Dance Creativity in Kindergarten: Improvisation as a Method for Identifying Dance Talent in Children

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Dance improvisation is a spontaneous and free form of expression that intertwines movement and imagination, creating space for creativity. The creativity expressed through dance improvisation represents a key category in identifying dance talent in children, as it provides insight into their ability for free expression and original movement. The aim of our study was to explore the characteristics of dance improvisation in early childhood, with a focus on physical activity and the formation of movement in children. We employed a quantitative research approach, collecting data through an observational protocol. The study included 246 children aged 5–6 years from 38 public kindergartens across Slovenia. Our findings serve as an important foundation for further research on monitoring dance improvisation in preschool children and for a deeper understanding of the role of body movement in children's creative dance expression.

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1 Introduction

Dance originates from a child's natural need for movement and self-expression (Koff, 2000). It represents one of the most fundamental ways in which individuals connect with the world, emerging even before language development. Dance is inherent to children—it precedes verbal communication—and serves as a medium for expressing thoughts and emotions that may be too profound for words (Faber, 1994).

In early childhood education, dance is increasingly recognized for its role in holistic development and talent identification. Preschool teachers integrate dance activities into curricula, emphasizing their significance for children's overall growth (Hornos & Nicolás, 2019; Pastorek Gripson et al., 2021).

Scholars and educators stress the need for diverse methods to identify dance talent (Baum, Owen & Oreck, 2004; Warburton, 2002; Williams & Reilly, 2000; Wolstencroft, 2002). Among the six key areas identified in dance talent recognition, creativity—particularly expressed through dance improvisation—plays a crucial role (Baum, Owen & Oreck, 2004). Dance improvisation serves as a powerful tool for discovering and nurturing children's natural movement potential and creative abilities.

The preschool years provide an optimal period for encouraging children's natural movement exploration. During this time, they can engage with various dance elements, such as energy, space, and time (Kaufman & Ellis, 2007). The emphasis is on spontaneity, originality, and individuality, enabling children to develop unique movement expressions in different contexts (Joyce, 1994, in Lobo & Winsler, 2006). Rather than focusing on predetermined choreography, dance activities should stimulate creativity, allowing children to express emotions, thoughts, and experiences in their own way.

In Slovenia, research on identifying dance talent in preschool children remains scarce. While studies on musical talent and aptitude primarily focus on primary school levels (Kovačič & Črčinovič Rozman, 2014; Kovačič, 2015; Kovačič & Matejek, 2020), the preschool stage remains largely unexplored.

Given the significance of dance improvisation in fostering creativity and identifying dance talent, this study aims to examine its characteristics in preschool children. The theoretical framework first explores the concept of dance talent, followed by an analysis of dance improvisation as a key element in talent recognition. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the study's purpose.

1.1 Creativity as an Element of Dance Talent

The development of dance talent is a complex process influenced by multiple factors. Research suggests that talented dancers exhibit a combination of physical abilities, psychological traits, creativity, and motivation (Chua, 2014; Walker et al., 2010). Successful dancers not only demonstrate advanced technical skills but also develop strong psychosocial competencies and benefit from supportive environments that provide optimal learning opportunities (Chua, 2015). Social support from family, peers, and teachers plays a crucial role in nurturing dance talent, enhancing psychological well-being, self-esteem, and motivation (Sanchez et al., 2013). This talent development process is shaped by instrumental, emotional, and informational support from these social networks (Chua, 2015).

Several theoretical models contribute to understanding talent development. Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and Gagné's (1985) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) emphasize the interaction between innate abilities and environmental influences. However, these models have been critiqued for their lack of empirical support, limiting their applicability in dance education.

To address challenges in talent identification, Baum, Owen, and Oreck (2004) developed the Talent Identification Instrument (TII), which was applied during a seven-week audition process involving students from urban, low socioeconomic backgrounds. Grounded in Renzulli's (1978) three-ring model of giftedness—encompassing above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment—this instrument assessed physical skills, creativity, and motivation. The TII was later refined into the Talent Assessment Process (TAP), a multi-session approach in which evaluators collaboratively scored students based on these criteria while also forming an overall impression. In the field of dance, three core criteria have been emphasized: technical skills, motivation, and creativity (Baum, Owen & Oreck, 2004).

Creativity, a fundamental component of dance talent, is a multifaceted concept that offers insight into human behavior. It is shaped by variables such as environmental influences, individual traits, and intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1993). While creativity is generally defined as the ability to generate original and effective outcomes (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), ongoing debates persist regarding the precise criteria for its assessment. In the context of dance, creativity is understood through a combination of cognitive, sociocultural, and post-human perspectives, incorporating elements such as creative pedagogy and multicultural influences (Chappell & Hathaway, 2019).

Within movement studies, creativity is described as the ability to produce novel solutions within the realm of physical activity (Pagona & Costas, 2008). This definition is particularly relevant to dance education, where creativity is considered a universal trait that can be expressed by individuals regardless of formal training. In young children, creative exploration fosters innovative thinking and problem-solving, even in the absence of structured techniques or predefined frameworks. This aligns with the broader goal of fostering creativity in early childhood education, though challenges remain in effectively evaluating creative movement. Pica (2008) suggests that creative movement serves as a vital medium for establishing a connection between the mind and body, which is essential for unlocking creativity.

Recent research highlights the critical role of creativity in dance education, not only as a means of enhancing artistic expression but also as a key factor in cognitive and social development. Further studies are needed to deepen our understanding of the relationship between dance talent and creativity and to refine methods for identifying and nurturing creative potential in diverse populations (Walker et al., 2010; Chua, 2014).

1.2 Children's Dance Improvisation

Dance improvisation is a unique form of artistic expression that allows children to explore and develop their movement creativity. The concept of improvisation is closely associated with spontaneity, creativity, and the absence of predetermined planning, providing opportunities for movement experimentation and the expression of individual ideas (Carter, 2000). The primary medium for improvisation

is the human body and its interaction with others, encouraging children to discover new ways of moving and engaging in cognitive exploration.

Biasutti (2013) defines dance improvisation as the art or act of creating and performing something new without prior preparation. In early childhood, improvisation manifests as play through movement, where children, with appropriate stimulation (e.g., music or material prompts), are guided toward creating their own movement expressions (Kroflič & Gobec, 1995). Dance improvisation originates from children's internal experiences and expressions. By encouraging children to use their natural movements, they are guided to explore various elements of dance, such as energy, space, and time (Kaufman & Ellis, 2007).

Improvisation in dance is not only an artistic activity but also a valuable pedagogical tool that fosters children's creative potential. When dance instructors focus solely on the repetition of movements (i.e., memorization-based learning), they underestimate the power of creative learning and the cognitive processes that can unfold within dance activities. Through improvisation, children face the challenge of creating something entirely new, stepping beyond their habitual movement patterns, and overcoming the risk of falling into repetitive routines that may limit their expression. This process demands continuous idea generation, exploration of movement possibilities, and an element of surprise, both for themselves and their observers (Carter, 2000).

A distinct value of dance improvisation lies in its ability to enable children to express thoughts and emotions beyond the limitations of verbal communication. Movement becomes a medium through which they explore their emotional states and creatively express their inner worlds. This process enriches their movement vocabulary, builds self-confidence and curiosity, and enhances their adaptability to new situations (Chappell, 2007).

Research underscores the significant benefits of dance improvisation for creativity and cognitive development. Studies indicate a positive correlation between improvisational dance and creativity enhancement, primarily due to the cognitive comprehension and exploratory skills it fosters (Wright, 2018). Dance improvisation creates a shared creative space where dancers co-create and communicate ideas non-verbally, distributing intentionality among participants (Łucznik, 2015). Expert

dance educators recognize the potential of improvisation in fostering creativity in children, highlighting its role in holistic development and education (Biasutti & Habe, 2021). The spontaneous kinesthetic responses required in dance improvisation facilitate the creative process by enabling innovative movement (Savrami, 2017).

Moreover, dance improvisation contributes to the development of motor and communication skills while promoting children's overall growth in physical, cognitive, and emotional domains (Biasutti, 2013; Pavlidou et al., 2018). It also provides insights into the relationship between consciousness and movement, potentially advancing our understanding of mind-body connections (Savrami, 2017). Collectively, these studies highlight the multifaceted benefits of dance improvisation for fostering creativity, cognitive skills, and personal development.

By emphasizing exploration and self-expression through movement, dance improvisation makes a significant contribution to the holistic development of children, offering them a unique opportunity to discover their own creative voices through physical expression.

1.3 Research Aim

In the Slovenian context, there is a lack of research focusing on the identification of dance talent in preschool children through the lens of dance improvisation.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to gain insight into the characteristics of dance improvisation in preschool children and to examine potential differences between boys and girls, with an emphasis on physical activity and movement formation. Physical activity encompasses motor skills such as coordination, strength, speed, balance, flexibility, precision, and endurance (Goodway, Gallahue, & Ozmun, 2013), all of which influence the quality of dance performance (Kostić et al., 2002; Nožinović et al., 2006; Srhoj, 2002; Uzunović & Kostić, 2005). Movement formation, on the other hand, refers to the structuring of individual movements into movement motifs, through which children express themselves in dance (Kroflič & Gobec, 1995). Both elements are fundamental components of dance improvisation, contributing to children's exploration and creative expression through movement.

2 Methods

A descriptive empirical pedagogical research method was employed. We conducted a quantitative analysis of children's dance improvisation performance, focusing on physical activity and movement formation.

2.1 Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of preschool children's dance improvisation in terms of physical activity and movement formation?
- Are there differences between boys and girls in their performance of dance improvisation regarding physical activity and movement formation?

2.2 Sample

The study was conducted in 38 public kindergartens across the Savinja, Podravje, Koroška, and Prekmurje regions of Slovenia. A total of 246 randomly selected children aged 5–6 years participated, including 147 girls and 99 boys. In each kindergarten, eight children from the 5–6-year-old age group were randomly selected to take part in the study.

2.3 Measurement Instruments

For the purposes of this study, we developed and utilized an observational protocol to assess dance improvisation in preschool children. This protocol is being developed as part of a doctoral dissertation focusing on the planning and implementation of dance activities in kindergartens. The items included in the protocol were designed based on theoretical frameworks established by experts in the field of dance (Kroflič & Gobec, 1995; Laban, 2002; Zakkai, 1997).

The protocol employs a four-point Likert-type scale, with the following response categories: 1 – Never, 2 – Rarely, 3 – Often, 4 – Very often. Before its implementation, the content validity of the protocol was assessed by experts in dance education. The measurement instrument consists of 22 items, categorized into four

domains: physical activity, movement formation, use of space, and integration of dance with music.

The instrument is designed for the observation of small groups of children, specifically those aged 5 to 6 years. It is essential that all assessments reflect real-time observations of the children's performance during the activities.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

In each kindergarten, a dance improvisation activity was conducted with eight randomly selected children from the 5–6-year-old age group. Each activity lasted approximately 15 minutes. The session began with children listening to a piece of music. Based on their experiences and interpretations of the music, they engaged in free movement creation to express their own dance improvisations. Each child was observed using the prepared observational protocol.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The collected data were processed and analyzed using SPSS, version 24. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were applied. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the fundamental characteristics of the data, including means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for each variable.
To examine gender differences in dance improvisation performance, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The goal was to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between boys and girls in items related to physical activity and movement formation. Prior to conducting the t-tests, Levene's test for equality of variances was applied to assess variance homogeneity between groups. If the p-value was greater than 0.05, equal variances were assumed, and the standard t-test was used.

3 Results

3.1 Characteristics of Children's Dance Improvisation in Terms of Physical Activity

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Children's Physical Activity During Dance Improvisation

Items on Physical Activity	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
During dance, the child combines various locomotor movements (e.g., jumping, crawling, hopping, running, rolling, gliding)	246	1	4	3.12	0.856
During dance, the child uses the lower body (e.g., legs, feet, hips)	246	1	4	3.15	0.845
During dance, the child uses the upper body (e.g., arms, head, shoulders)	246	1	4	3.24	0.807
During dance, the child coordinates different body parts (e.g., arms and legs, shoulders and legs)	246	1	4	2.87	0.826
During dance, the child maintains balance (e.g., shifting weight from one leg to another, standing on one leg)	246	1	4	2.98	0.899
During dance, the child performs spins	246	1	4	3.23	0.947

Note: The scale ranges from 1 (never) to 4 (very often).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for various variables related to physical activity during dance. All variables were rated on a four-point scale, where 1 indicates that the child never engages in a particular activity, and 4 signifies that the child performs the activity very frequently. The analysis reveals that children most frequently use their upper body during dance improvisation, as this item received the highest mean score (M = 3.24). This was closely followed by spinning movements (M = 3.23), suggesting that these elements are commonly observed in dance improvisation. Conversely, the coordination of different body parts, such as arms and legs or shoulders and legs, received the lowest mean score (M = 2.87), indicating that children engage in this activity less frequently. Similarly, balance maintenance (M = 2.98) appeared less commonly in children's dance improvisation.

Table 2: T-Test Results for Gender Differences in Movement Formation During Dance Improvisation

Items on Movement Formation	Gender	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	T-test
During dance, the child combines various locomotor movements (e.g., jumping, crawling, hopping, running, rolling, gliding)	Boys	99	3.17	0.783	F=0.822 p=0.365	t=0.809 p=0.419
	Girls	147	3.08	0.903		
During dance, the child uses the lower body (e.g., legs, feet, hips)	Boys	99	3.03	0.863	F=0.670 p=0.414	t=-1.776 p=0.077
	Girls	147	3.22	0.826		
During dance, the child uses the upper body (e.g., arms, head, shoulders)	Boys	99	3.11	0.856	F=0.107 p=0.744	t=-2.135 p=0.034
	Girls	147	3.33	0.762		
During dance, the child coordinates different body parts (e.g., arms and legs, shoulders and legs)	Boys	99	2.66	0.785	F=0.622 p=0.431	t=-3.464 p=<.001
	Girls	147	3.02	0.823		
During dance, the child maintains balance (e.g., shifting weight from one leg to another, standing on one leg)	Boys	99	2.88	0.895	F=0.042 p=0.838	t=-1.507 p=0.133
	Girls	147	3.05	0.897		
During dance, the child performs spins	Boys	99	3.07	1.042	F=2.327 p=0.128	t=-2.205 p=.028
	Girls	147	3.34	0.864		

Table 2 presents the t-test results for various variables examining movement formation and their association with gender. Before conducting the t-test, Levene's test for equality of variances was applied, confirming that the assumption of equal variances was met. In examining the ability to combine different locomotor movements (jumping, crawling, hopping, running, rolling, gliding), no statistically significant differences were observed between boys and girls ($p = 0.419$). Similarly, no significant differences were found in balance maintenance ($p = 0.133$).

However, the results indicate a tendency for gender differences in the use of the lower body (legs, feet, hips) ($p = 0.077$), suggesting that girls tend to use their lower body more frequently than boys, although the difference is not statistically significant.

Statistically significant gender differences emerged in the use of the upper body (arms, head, shoulders) in dance, with girls using their upper body more frequently during improvisation, achieving a mean score of M = 3.33 compared to M = 3.11 for boys ($p = 0.034$). A statistically significant difference was also observed in the coordination of different body parts (e.g., coordinating arms and legs), where girls demonstrated better coordination during dance (M = 3.02) compared to boys (M = 2.66) ($p < 0.001$). A statistically significant gender difference was also detected in spinning movements, where girls engaged in spinning more frequently than boys ($t = -2.205$, $p = 0.028$), with a mean score of M = 3.34 compared to M = 3.07.

3.2 Characteristics of Children's Dance Improvisation in Terms of Movement Formation

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Children's Movement Formation During Dance Improvisation

Items on Movement Formation	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
During dance, the child finds original and unusual movement solutions.	246	1	4	2.41	0.955
During dance, the child uses familiar movement patterns.	246	1	4	3.13	0.784
During dance, the child combines at least three different movement motifs and does not repeat just one.	246	1	4	2.93	0.899
During dance, the child imitates the movements of other children.	246	1	4	2.63	0.950
During dance, the child combines large and small movements.	246	1	4	2.73	0.859

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the items related to movement formation during dance improvisation. All items were rated on a four-point scale, where 1 indicates that the child never engages in a particular activity, while 4 signifies that the activity is frequently present.

The analysis reveals that children most frequently use familiar movement patterns, as indicated by the highest mean score (M = 3.13). This is followed by the ability to combine at least three different movement motifs without repeating only one (M = 2.93). The item related to combining large and small movements received a mean score of M = 2.73, suggesting a moderate presence of this activity.

Imitating the movements of other children (M = 2.63) and finding original and unusual movement solutions (M = 2.41) were observed less frequently, as these items had the lowest mean scores. The standard deviations indicate relatively diverse engagement levels among children across all items.

Table 4: T-Test Results for Gender Differences in Movement Formation During Dance Improvisation

Items on Movement Formation	Gender	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	T-test
During dance, the child finds original and unusual movement solutions.	Boys	99	2.28	0.926	F=1.694 p=0.194	t=-1.6773 p=0.096
	Girls	147	2.49	0.968		
During dance, the child uses familiar movement patterns.	Boys	99	3.05	0.813	F=0.000 p=0.999	t=-1.376 p=0.170
	Girls	147	3.19	0.762		
During dance, the child combines at least three different movement motifs and does not repeat just one.	Boys	99	2.82	0.908	F=0.885 p=0.348	t=-1.620 p=0.107
	Girls	147	3.01	0.887		
During dance, the child imitates the movements of other children.	Boys	99	2.75	0.930	F=0.858 p=0.355	t=1.540 p=0.125
	Girls	147	2.56	0.959		
During dance, the child combines large and small movements. Items on Movement Formation	Boys	99	2.60	0.856	F=0.318 p=0.573	t=-1.985 p=0.048
	Girls	147	2.82	0.852		

Table 4 presents the t-test results for the items related to movement formation, analyzing gender differences. Before conducting the t-test, Levene's test for equality of variances was applied, confirming that the assumption of equal variances was met for all analyzed items.

The results indicate that there were no statistically significant gender differences ($p > 0.05$) for most of the items, including finding original movement solutions ($p = 0.096$), using familiar movement patterns ($p = 0.170$), combining three different movement motifs ($p = 0.107$), and imitating the movements of other children ($p = 0.125$). The mean values for these items differed minimally between boys and girls, suggesting similar patterns of engagement in these aspects of dance improvisation.

The only statistically significant difference was observed in the combination of large and small movements, where girls (M = 2.82) combined these movements more frequently than boys (M = 2.60) (t = -1.985, p = 0.048).

Overall, the results indicate that gender differences in movement formation during dance improvisation are generally small, with girls showing a slight advantage in certain aspects, such as combining different types of movement. These findings highlight the importance of individual differences rather than gender alone when analyzing dance improvisation in preschool children.

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to address the research questions related to preschool children's dance improvisation. Dance improvisation is considered a key criterion for creativity in identifying children's dance talent (Baum, Owen, & Oreck, 1996). Therefore, we sought to examine the characteristics of dance improvisation in preschool children, with a particular focus on physical activity and movement formation. Additionally, we explored potential differences in these characteristics between boys and girls.

In the Slovenian context, there is a lack of research examining various aspects of identifying dance talent in early childhood. The findings of this study reveal several key aspects of children's movement expression, creativity, and gender differences. The results indicate that children frequently use their upper body and perform spinning movements during dance improvisation, whereas coordination and balance maintenance appear less developed. These findings align with the observations of Kroflič and Gobec (1995), who emphasize the importance of encouraging movement diversity and developing motor skills through dance activities in early childhood. The lower frequency of certain elements, such as coordination, suggests the need for targeted activities to enhance these specific movement skills. Motor abilities, including coordination, balance, strength, and flexibility, play a crucial role in the quality of dance performance (Kostić et al., 2002; Nožinović et al., 2006; Srhoj, 2002; Uzunović & Kostić, 2005). Coordination enables precise and fluid movement, balance contributes to stability, strength ensures dynamic execution, and flexibility allows for a greater range of movement. Well-developed motor skills enable dancers

to perform complex choreography and enhance the technical and expressive quality of their dance performance.

The analysis of gender differences revealed that girls more frequently used their arms, head, and shoulders, meaning that they engaged their upper body more actively than boys. Additionally, girls demonstrated better coordination of different body parts and were more likely to perform spinning movements, consistently achieving higher mean scores than boys. The findings also indicate that children primarily rely on familiar movement patterns during dance improvisation, while exploring original solutions and combining diverse movement motifs remains less prominent. This suggests the need for greater educator involvement in encouraging creative movement expression in preschool children. Research highlights the positive effects of creative movement as an approach for fostering creativity in children (Alper & Ulutaş, 2022; Cheung, 2010; Wang, 2003). Creative movement allows children to explore their own physical expression and discover new movement solutions, emphasizing spontaneity, originality, and individuality, which enables children to develop their unique movement expression in different contexts (Joyce, 1994, in Lobo & Winsler, 2006).

Based on our findings, we recommend greater integration of dance improvisation into the preschool curriculum, as it not only promotes the development of motor skills and creativity but also supports social, cognitive, and emotional skill development (Biasutti & Habe, 2021; Savrami, 2017).

5 Conclusion

This study focuses on the characteristics of dance improvisation in preschool children, with particular attention to physical activity and movement formation. Dance improvisation serves as a valuable method for identifying dance talent in children, as it enables free expression and the development of movement creativity.

The research questions aimed to analyze the characteristics of dance improvisation performance and examine potential gender differences in physical activity and movement formation. Using an observational protocol, we assessed the frequency of different movement elements and the extent to which certain physical activities were performed.

The findings indicate that children most frequently use their upper body and engage in spinning movements during dance improvisation, whereas coordination of different body parts is less pronounced. Statistically significant gender differences were observed in upper body use, coordination, and spinning movements, with girls achieving higher mean scores than boys. Additionally, the results show that children often rely on familiar movement patterns, while the exploration of original movement solutions is less prominent.

These findings provide a foundation for future research, which could further investigate the role of dance improvisation in fostering creativity and identifying dance talent in early childhood. Future studies should also explore the impact of different pedagogical approaches on encouraging children's creativity in dance. Longitudinal studies could examine the development of dance abilities over time and the role of educators and parents in promoting dance creativity. Furthermore, exploring the influence of musical and spatial factors on the quality of dance improvisation and investigating the effects of dance activities on other aspects of child development, such as social and cognitive skills, would be valuable directions for future research.

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