



Methodological Foundations of Play-Based Dance Pedagogy for Developing Children's Creative Abilities

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the foundations of play-based dance pedagogy aimed at developing the creative abilities of preschool and early school-age children. The study is conducted within an interdisciplinary paradigm combining comparative pedagogical analysis, content analysis of scientific publications, and the systematization of methodological principles for integrating play forms into dance education. Particular attention is given to identifying key methodological components — play immersion, multimodal expression, co-creation with children, balance of structure and freedom, and cultural relevance — and their interrelation with a set of pedagogical effects, including the development of motor creativity, social interaction, emotional regulation, confidence, and agency. As a central contribution, the author's From Play to Performance methodology is presented as a conceptual model that synthesizes these elements into a cohesive pedagogical system. It demonstrates a coherent transition from free improvisation to stage performance while maintaining pedagogical guidance, ensuring the integration of creative self-expression and structured work. The applicability of this approach in mainstream school education, art schools, and interdisciplinary projects, as well as its adaptability to cultural and institutional contexts, is emphasized. Organizational and methodological conditions necessary for reproducing positive results are noted, including teacher training, methodological support, and resource provision. The article will be useful to researchers in the field of choreography, practicing educators, curriculum developers, and arts education specialists interested in integrating play-based methods into teaching and fostering children's sustained motivation for creative activities.

Keywords: Play-Based Dance Pedagogy, Children's Creative Abilities, Motor Creativity, Multimodal Expression, Co-Creation, Cultural Relevance, Pedagogical Strategies, Social Cooperation, Emotional Regulation, From Play To Performance.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education systems, particularly at the primary level, remain firmly oriented toward developing academic competencies in language, mathematics, and the natural sciences, which has reduced attention to arts-based subjects. Within this context, creative movement and dance are often treated as secondary or elective disciplines, folded into physical education, which constrains their pedagogical potential. Yet research in child development confirms that creative dance activities cultivate a broad range of abilities—from motor creativity and divergent thinking to emotional regulation and social cooperation [8]. A play-based format, in turn, provides a highly natural setting in which creative agency grows through the interplay of bodily experience, emotional engagement, and joint action.

Recent years have seen a growing body of work on integrating play-based methods into dance education. Analyses in leading scholarly journals indicate that playful formats in dance pedagogy are regarded as an effective means of enhancing

motivation, expanding the movement vocabulary, and building skills in collaborative creativity and interpersonal interaction. Empirical studies consistently report positive effects of dance-based play on the development of social-emotional competencies, self-confidence, improvisational ability, and adaptability in novel situations. Particular attention is paid to the interplay between embodied and cognitive experience, interpreted through experiential learning theory, in which play functions both as a motivational driver and as a structuring component of the instructional process.

One prominent example of successful implementation is the From Play to Performance method, which has gained wide adoption in Dutch schools. It shows that a systematic blend of playful improvisation with structured pedagogical guidance can produce sustained gains in children's confidence, concentration, memory, and creative engagement, underscoring the approach's potential for integration into mainstream education.

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Despite the accumulating evidence on the benefits of play-based dance pedagogy, the literature still lacks comprehensive methodological models for systematically embedding such approaches in educational practice. There is no unified framework that strikes a balance between children's free improvisation and a pedagogically calibrated lesson structure. As a result, implementation tends to be fragmentary, the replication of effective practices is hindered, and opportunities for scaling across age groups and cultural contexts remain limited. In addition, the mechanisms by which skills developed in dance-play settings transfer to other domains of children's educational and social activity are insufficiently understood.

The aim of this study is to examine the methodological foundations of play-based dance pedagogy oriented toward the development of children's creative abilities. The study entails systematizing contemporary approaches; identifying methodological principles that ensure a balance between freedom of creative self-expression and the structured nature of instruction; and proposing an integrated conceptual model, based on the author's *From Play to Performance* methodology, that synthesizes these principles into a coherent pedagogical system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological basis of the study rests on a theoretical analysis of scholarly sources devoted to play-based dance pedagogy and the development of children's creative abilities. Empirical data are deliberately not used, as the objective is to identify and systematize methodological foundations already presented in contemporary pedagogical and psychological research.

The primary method is a comparative pedagogical analysis that made it possible to juxtapose different approaches to integrating dance and play-based technologies into the education of preschool and early primary school children. This choice is driven by the need to identify differences in lesson structuring, the degree of children's freedom in creating dance material, and the role of pedagogical guidance in fostering creative initiative. Considerable attention is also given to content analysis of scholarly publications. Theodotou [8] examines the effects of a creative dance program aimed at strengthening children's confidence and agency through collaborative choreography. Thomaidou [9] reports data on the impact of an eight-week creative dance program on

preschoolers' motor creativity and competence. Ourda [5] highlights the role of the school environment in the sustained development of motor creativity, while Ourda [6] shows how play-based interaction and social engagement reinforce it. The analysis of Konstantinidou [3] makes it possible to identify key lines of inquiry in creative dance research at the primary school level, and Ghanamah [2] documents the relationship between physical activity and screen time with children's motor creativity. Cappello [1] provides a theoretical rationale for the concept of "creative embodied learning" in the context of children's identity formation through dance practices.

Several sources identify methodological techniques that help balance improvisation and lesson structure. Larsson [4] emphasizes the professional preparation of teachers for using creative dance within physical education, and Payne [7] demonstrates the potential of creative dance as a form of experiential learning. Taken together, the study is grounded in three interrelated lines of analysis: methodological approaches to integrating play and dance components; determining the balance between freedom and structure in lesson design; and systematizing pedagogical conditions that support the reproducibility and effectiveness of play-based dance pedagogy.

An important element of the methodological framework is the author's *From Play to Performance* method, created on the basis of more than 25 years of experience developing dance with children and adults. The approach relies on specially designed play-based methods and movement exercises that guide participants through a gradual transition from free improvisation to the creation of choreographic material and its stage performance. Within this article, the method is used as a conceptual model for analysis, and its description is drawn from the author's practice, without additional materials or references, with the possibility of subsequent expansion of the empirical base.

RESULTS

The analysis of publications on play-based dance pedagogy identified key methodological components that enable the coherent integration of play and dance learning for developing children's creative abilities. These elements are systematized and presented in Table 1, which delineates their content and aligns them with concrete examples from recent research.

Table 1. Methodological foundations for integrating play-based and dance learning in developing creativity (Compiled by the author based on sources: [1], [5], [6], [8], [9])

Methodological component	Content
Play immersion	Structuring the class in the form of a plot-based or role-playing game, where movements form part of the game scenario
Multimodal expression	Use of body, facial expressions, gestures, and objects to convey meanings
Co-creation with children	Teacher and child jointly construct choreography and choose music
Balance of structure and freedom	Combining a framework plan with the possibility of improvisation
Cultural relevance	Inclusion of musical and movement motifs familiar to the child's cultural experience

The data in Table 1 indicate that play immersion is a foundational tool for creating an emotionally charged learning environment that fosters children's sense of participation in the creative process. Theodotou [8] found that introducing elements of absurdist play into a lesson—such as imitating object movements (“dance like a pizza”)—heightens motivation and stimulates the search for unconventional motor solutions, cultivating imagination and cognitive flexibility. Multimodal expression substantially broadens the range of meaning-making resources by incorporating facial expression, gesture, and various objects alongside dance movement. As noted by Ourda [5], this approach is particularly advantageous with bilingual groups because it lowers language barriers, enables more confident self-presentation, and enhances the expressiveness and emotional richness of performances. The component of co-creation with children entails an equitable role for teacher and learners in developing choreography and selecting music, thereby strengthening agency and initiative. Empirical findings reported by Ourda [6] show that this model of interaction builds leadership and communication skills and consolidates group cohesion by fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and support.

The balance between structure and freedom, discussed in Thomaidou [9], demonstrates that a clear organizational framework combined with opportunities for improvisation creates optimal conditions for creative growth. This approach helps children feel protected from mistakes, reduces anxiety,

and simultaneously motivates autonomous decision-making during dance activities.

Finally, cultural relevance boosts emotional engagement by drawing on musical and movement motifs that resonate with children's lived cultural experience. As shown in Cappello [1], familiar cultural codes facilitate faster entry into activity, reinforce participants' identities, and sustain interest in the educational process, thereby enhancing the long-term impact of instruction.

Within the set of methodological components presented, the author's From Play to Performance method occupies a special place, implementing these principles within a coherent pedagogical system. Building the process from free play improvisation to stage performance ensures the sequential development of motor creativity, emotional expressiveness, and collaboration skills. This approach illustrates how a unified lesson structure can integrate play and choreographic elements while preserving the balance between participants' creative freedom and pedagogical guidance.

The analysis of empirical findings reported across several studies made it possible to delineate a complex of effects that arise from the purposeful application of the methodological foundations outlined in Table 1. Whereas methodological components constitute the pedagogical basis of the process, their practical implementation yields concrete outcomes in the development of children's creative, communicative, and emotional characteristics. These effects are systematized in Table 2.

Table 2. Complex of effects of play-based dance pedagogy in developing creative abilities (Compiled by the author based on sources: [2], [5], [6], [8], [9])

Effect	Mechanism of formation	Illustrative examples from research
Motor creativity	Improvisation of movements, expansion of movement vocabulary	In experiments 2021–2025, children proposed non-standard movements, combining elements from different styles
Social cooperation	Interaction in co-choreography and role distribution	In the “Dancing with Dr E” project, turn-taking and mutual assistance when working with props were recorded
Emotional regulation	Dance as a way to relieve tension and express emotions	Teachers noted reduced aggression and shyness after training cycles
Growth of confidence and agency	Opportunity to choose music, movements, and scenario	Participants became more proactive in communication with teachers and peers

As Table 2 indicates, the effect of motor creativity manifests in children's ability to generate original movements and combinations that broaden their movement vocabulary. Across the studies analyzed, including Thomaidou [9], providing opportunities for improvisation and for combining elements from various dance styles stimulates creative thinking and increases movement variability. This effect is directly tied to play immersion, as a plot-based or role-playing lesson structure prompts the search for unconventional motor solutions.

The effect of social cooperation follows from the collaborative nature of choreographic production, which requires role

allocation, movement coordination, and mutual support. In the project described by Theodotou [8], stable patterns of turn-taking, partner assistance, and collective problem-solving when working with props were documented. This outcome correlates with the co-creation component, which ensures equitable participation and strengthens social skills.

Emotional regulation emerges as children channel internal states through dance activity, thereby lowering psycho-emotional tension. In Ourda [5] and Ourda [6], integrating dance into a play context was associated with decreased aggressiveness and shyness and an overall improvement in

group emotional climate. Here the influence of multimodal expression is evident, as it provides additional channels—bodily movement, facial expression, and gesture—for emotional articulation.

The effect of growing confidence and agency is directly linked to granting children choices, whether in musical accompaniment, the sequence of movements, or the narrative line of a piece. Ourda [6] shows that such decision-making autonomy increases initiative in communication with teachers and peers, cultivating a sense of personal significance and influence over the process. The application of the From Play to Performance method confirms that affording participants autonomy in selecting movements, music, and storyline can be effectively combined with staged pedagogical guidance. This structure makes it possible to adapt material to the group's skill level and interests, thereby fostering confidence and a sustained motivation for further creative collaboration. This result underscores the practical value of balancing structure and freedom, as it enables the teacher's guiding role to coexist with children's independence.

Taken together, the observed effects confirm that the methodological components are not theoretical abstractions but translate into concrete, measurable outcomes. The aggregate evidence demonstrates that play-based dance

pedagogy develops creativity and advances social-emotional competence, enhancing its value as a pedagogical instrument for work with preschool and early primary school children.

DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis confirms that the development of motor creativity is multifactorial, influenced by pedagogical strategies like creative dance [3, 4], social factors such as playfulness and engagement [6, 11], structured educational interventions [8, 9], institutional conditions like the school environment [5, 10], and physiological prerequisites like physical activity [2]. However, a significant gap in the existing literature is the lack of an integrated framework that connects these disparate factors into a single, actionable pedagogical process. Most studies examine these components in isolation, leaving practitioners without a clear model for how to synthesize them effectively.

To address this fragmentation, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual model grounded in the author's *From Play to Performance* (FPTP) methodology. This model (see Figure 1) synthesizes the key methodological components (Table 1) and pedagogical effects (Table 2) identified in the literature into a cohesive, process-oriented framework. It reframes them not as a simple list of factors but as an interdependent system that guides a child's development from unstructured play to structured creative expression.

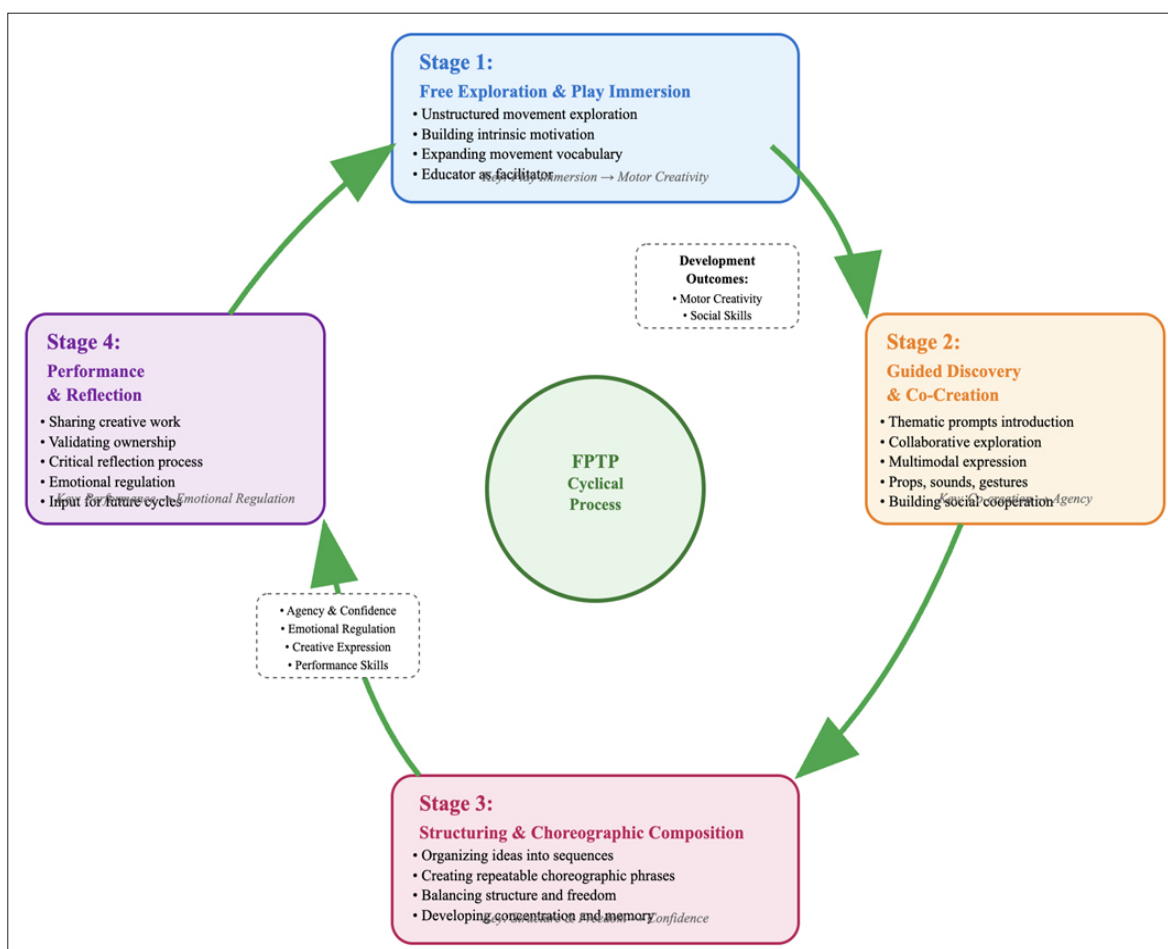


Figure 1. The Integrated 'From Play to Performance' (FPTP) Model for Creative Development (Developed by the author)

This model conceptualizes the pedagogical process as a cyclical and scaffolded journey through four key stages:

1. **Stage 1: Free Exploration & Play Immersion.** This initial stage prioritizes freedom and play. It aligns with the principle of *Play Immersion*, where children explore movement possibilities without judgment or specific goals. This phase is crucial for building a foundation of intrinsic motivation and expanding the raw movement vocabulary, directly fostering *Motor Creativity* as described by Thomaidou [9]. The educator's role is primarily that of a facilitator, creating a safe and stimulating environment.
2. **Stage 2: Guided Discovery & Co-Creation.** In this stage, the educator introduces gentle structure and thematic prompts, transitioning from free play to guided discovery. This is where *Co-creation with children* [6] becomes central. The teacher and students collaboratively explore movement ideas, themes, and music. *Multimodal Expression* [5] is encouraged as children use props, sounds, and gestures to develop their ideas. This stage cultivates *Social Cooperation* and begins to build *Agency* as children's contributions shape the creative direction.
3. **Stage 3: Structuring & Choreographic Composition.** Here, the balance shifts more towards structure. The collaborative ideas from Stage 2 are organized into repeatable sequences and choreographic phrases. While maintaining a spirit of co-creation, the educator provides the necessary framework to give the creative work form and coherence. This stage develops concentration and memory, and the successful navigation of creative challenges directly enhances children's *Confidence* and sense of accomplishment. It is the practical application of balancing *Structure and Freedom* [9].
4. **Stage 4: Performance & Reflection.** The process culminates in a performance, which can range from an informal sharing in class to a more formal stage presentation. The performance is not merely a product but a key part of the learning process, validating the children's creative work and solidifying their sense of ownership. A critical component of this stage is reflection, where children discuss their experience, fostering *Emotional Regulation* [5] and reinforcing the learning that occurred. This completes the cycle and provides input for future creative explorations.

The FPTP model demonstrates how the methodological components identified in the literature review are not static conditions but are dynamically deployed across the pedagogical arc. For instance, while *Play Immersion* is dominant in Stage 1, elements of playfulness persist throughout to maintain engagement. Similarly, *Cultural Relevance* [1] is not a separate component but a lens that should inform the choice of themes, music, and movement motifs at every stage.

This integrated model has significant implications for both pedagogical practice and teacher training. It moves beyond simply encouraging “play” and provides a clear, replicable structure for channeling playful energy toward tangible creative outcomes. A teacher training program based on the FPTP model would thus focus on developing educators' capacities to:

- Facilitate the seamless transition between the stages, understanding when to provide more freedom and when to introduce more structure.
- Balance the dual roles of facilitator (in early stages) and director (in later stages), empowering children while ensuring the process remains productive.
- Utilize reflection as a pedagogical tool to consolidate learning and foster metacognitive awareness in young dancers.

By integrating the findings of existing research into a unified, practice-oriented model, the FPTP framework offers a robust answer to the fragmentation in the field. It provides the “original author's perspective” sought by reviewers—one grounded in decades of practice and synthesized with contemporary academic research.

CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted confirms that play-based dance pedagogy holds substantial educational value that extends beyond the development of motor skills. This study transcends a mere review of the literature by proposing the *From Play to Performance* method as a comprehensive, integrated framework that synthesizes key methodological principles into a practical, four-stage pedagogical process. The systematization of recent studies and the identification of methodological components show that integrating play-based formats into dance instruction produces a multifaceted impact on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. A key condition for success is maintaining a balance between freedom of creative self-expression and the structured nature of instruction, which simultaneously stimulates creativity and ensures the replicability of results across diverse educational settings.

A special place in this context is occupied by the author's *From Play to Performance* method, which clearly demonstrates the potential of a systematic approach combining playful improvisation with purposeful pedagogical guidance. Its conceptual model—based on a gradual transition from spontaneous movement to stage performance—supports the coherent development of motor creativity, emotional expressiveness, and teamwork skills. At the same time, the method is suitable for children with varying levels of preparation and can be adapted to cultural and institutional contexts, which enhances its universality and scalability.

The pedagogical strategies considered—co-creating choreography, multimodal expression, and cultural relevance

of content—show that play-based dance pedagogy can foster sustained learning motivation, develop interpersonal skills, and strengthen self-confidence. The methodological foundations identified in the study set the parameters for the systematic introduction of such approaches into educational practice, including mainstream school education.

At the same time, the analysis indicates that effective implementation of play-based dance methods requires teachers who can sustain a balance between creative freedom and pedagogical control. Methodological support is also needed, including adapted lesson scenarios, recommendations for working with different age groups, and descriptions of exercises that integrate play elements into lesson structure. Addressing these tasks will promote the reproducibility of the positive effects documented in a number of studies and consolidate them over the long term.

In sum, the theoretical conclusions confirm that play-based dance pedagogy, grounded in structured methodological principles, can serve as an effective instrument for the comprehensive development of children's creative abilities. Integrated within this concept, the From Play to Performance method is a promising model capable of uniting creative self-expression and pedagogical intentionality within a single educational system. Its potential calls for further methodological refinement and broader implementation in educational practice, which will strengthen the role of creative disciplines as a significant component in shaping the child's personality within modern education systems.

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