analytical questions

(AQs): AQ 1) What central ideas about creative dance permeate the literature?; and AQ2) How are theoretical perspectives used to explore these ideas? Relating to AQ1, this step entailed identifying and highlighting central key terms reiterated in the texts, such as *experience*, *aesthetic* and *expression*, and exploring similarities and differences in how these terms were used. For example, the term *experience* was reiterated often in the texts, and used to depict modes of intelligence as part of kinaesthetic experiences in one text and to explore aesthetic experience in another. Relating to AQ2, this step involved exploring what and how theoretical perspectives were used in the studies.

The last step involved summarizing, comparing and interpreting the extracts in the literature while

considering the AQs. This step also required returning to the full articles for further reading.

Key to creative dance – Various forms of experience

Overall, the 29 studies offer rich insight into the learning and teaching of creative dance in PE and PETE. The majority of the studies (20) make explicit which theoretical perspectives were used in their work. Still, this means that a third of the studies (10) do not. The most commonly considered theoretical perspective in the narrative review was phenomenological (8 studies).

The findings of the study and my discussion are presented in two subsections. In the first, I describe the theoretical perspectives used in studies about the experience of movement in creative dance in PE and PETE. In the second subsection, I discuss how researchers studying creative dance in PE and PETE tend to regard students' previous movement experiences and Laban's movement concepts as resources in creative dance teaching. Also in this subsection, I describe the theoretical perspectives used in the studies.

Experience in creative dance

The sample of studies shows that providing means for school pupils and university students to explore the embodied and aesthetic experience of movement is central to creative dance teaching practices in PE and PETE (Orbæk 2021; Steinberg and Steinberg 2016). The most widely cited description of creative dance concerns students' experience of movement and aesthetic expression, involving intentions to convey thoughts, feelings and moods through movement (Cleland Donnelly and Faden Millar 2019; Jusslin 2020; Lara-Aparicio et al. 2021; MacLean 2018; Rebelo Leandro et al. 2018; Theocharidou et al. 2018). Studies exploring questions of movement experience in creative dance in PE and PETE are most often guided by phenomenology. A phenomenological reading of creative dance in PE and PETE can emphasize experiencing in movement (Rustad 2012). Rustad studies PETE students' experiences when taught dance improvisation and contact improvisation. She notes that the students engaged in exploration that highlighted sensorial awareness, and that teaching gave them opportunities to develop their capacity of "knowing in and through the body, gained through the experience of dancing" (2012, 17; see also Rustad 2013).

Several scholars have engaged with Fuchs's phenomenological perspective to theoretically guide their studies (Frisk 2019; Orbæk 2021; Orbæk and Engelsrud 2021). For instance, Orbæk (2021) explores student teachers' experiences of creating dance as part of their PETE. While considering Fuchs's ideas, she observes how emotional interaction occurs when students move together during creative dance lessons. By putting particular concepts by Fuchs to work, such as interbodily resonances, Orbæk shows how creative dance lessons involve socially interactive situations. Also citing Fuchs, Orbæk and Engelsrud (2021) provide insights into, for example, how students' embodied interactions are significant parts of creative dance teaching. Similarly employing Fuchsian concepts, Frisk (2019) identifies that PETE educators relate more to embodied interaction than teachers of theoretical subjects, that is, studies working with a phenomenological perspective emphasize ideas about experience in movement and embodied interaction in creative dance in PE and PETE.

The notion of experience in creative dance has also been studied with other theoretical perspectives. For example, using Dewey's pragmatist concepts of experience and aesthetic experience can highlight ideas about meaning-making and transaction. This theoretical perspective guides Lundvall and Maivorsdotter's (2010) exploration of how specific aspects of aesthetic experience are involved in meaning-making processes in dance. They identify how positive or negative feelings can inform how students define meanings of embodied experience. Mattsson (2016) and Mattsson and Larsson (2021) are similarly guided by Dewey's concept of transaction when studying which dynamic and reciprocal processes of interplay occur with students and their surroundings.

Steinberg and Steinberg (2016) use psychology of self-esteem to study school pupils' experiences of personal expression in creative dance lessons. They identify, for example, that creative dance can provoke emotions of awkwardness with some pupils, and that the pupils develop strategies to preserve their self-esteem while engaging in movement exploration. Gard (2006, 2008) also assesses learners' experiences of creative dance from a social constructivist perspective to explore how gender norms and preformed ideas about "good dancing" are elements that construct learners' experience of dance in PE and PETE.

A few studies have recently engaged with posthumanism and philosophical concepts by Deleuze and Guattari to study experience in creative dance in PETE. The philosophical concepts of palpation and experimentation guide Engdahl and colleagues' (2022) study, whereby they show how agency in movement goes beyond PETE students' own subjective expressions and experiences when they participate in creative dance lessons. The Deleuzoguattarian and posthumanist concepts of affect and assemblage assist Engdahl and Ceder (2023) to show how PETE educators and students' experiences of movement ought to be regarded as products of agential capacities of human and non-human materialities.

Furthermore, Keun and Hunt (2006) show how Gardner's multiple intelligences theory can be used to explore pupils' bodily kinaesthetic experiences during creative dance lessons in PE. Two modes of intelligence, identified by the multiple intelligences theory, are 1) kinaesthetic and 2) interpersonal or social (between people). Keun and Hunt show how although creative dance in PE essentially stimulates bodily kinaesthetic intelligence, other intelligences, such as interpersonal or social intelligence, are evoked and utilized during lessons.

Summing up, although a phenomenological perspective is commonly used in the studies of creative dance in PE and PETE, a variety of theoretical perspectives can be used as well.

Teaching based on familiar and everyday movement experiences

The sample of studies also reveals elaborate pedagogical considerations: for instance, that listening to children's storybooks (Gabbei and Clemmens 2005), reading poems (Cleland Donnelly and Faden Millar 2019), using words (Carlgrén and Nyberg 2015) or music (Mattsson and Larsson 2021) inspire exploratory processes in creative dance lessons. However, a main finding is that previous movement experiences and movement concepts recur in the literature as common points of departure when it comes to creative dance teaching. Previous movement experiences are understood mainly in two ways in the studies: a) as learners' everyday movements, and b) in their familiarity with sports.

Both pragmatist- and phenomenologically inspired analyses find that everyday movement experiences constitute a significant part of creative dance teaching.

Guided by ideas of Dewey's pragmatism, Mattsson (2016) and Orbak (2018) study the importance of creating a safe learning environment by, for instance, acknowledging PETE students' everyday movement experiences, such as walking, in teaching. Another example is Nilges's (2004) phenomenological study that shows that because effort concepts are embedded in all movements, everyday activities such as washing dishes and playing football hold expressive potential and might become expressions of dance. For Nilges, movement exploration is an invitation for school pupils to open up the habitual bodily modes of being in the world (as in washing dishes or playing football). In creative dance lessons, school pupils' common ways of moving in their everyday lives can be affected by movement concepts – for instance, effort concepts – whereby dance is expressed. Cleland Donnelly and Faden Millar (2019), inspired by a modality-based learning perspective, provide another example of how creative dance lessons can involve opportunities for school pupils' to explore habitual modes of moving in their everyday lives. They show, for example, that teaching enables pupils to explore alternative ways to express movement by trying out various spatial pathways and movement efforts.

Laban's work on improvisation and movement analysis, which inspired the form of aesthetic gymnastics developed by female PE and PETE educators over the last century, has sometimes been considered in teaching creative dance as means to experiment with learners' familiar movements. Laban's conceptual framework – often consisting of body, space, effort and relations – is reiterated in the literature (e.g. Lobel 2021; Mattsson and Larsson 2021). In the studies reviewed here, this conceptual framework is not regarded as a theoretical perspective used to guide studies of creative dance, but as a way to inspire didactical strategies and frame teaching (e.g. Mattsson 2016). Sometimes the elements of body, space, effort and relations are defined in terms of the BSER conceptual framework (Gabbei and Clemmens 2005). Again, Nilges (2004) considers Laban's work on improvisation when highlighting exploratory processes that involve pupils' movement experiences and movement meaning. For instance, she describes pupils who are instructed by the teacher to explore skipping by means of Laban's movement effort concepts, that is, effort defined by space, time, force and flow. While exploring experiences of skipping with the movement concept of

strong force, pupils begin to express emotions, such as anger, through movement.

Concluding discussion

The lack of clarity of the educational qualities of creative dance in PE and PETE, accompanied by a “there is no right or wrong way to move” rhetoric (Cardwell 2023; Kalivas 2011; Larsson et al. 2024; Mattsson and Larsson 2021), risks reinforcing the impression among PETE students and PE teachers that there is nothing to learn from creative dance and that this activity merely involves directionless movement. In light of this, my narrative review has illuminated key ideas and theoretical perspectives about creative dance in PE and PETE, with the ambition to clarify what characterizes this teaching area in an educational context. In contrast to empirical studies, my review shows the various educational qualities of creative dance in PE and PETE, as it depicts, for instance, the central concern of aesthetic experience of movement and experimentation, along with numerous elaborate pedagogical considerations.

My narrative review offers somewhat contrasting findings on theoretical perspectives as used in studies of creative dance in PE and PETE compared to the comprehensive overview of the school context made by Ørbæk and Engelsrud (2019), which notes that only a few studies highlight theoretical perspectives. In the current review, the majority of the studies make explicit which theoretical concepts they feature, with

the most commonly considered theoretical perspective being phenomenological. I paint a similar picture to Ørbæk (2021), who claims that creative dance teaching in PETE provides students ways to express subjective experiences through dance by creating dances based on everyday movements. This paper also makes visible what ideas that have been – and have not been – explored in research studies. Few studies explore critical questions of, for instance, gender and disabilities. Questions of class are not explored in any of the studies either. This implies a lack of discussions on how aspects of social justice might influence teaching and learning in dance in PE and PETE. Studies engaging with posthumanist and new materialist perspectives have recently found their way into research on creative dance in this educational context as well. Such theoretical perspectives might invite scholars to increasingly explore aspects other than those often key in qualitative research, such as human experience and subjectivity (cf. Brinkmann 2017).

Having provided my arguments, I do acknowledge that this review excludes high-quality work written in languages other than English, Swedish and Norwegian. Other limitations include that, because of the relatively few numbers of papers accounted for in the review, the coverage of creative dance is not exhaustive.

Disclosure statement

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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