

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Moving to Belong: A Qualitative Study of Culturally Responsive Dance for Adolescent Motivation and Physical Activity using the COM-B Framework

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Abstract

Physical inactivity among adolescents remains a global public health concern, with long-term consequences for physical, psychological, and social well-being. This article explores the potential of dance as an intervention to increase motivation and participation in physical activity (PA) among adolescents. Through a qualitative study involving 89 adolescents aged 12–16 from three schools in the UK, the effectiveness of a culturally responsive dance programme on PA motivation, participation, and psychosocial outcomes was examined. Focus groups, reflective journals, and field notes were analysed thematically, with findings interpreted through the COM-B model. Results suggest that dance facilitated emotional expression, social connection, and physical confidence. Themes revealed dance as enjoyable, empowering, and inclusive, with students reporting increased motivation and a sense of connection and belonging. The dance programme enhanced capability through physical and emotional skill-building, provided opportunities through cultural relevance and accessibility, and motivated participants via intrinsic enjoyment and social affirmation. Findings support dance as an effective strategy for increasing motivation and participation among adolescents in PA. The study also highlights the need for inclusive pedagogical training in dance for Physical education teachers. The study offers a replicable model for global policymakers and educators seeking to enhance equity in health and education outcomes.

Keywords:

adolescent physical activity, culturally responsive pedagogy, dance education, COM-B model, gender-inclusive PE, health and well-being

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Introduction

Adolescent physical inactivity remains a pressing global health issue, with fewer than 20% of adolescents worldwide meeting the World Health Organization's recommended levels of physical activity (WHO, 2020). It has been suggested that 1 in 5 children in England is reportedly obese or overweight by the time they are five years old (Sivvas *et al.*, 2015). Physical activity in adolescence may influence physical activity in adulthood, as people establish many of their lifestyle choices

during this stage of development (Troost *et al.*, 2001). While physical activity (PA) in adolescence may influence activity patterns in adulthood (Troost *et al.*, 2001), adult PA behaviour is also shaped by a complex constellation of socio-economic, environmental, personal, and behavioural factors (Troost *et al.*, 2001). This raises questions about the extent to which adolescent activity alone determines lifelong habits.

The decline in physical activity (PA) in adolescence has been associated with

increased risks of poor mental health and reduced social connectedness (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Guthold *et al.*, 2020), as well as obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension in adulthood (e.g., Bauman, 2004), with potentially long-term consequences for physical, psychological, and social well-being. Despite broad agreement on these risks, interventions that successfully engage adolescents in sustainable PA remain limited, particularly among groups underserved and marginalised by gender, socio-economic status, or cultural background (Pearce *et al.*, 2014; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). The literature diverges on the strategies needed to support sustained adolescent PA engagement, suggesting a gap between evidence and practice.

Schools are often identified as critical settings for PA interventions due to their access, reach, and possible influence during key developmental years (Langford *et al.*, 2015). Adolescence is a critical period for the development of lifelong PA behaviours. However, research is inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of school-based interventions in increasing adolescents' levels of PA (De Meester *et al.*, 2009; Parrish, 2020).

Motivation to engage in PA during adolescence is shaped by a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, which can significantly influence long-term behavioural outcomes. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000), intrinsic motivation is driven by enjoyment, autonomy, and perceived competence and tends to be more sustainable, leading to greater psychological well-being. In contrast, extrinsic motivation, such as rewards or social approval, may foster short-term engagement but often lacks a lasting impact unless it supports internalised values. During adolescence, a period marked by identity exploration and heightened sensitivity to peer dynamics, motivational drivers become particularly salient. Studies by Azzarito (2009) and Jago *et al.* (2015)

have found that personal relevance, social connection, and creative expression are powerful motivators for adolescents to engage in PA.

Traditional PE models, often structured around competitive sports, may fail to meet these needs, leading to disengagement, particularly among girls and minority groups (Dyson, 2014; Oliver & Kirk, 2015), who do not identify with such activities (e.g., Berger *et al.*, 2008). Innovative interventions that nurture intrinsic motivation through culturally student-centred approaches have demonstrated promise in reversing this trend by fostering enjoyment, autonomy, and a sense of belonging (Gard, 2006; Lubans *et al.*, 2016; McCarthy-Brown, 2027; Sango & Pickard, 2021).

Global policy frameworks have increasingly emphasised the importance of inclusive, relevant, and equitable physical education as a means of addressing the widespread decline in adolescent physical activity. UNESCO's *Quality Physical Education (QPE) Guidelines* (2015) advocate for pedagogies that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and learner-centred, aligning with calls to reform traditional PE models that fail to engage all young people, particularly those from underserved or marginalised communities.

These guidelines underscore the value of creative and expressive forms of movement, such as dance, as powerful tools for supporting student engagement, motivation, and psychosocial development. Similarly, the World Health Organization's *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030* (WHO, 2018) calls for multi-sectoral and innovative approaches to reverse global inactivity trends. The WHO advocates for culturally appropriate and community-embedded initiatives that offer equitable opportunities to participate in physical activity across the life course. This study responds to these calls by integrating a culturally responsive dance programme within school settings, aligning with global recommendations for accessible, inclusive,

and engaging physical activity interventions for youth.

There is growing interest in applying alternative, culturally relevant, and student-centred approaches to PA promotion (West et al., 2004). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an approach that recognises the importance of including students' interests and cultural references in all aspects of learning. This approach fosters relevance, engagement, and emotional safety, which are crucial for enhancing motivation and inclusive participation.

Dance has emerged as a promising strategy for delivering inclusive, engaging PA that meets these pedagogical and psychological needs. Dance can be defined as physical and expressive human movement with aesthetic and artistic value, often accompanied by sound or music, that can be both participatory and performative (Chappell et al., 2021). Dance involves, for example, moving to rhythms, repetitions, changes in direction, coordination and control, balance, and the development of movement memory (Tao et al., 2021). Dance, then, offers a holistic body-mind activity, as it encompasses physical, social, psychological, emotional, and cognitive aspects.

Evidence suggests that dance can improve cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, strength, and motor coordination (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012; Hogg et al., 2012; Tao et al., 2021; Waugh et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2008), while also fostering self-esteem, positive body image, mental well-being, social bonding, emotional expression, and identity development (Burgess et al., 2006; Jola et al., 2011; Oliver et al., 2017; Pickard, 2021; Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010; Samoray, 2005; Wright et al., 2016), which can be motivating, particularly for adolescents (Hackney et al., 2007).

Dance's expressive and non-verbal nature may enhance inclusion, social cohesion, and belonging (Sango & Pickard, 2024; Froggett & Little, 2012) and can

bring diverse communities together. Its aesthetic and artistic value can deepen participants' emotional engagement (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020; Chappell et al., 2021).

In several countries, such as Finland and the Netherlands, dance- and movement-based initiatives have been integrated into broader educational and healthcare frameworks, yielding promising outcomes. In Finland, where holistic, arts-rich curricula are a key component of the national education system, movement and creativity are viewed as essential to student well-being and cognitive development (Kallio & Husu, 2020). Similarly, in the Netherlands, interdisciplinary programmes that combine music, movement/dance, and mental health education have been piloted as low-cost strategies to enhance adolescent mental health and combat physical inactivity (de Vries et al., 2019). These international models provide a compelling case for the scalability of inclusive, dance-based physical activity interventions, particularly in culturally diverse or under-resourced settings. They also reinforce the notion that motivation and sustained participation in PA are more likely when programmes resonate with young people's interests, identities, and emotional needs.

Nevertheless, while the literature on dance is largely positive, more critical reflection is needed on how such interventions are practically implemented within mainstream education systems. There is limited evidence on long-term sustainability and transferability, and further research should explore how school contexts, teacher training, and assessment frameworks can support or hinder innovative, inclusive PA models. Ultimately, bridging the gap between research and practice requires a critical interrogation of both structural barriers and pedagogical assumptions.

Sheppard and Broughton (2020) have explored the aesthetic, artistic, and creative aspects of dance, as well as its contribution to participants' health and well-being

through their work in active participation in music and dance. The aesthetic and artistic are experienced, perceived, and felt within dance as a combination of sensory and expressive qualities. Dance can offer a culturally relevant, expressive, and inclusive alternative to traditional PE, which can re-engage students in physical movement and foster psychosocial well-being.

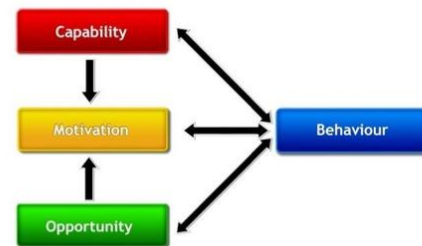
This article discusses an innovative study that investigates the potential of a school-based dance intervention to increase motivation, participation, and social-emotional outcomes among adolescents in UK secondary schools, framed through the COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation Behaviour). This study holds international significance as it addresses the global challenge of declining PA among adolescents by offering a culturally responsive and inclusive alternative to traditional PE.

With physical inactivity identified by the World Health Organization (2021) as a leading risk factor for non-communicable diseases worldwide, innovative interventions that promote sustained PA engagement are urgently needed. By situating dance within the COM-B framework, this research provides transferable insights into how motivation, opportunity, and capability can be fostered across diverse cultural and educational contexts.

Methods and Materials

The study evaluated the effectiveness of a school-based, culturally responsive dance programme designed to increase motivation and participation in PA among adolescents. At the start of the intervention, in consultation with participants at each school, the choice of dance styles and music was informed by the participants' lived experiences, preferences, and identities. This approach fosters relevance, engagement, and emotional safety, which are crucial for enhancing motivation and inclusive participation.

Drawing on the COM-B model (Michie *et al.*, 2011), Figure 1 illustrates how the intervention aimed to impact PA behaviour by enhancing *capability* through skill development and emotional confidence, *opportunity* via accessible and inclusive environments, and *motivation* through enjoyment and social engagement



Michie et al (2011) Implementation Science

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Figure 1. The COM-B Model of Behaviour

Methodology

Researcher reflexivity

Given the immersive and participatory nature of this intervention, researcher reflexivity was a key methodological consideration. The lead researcher was both a designer of the programme and a participant-observer during sessions, which positioned them in close proximity to the young people and facilitators. While this facilitated trust and deep insight into the dynamics of participation and motivation, it also carried risks of bias, particularly in the interpretation of engagement and emotional responses. To enhance rigour, reflective field notes were maintained after each session, triangulated with student reflective activities and journals, facilitator and PE teachers' debriefs, and observations. The researcher's background in dance education and commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy inevitably shaped interactions and interpretations. However, these were openly acknowledged and critically examined throughout the analytic process.

Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore adolescents' experiences of a culturally responsive, school-based dance programme/intervention. The study sought to understand how the programme influenced participants' motivation, participation, self-perception, and social engagement in PA. The COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation = Behaviour) was used as an analytical framework to interpret how young people experienced behavioural change processes within the intervention context.

Settings and Participants

The study was conducted in three secondary schools located in urban, coastal, and rural areas of England, specifically in the South East, London, and Yorkshire. Schools were selected based on their existing interest in integrating dance into their PE curriculum and their demographic diversity. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from parents or guardians, as well as from the school leadership teams, and assent from the students. Eighty-nine adolescents participated in the study, aged 12-16 years, across three secondary schools (South-east, $n = 29$; London, $n = 31$; Yorkshire, $n = 29$). Participants varied in their prior experience with dance, with 53 students reporting no formal dance training. Table 1 summarises the demographics of the 89 participants, including their gender, ethnicity, and age.

Intervention Design

The intervention was co-designed with students at each participating school to ensure that the dance styles, musical selections, and overall structure reflected participants' lived experiences, preferences, and cultural identities. This culturally responsive approach was operationalised through initial consultation workshops where students shared their musical tastes, cultural backgrounds, and prior experiences of physical activity. Facilitators then used this input to collaboratively develop session

plans, with adaptations made over time in response to student feedback, thereby enhancing relevance, emotional safety, and sustained engagement (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender	n
Female	47
Male	38
Non-binary	4
Ethnicity	n
Black British	16
African Caribbean	10
White British	37
South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi heritage)	13
Mixed heritage	7
East Asian, Middle Eastern, and other self-identified groups)	4
Prefer not to say	2
Age	n
12-13 years	50
14-16 years	39
Mean age=	13.8 years

The intervention consisted of an 8-week school-based dance programme, 70 minutes in duration, delivered during PE classes once a week. Professional dance artists and practitioners facilitated sessions in consultation with PE teachers. The intervention incorporated creative tasks featuring diverse and culturally responsive dance styles, including hip-hop, dance rooted in the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, Bharatanatyam, and contemporary dance, with a focus on inclusivity, enjoyment, self-expression, social connection, and student-led creativity.

To ensure transparency and rigour in implementation, the intervention followed a standardised but flexible session structure. Each school received an 8-week programme, comprising weekly 70-minute sessions. Sessions typically included: (1) a check-in circle, (2) a social warm-up/game,

sometimes chosen and/or led by a young person, and (3) mobilisation and pulse-raising activities, including ‘people’s choice of music. (4) a technique and skill-building component based on selected dance styles (e.g., hip hop, dance rooted in Afro-Caribbean diaspora, and/or contemporary); (5) creative tasks (6) cool-down, sometimes led by a young person from the group (7) group reflective activities and journals and dialogue.

Activities fostered peer interaction, creative expression, and iterative skill development. A summary of key activities and session objectives is presented in *Table 2*. Documentation of each session was maintained through facilitator logs, student reflection activities, and journals, which were analysed to support evaluation of participant outcomes and engagement levels.

Table 2. Example dance intervention session plan (week 4)

Session duration	Focus
70 minutes	Hip hop (foundational styles such as groove, top rock, bounce, isolations, basic footwork).
Check-in circle (10 mins)	Purpose: Build emotional safety and connection. Prompts: ‘How tired are you feeling on a scale of 1-10?’ ‘Share one song that lifts your mood and brings you energy.’ Brief reminder of the community agreements (respect, openness, everyone has a voice).
Social warm-up game (5 mins)	Facilitator model inclusiveness. Young people stand in a circle and share briefly. Choice dependent on tiredness/ energy levels: Pass the move or accumulation. Student choice/led as appropriate Encourage laughter, creativity, and connection.
Mobilisation and pulse-raiser (10 minutes)	Optional: Music selected by students (rotating DJ of the day) Begin with joint mobility (wrists, shoulders, hips, knees), then isolation drills, light jogging. Groove-based warm-up to a student-selected hip hop track.
Technique and skill building (15 mins)	Use follow-the-leader format: each person leads 8 counts of freestyle. Focus: Foundation movements—bounce, rock, top rock, and isolations. Central context shared. Break down each movement slowly, then build to tempo. Practise short combos with counts and then with music. Emphasis on rhythm, groundedness, musicality, and personal style.
Creative and sharing (15 mins)	Small groups choose 2–3 movements from what was taught. Add their own moves to create a short phrase. Facilitator supports with structure but encourages choreographic elements e.g., dynamics, transitions. Focus on students’ cultural/music references where appropriate.
Cool down (5 minutes)	Groups share if appropriate. Appreciation feedback including reference to achievements, community, and creativity and expression. Student-led: Invite one volunteer to guide breath, stretch, or somatic (all experienced before). Relaxation to a slower, student-chosen track (instrumental hip hop or lo-fi). Include breathing and guided imagery.
Reflection (10 mins)	Post-it notes on poster and/or journalling prompt: <i>How did today’s session help you express who you are?</i> <i>What did you do to support each other?</i> Optional: Verbal sharing or art response (draw how the session felt). Closing circle: Appreciation shout-outs or one thing I’m taking away.

This design exemplifies how culturally responsive, student-centred approaches can be implemented systematically within a school-based PA intervention. It also

illustrates how collaboration between specialist facilitators and school-based PE staff can enhance both the delivery and sustainability of such initiatives.

Professional dance artists and practitioners

Each programme was delivered by qualified dance artists and practitioners who held recognised certifications in dance, dance education, youth engagement, and safeguarding. Two of them had formal training in community or participatory arts, and all three had formal training in performance. All the facilitators had experience working with diverse and marginalised youth populations and were chosen for their ability to establish rapport and lead inclusive dance sessions. To support fidelity and relational consistency, all practitioners participated in pre-intervention training focused on cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, and adolescent motivation, drawing on frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), COM-B, and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

PE teachers

Physical Education teachers based in each school played a key supporting role as participant observers during the intervention. Prior to the programme, PE staff received tailored training from the lead dance practitioners, which included guidance on facilitative observation, inclusive communication strategies, and recognising indicators of increased student motivation and engagement. Their presence during sessions helped bridge the intervention with the existing school context, supported continuity in physical education provision, and enabled reflective discussions around pedagogical practices that could enhance regular PE. Debriefing sessions were undertaken between the dance facilitator and the PE teacher after each intervention session.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through multiple sources to allow for methodological triangulation:

- Focus groups (n = 12), organised post-intervention, stratified by gender,

ethnicity, and school to encourage peer dialogue and group reflection.

- Semi-structured interviews (n = 18) with individual students, purposively sampled to represent a range of experiences and engagement levels.
- Artist/practitioner and teacher field notes, as well as researcher observations, were taken throughout the programme to capture student motivation, participation, and interactions.
- Reflective journals were completed weekly by a sub-sample of participants (n = 15), documenting personal responses, emotional engagement, and evolving motivation.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was secured, and all safeguarding and risk assessment procedures were followed. Ethical considerations are crucial to ensure the safety and well-being of adolescents. Informed consent was obtained at each session, where the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study were explained. Given the physical and emotional vulnerabilities associated with adolescence, special care was taken to avoid any form of pressure or harm, including issues related to body image, self-esteem, and performance anxiety. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and the six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was both inductive and deductive, drawing on the COM-B model as an interpretive lens. This allowed for a rich and iterative interpretation of meaning across datasets. Initial codes were generated inductively, followed by thematic development in relation to the COM-B framework (Michie *et al.*, 2011). The intervention examined *capability* through skill acquisition and confidence-building, *opportunity* by embedding the programme in the school curriculum, ensuring accessibility, and

motivation through engaging content, peer support, and self-directed creativity.

Coding was conducted in NVivo, with cross-coding and peer debriefing undertaken to ensure rigour and credibility. Member checking with a sample of participants helped verify the trustworthiness of emerging interpretations.

Materials

Materials utilised in the study included:

- Audio-recording devices for all interviews and focus groups.
- NVivo software for data coding and thematic analysis.
- Participant reflection templates and journals.
- Detailed session plans and curriculum materials co-designed with dance professionals.
- Observational checklists and field-note logs for researchers and teaching staff.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes that highlight adolescents' experiences of the dance intervention, connected to COM-B:

- (1) Enjoyment and intrinsic motivation;
- (2) Opportunity: Building social and cultural accessibility;
- (3) Capability: Developing physical and emotional confidence;

Each theme is outlined below and supported by illustrative quotations from participants.

1. *Enjoyment and intrinsic motivation*

The most prominent outcome was an increase in intrinsic motivation, primarily driven by the programme's fun, creativity, and its resonance with the adolescent group. Engagement in dance with different types of music was consistently described as enjoyable and rewarding, where participants gained a sense of achievement and competence, which sustained voluntary participation.

"It didn't feel like exercise; it was just fun. I wanted to come back every week, and I have been practising at home." (Female, 15)

"Normally I hate PE, but this was actually something I looked forward to because I liked the music and learning different dance styles as well as creating." (Male, 14)

According to the COM-B model, motivation encompasses both reflective (intentions and plans) and automatic (emotions and impulses) processes. The sessions fostered positive affect and a sense of ownership over movement, stimulating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

This aligns with previous literature, which shows that autonomy-supportive and culturally meaningful PA increases adolescents' motivation to be active. The emotional satisfaction derived from self-expression and achievement through dance supported a sustainable form of motivation.

Students described both reflective engagement (personal growth, self-worth) and automatic motivation (enjoyment, habit):

"We didn't even realise we were exercising, it just felt good." (Male, 12)

This response highlights intrinsic motivators and the emotional rewards that align with sustained behavioural change.

2. *Opportunity: Building social and cultural accessibility*

The dance intervention provided social and physical opportunities for participation. Culturally responsive content (e.g., music, movement styles) and the absence of traditional sport-based hierarchies made the programme more inclusive, particularly for students who were not motivated by sport.

"I liked using music from my culture. It made me feel seen." (Male, 15)

“We could show who we are through our moves.” (Female, 16)

Socially, the dance intervention fostered positive peer relationships, built trust, and promoted collaboration through working in pairs, small groups, and as a large class. These are key aspects of the opportunity domain in the COM-B model. The safe and supportive environment encouraged interaction across usual social boundaries.

“I didn’t really know anyone in my group before, but now we’re like a team.” (Non-binary, 16)

“Doing dance has made me feel closer to people. Playing games, creating duets and learning different dances has been fun.” (Male, 14)

These findings underscore the significance of dance in fostering not only individual engagement but also broader social outcomes, including a sense of belonging, community, and inclusive participation.

“This was the first time PE actually felt fair. Everyone had a chance, and no one judged you.” (Non-binary, 15).

“Doing dances from different cultures made me feel proud, like, this is part of me.” (Male, 13).

These quotations reflect how dance, as both a physical opportunity (structured, supportive sessions) and a social opportunity (peer acceptance, cultural recognition), was crucial in fostering participation.

3. Capability: Developing physical and emotional confidence

Although the intervention did not aim to build or advance technical skill, many students reported increased confidence in their physical capabilities. In addition,

some students demonstrated emotional resilience through problem-solving and creative tasks. These developments reflect the capability component of COM-B, which includes both physical and psychological factors.

“I didn’t think I could dance, but now I feel more confident in myself.” (Male, 13).

“When I’m stressed, dancing helped me focus and calm down.” (Female, 12).

“I was a bit worried at first when we had to create something, as I have not done that before. But, it was good to work with someone. We worked it out together, and I felt that we both cared about it, so we got on with it. I noticed that usually there are a lot of people mucking about, but everyone seemed interested and improved in the dances.” (Female, 12).

Participants reported some improvement in emotional regulation, suggesting that dance may also help develop coping strategies, body awareness, and confidence that extend beyond the sessions themselves.

“At the start I couldn’t even do the warm-up without feeling awkward. Now I actually help lead it sometimes.” (Male, 15).

“Learning the phrases of movement in the different styles made me realise I can pick things up if I keep trying. It gave me more belief in myself.” (Female, 14).

The dance programme enabled the adolescents to experience increased physical capability and success. This contributes to building self-efficacy, potentially supporting long-term engagement in PA.

Discussion

Effectiveness of the Dance Intervention

Informed by the COM-B framework, the qualitative analysis and findings support

dance as an effective strategy for increasing motivation and participation among adolescents in PA. There was some evidence that the dance intervention enhanced intrinsic motivation through increased enjoyment and creativity. Additionally, dance provided accessible opportunities for engagement, particularly for individuals who were previously disengaged from traditional PE. Furthermore, the dance intervention developed specific capabilities by enhancing participants' confidence, self-expression, and emotional coping skills.

Importantly, the intervention may have contributed to positive psychosocial outcomes, including strengthened peer relationships, increased self-esteem, and a deeper sense of cultural and personal identity. These areas are suggested as foundational for sustained participation in PA. The findings support the integration of culturally responsive, expressive forms of PA, like dance, into school-based programmes, especially when aiming to reach diverse youth populations.

Dance and motivation: A pathway to sustained engagement

A key finding was the substantial increase in intrinsic motivation, which aligns with prior research indicating that enjoyment and self-expression are central to adolescent engagement in PA (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lubans et al., 2016). Participants' reflections revealed that the non-competitive, expressive nature of dance offered emotional satisfaction and autonomy, both of which are essential for internalising the value of movement. Unlike performance-oriented sports, which may alienate some students, particularly girls and less confident youth (Jago et al., 2015), dance fosters a sense of ownership, enjoyment, and personal meaning.

Opportunity and belonging: Broadening access through cultural relevance

The dance intervention's design incorporated music and movement styles

that reflected participants' interests, which was influential in increasing interest and engagement. Dance served as a vehicle for movement and a site of social cohesion, identity affirmation, and emotional expression. The creation of a safe and affirming space for young people to interact beyond their usual social groups fostered peer connections.

Building capability: Physical confidence and emotional literacy

Participants' development of physical confidence and emotional regulation during creative tasks enabled greater self-assurance in physical abilities for some students. The dance programme's emphasis on improvisation, group support, and skill development at a manageable pace facilitated psychological and physical growth. This supports prior work by Oliver & Kirk (2015), who emphasise the value of pedagogies that validate diverse bodies and competencies in PE.

Addressing challenges and resistance

While the findings highlight predominantly positive outcomes related to motivation, engagement, and psychosocial well-being, it is essential to critically acknowledge the challenges and moments of resistance that emerged throughout the intervention. Not all students engaged enthusiastically in every session; some initially expressed discomfort or scepticism toward dance, particularly if it did not align with their prior experiences or peer group norms. For a small number of participants, feelings of self-consciousness, performance anxiety, or cultural misalignment occasionally hindered full engagement. There were also examples where students experienced adolescent growth spurts and became more sensitive, self-conscious, and fatigued.

There were also instances where dance artists and practitioners, serving as facilitators, had to navigate tensions between individual expression and group cohesion, especially in co-creative components. Occasionally the school-based

PE teacher had to intervene to manage behaviour. These experiences underscore the complexity of delivering culturally responsive interventions in diverse school environments. Importantly, moments of resistance often offered valuable insight and became catalysts for adaptation and highlighted the need for ongoing dialogue, flexibility, and co-construction in programme delivery. Addressing these tensions not only strengthens the analysis but also adds credibility to the broader claim that culturally responsive dance interventions can be both impactful and contextually sensitive when thoughtfully implemented.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study strongly align with global recommendations from both UNESCO and the WHO, suggesting that culturally responsive dance programmes are well-positioned to contribute to internationally endorsed strategies for improving adolescent physical activity. UNESCO's QPE framework promotes holistic, inclusive, and culturally grounded physical education that supports lifelong engagement in physical activity. This study echoes those principles by demonstrating how tailoring dance interventions to the cultural identities and preferences of young people can foster motivation, a sense of belonging, and sustained participation. Moreover, the WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity emphasises the need for scalable, innovative approaches that reduce inequalities in physical activity engagement, particularly among young people. By demonstrating that school-based, student-centred dance interventions can engage ethnically diverse populations across varied settings, this research offers a practical, policy-aligned model that could be adapted internationally. Embedding such interventions within national curricula or youth-focused health strategies could play a key role in achieving global physical activity targets.

This study is original in its framing of the outcomes through the COM-B model, and it has demonstrated how dance enhanced all three components necessary for behaviour change: capability, opportunity, and motivation. These results suggest that dance can address common barriers to PA engagement, such as a lack of confidence or interest.

However, for such interventions to be scalable and sustainable, schools must be supported with appropriate training and resources. Teacher preparedness emerged as a key factor, underscoring the need for professional development in inclusive, dance-based pedagogy. Future research should examine long-term outcomes and explore how dance programmes can be adapted across diverse educational settings to promote equity in PA access.

To maximise the benefits of dance-based interventions, several implications arise from this study. PE teachers observed and supported the dance artists and practitioners during the intervention sessions, often managing behaviours or additional access needs. The teachers reported that they were gaining professional development from the intervention, which was an unexpected outcome. Physical educators need training in dance, inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, and their application to all areas of PE. This includes strategies for building psychological safety, facilitating creative tasks and expression, and tailoring content to reflect the diverse cultural contexts of students.

Further, although dance is part of the national curriculum in England until children are 14 years old, dance can also be offered as an extracurricular activity. This would provide more opportunities for adolescents to engage in PA, led by trained teachers, artists, and/or practitioners. Further, international education curricula policies could support flexible PE curricula that prioritise engagement, inclusion, and student well-being over traditional performance sports.

Implications for sustained behavioural change

An important consideration in evaluating the impact of the intervention is the extent to which it may contribute to long-term behavioural change in physical activity engagement beyond the programme's duration. While the 8-week structure provided an initial scaffold for increased motivation, self-efficacy, and enjoyment, sustainable change relies on more than short-term enthusiasm.

The intervention aimed to cultivate internalised motivation by prioritising autonomy, cultural relevance, and social connection, factors known to influence long-term PA behaviour (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). Many participants reported continued interest in dance outside of the sessions, and two of the schools expressed intent to integrate similar approaches into their PE curricula.

However, structural support, such as access to facilities, continued opportunities for student-led activity, and sustained teacher engagement, is essential for lasting impact. The programme's focus on co-creation and skill-building, combined with peer leadership elements, may foster a sense of ownership that increases the likelihood of ongoing participation.

Nonetheless, future longitudinal research is necessary to assess whether and how these behaviours persist over time and what mechanisms and school structures may best support their maintenance across different educational and community contexts.

International relevance of dance as a public health strategy

Physical inactivity remains a critical global public health issue among adolescents, with long-term consequences for physical, psychological, and social well-being. As discussed in the introduction, according to the World Health Organization (2020), more than 80% of adolescents worldwide fail to meet the recommended daily levels

of PA. This study provides evidence that culturally responsive dance programmes can serve as effective interventions to boost motivation and participation among young people, particularly those who may feel excluded from traditional sports. In several other countries, such as Finland, where arts-based approaches are embedded in holistic education models, and the Netherlands, which has explored the integration of movement and music to support youth mental health, dance is increasingly recognised as a viable, low-cost tool to address inactivity.

The findings from this UK-based study support the scalability of such programmes across different cultural contexts, with dance offering adolescents a non-competitive, expressive, and enjoyable alternative that promotes emotional expression, physical literacy, and social connectedness.

Policy and practice implications for global health and education systems

This study also contributes to a growing body of international evidence that dance can positively influence young people's PA behaviours and psychosocial well-being. By applying the COM-B model, a replicable framework is offered that can be adapted to diverse education systems and cultural settings. For example, in countries like Sweden and Germany, where youth mental health and sedentary lifestyles are rising concerns, dance interventions aligned with school curricula or community programming could help address both health and educational inequities. Additionally, Southern European contexts, such as Spain, Greece, and Italy, have rich dance and cultural traditions that can be leveraged within inclusive PE practices.

The recommendation for inclusive pedagogical training in dance supports equity-oriented strategies in teacher education, resonating with the goals of the EU Physical Activity Strategy (2016–2020) and aligning with broader global policy frameworks such as UNESCO's Education

2030 agenda and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). This study, therefore, has both national and international implications, offering an innovative approach to increasing adolescent PA while supporting emotional and social development through the arts.

Limitations and Future Research

A critical reflection on the researcher's positionality highlights both the strengths and limitations of this study. The researcher's active involvement in programme development and delivery fostered trust, responsiveness, and depth of engagement with participants; these are key elements in culturally situated work. However, this proximity also introduced the potential for interpretive bias, particularly in evaluating motivation and emotional connection to dance. The researcher's own values around creative expression and equity in physical activity may have influenced the framing of success and the interpretation of student responses. Recognising this, the study adopted reflexive practices, such as documenting positional reflections and incorporating multiple perspectives into the analysis. These measures aimed to uphold integrity and transparency while acknowledging that knowledge produced in such settings is always co-constructed. Future studies may benefit from including more explicitly contrasting perspectives, such as those of non-participating students or external evaluators.

This study offers some evidence of the benefits of dance, but it is based on an 8-week single intervention within three specific secondary school contexts. Future research should investigate the COM-B impacts over time through a longitudinal study of PA habits and psychosocial well-being in dance. In addition, the scalability of the dance intervention programme across various educational and cultural settings should be considered. It would also be

interesting to compare studies between dance and other non-traditional PE approaches (e.g., yoga, martial arts).

Although the study was based in the UK, its conceptual framework and pedagogical approach offer adaptable insights for international education and healthcare settings. The inclusion of culturally responsive content, participatory methods, and emphasis on psychosocial outcomes provides a foundation for scalable interventions globally. Future studies should explore how culturally tailored dance programmes might be adapted for different regions to support equitable PA participation and adolescent well-being worldwide.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that a culturally responsive, school-based dance intervention can meaningfully increase adolescent motivation and participation in physical activity, while also supporting psychosocial well-being. A key strength of the programme was its grounding in culturally responsive pedagogy, which incorporated students' identities, interests, and cultural references into the design and delivery of the sessions, promoting emotional safety, autonomy, and relevance.

By applying the COM-B model, the intervention demonstrated how building emotional and physical capability, enhancing access and opportunity, and fostering intrinsic motivation can lead to more engaging and inclusive physical activity experiences. Notably, the study highlights an unmet need for investment in PE teacher training and professional development in dance, with educators frequently citing a lack of confidence and preparation in this area. The inclusion of diverse geographical and cultural school contexts further strengthens the generalisability of the findings, offering a model for international efforts to develop equitable and effective adolescent PA interventions. These findings support the

integration of culturally relevant dance programmes into school curricula as a scalable, low-cost strategy for promoting sustained physical activity engagement.

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