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Supporting children's understanding around emotions through creative, dance-based movement: A pilot study

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ABSTRACT

Developing Understandings of Emotions through Movement (DUEM) is an interdisciplinary programme supporting young children (5–6 years) to develop contextualised understandings around emotions. DUEM responds to the recognised need to support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in schools, acknowledgement that many SEL programmes do not offer equitable access to the development of social and emotional competence, and paucity of offerings supporting learning where verbal or written language are a barrier. Harnessing embodied literacy with alphabetical literacy, it frames movement as interpretive and improvisational, a tool for embodied meaning making. Children build emotional vocabulary through interaction with each other, images, picturebooks, music and embodied representation. Talk is still critical in *building* understanding, but movement provides another ‘way in’. This paper reports a pilot study with two school classes in England (29 children; two teachers), and online workshops with 18 practitioners. Data comprises video-recorded lessons, audio-recorded post-lesson discussions and interviews with the collaborating mental health specialist and dance specialist, and audio-recorded workshops. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore the data. We identify how movement can be used to bridge embodied and emotional learning, in ways that are acceptable for children and teachers, as a potentially more equitable addition to the SEL toolkit.

Outline of the paper

In this paper we identify a poorly met need within Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) provision – participation in learning around abstract concepts of emotion that is accessible for those who struggle to comprehend and express understanding through predominantly verbal and written literacy. Acknowledging how crucial understanding of emotions is for healthy ongoing wellbeing, we introduce, illustrate and offer analytic insights from a programme designed to support such creative, multimodal and embodied engagement.

We briefly review existing approaches to support children's SEL. Characterising our sociocultural and embodied theoretical framing, we present an innovative addition to the SEL pedagogical toolkit not met by existing classroom options. We report on a pilot study with 29 Year 1 children (in-person, 4 sessions in total); and 5 online workshops with practitioners.

Through analysis of participants' responses to the pilot and workshops, we highlight key programme features raised across data sources with recommendations for development and practice. We also reflect on our naming of the work from its original title of

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'Dancemotion' and how this was interpreted by people, and how we are reframing this work to better convey what the approach encapsulates. In renaming we see this as a fundamental opportunity to underline the importance of a sociocultural, embodied, multimodal theoretical framing toward all learning but particularly the learning of abstract concepts – such as emotions – that has implications beyond the situated nature of the work reported here.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social and emotional learning

Understanding our own and others' emotions is an important, early phase of building relationality and mental wellbeing (Hills, 2016). Social and emotional skills are key to children and young people's mental health and well-being (Elias et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004), and social emotional learning (SEL) has been defined as the process of learning to recognise and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, make responsible decisions, understand others' points of view, establish and maintain relationships (Elias et al., 1997). Similarly, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the US states that SEL programmes aim to develop cognitive, affective, and behavioural abilities for self-awareness and self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2003, 2015).

Many school-based SEL programmes have been evaluated and shown to positively affect social well-being and academic achievement. Students build social skills and stronger relationships with peers and teachers and good work habits, and they feel safer and more connected to their school settings (Brackett et al., 2012; Gueldner & Merrell, 2011; Zins et al., 2004). Extensive research supports school-based SEL programmes' effectiveness among older children and adolescents (Durlak et al., 2011). A review of 94 studies examining SEL in UK schools and out-of-school programmes (Clarke et al., 2015), that addressed coping skills, empathy, resilience, character development, self-esteem, social skills, social, emotional skills and positive behaviour, found that effective SEL programmes were competence-enhancing interventions (whether universal or focused on those at higher risk of developing social-emotional problems) and the most effective targeted younger children in primary schools. Universal SEL programmes are also effective with those aged 6 and under: of 51 universal SEL programmes in 79 studies among children, Blewitt et al. (2018) found these had significant positive effects on social and emotional competence, self-regulation, early learning skills and decreased behavioural and emotional difficulties. A small but significant age effect was seen favouring older children, and the greatest effects were seen on emotional competence. Emotional competence, or being able to understand and regulate emotion, underlies skills in empathy, friendship and other positive relationships, and is associated with social and academic outcomes (Denham & Burton, 1996; Izard et al., 2001).

However, what is less understood is the active components of successful interventions (Blewitt et al., 2018). The effective universal programmes described by Clarke et al. (2015) and Blewitt et al. (2018) vary considerably in their content and approach, although most focus on the classroom setting and include explicit instruction, modelling, reinforcement, and use of classroom routines such as circle time and play, sometimes focusing on specified abilities such as mindfulness, social problem solving and conversation (Blewitt et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2015). Blewitt and colleagues note that with younger children, successful programmes feature what they describe as developmentally appropriate methods, such as play, storytelling, singing, role play, and puppetry. There is therefore evidence for structured creative activities as a means of communicating SEL principles. Clarke and colleagues, reviewing studies of older children (2015) also found that the effective universal programmes used interactive, empowering methods such as role play, games and group work that aimed to enhance competence, and that had explicit teacher training and manuals.

Overall, therefore, evaluations of SEL programmes conclude that an optimal time for SEL interventions is approximately 4–6 years (the start of primary school in some countries such as the UK and Ireland, and the latter part of preschool years in countries where more formal schooling begins later); that emotional competence may be the most fruitful skill to begin with; and that effective universal programmes feature creative and interactive methods. Interestingly, however, despite the fact that emotions themselves are embodied states, reviews of universal school-based programmes do not discuss the role of embodiment in developing emotional competence.

1.2. Embodiment and emotion in learning

Embodiment theory specifies that the body and sociocultural experience are actively in relation with one another (Overton, 2015), and research in multiple domains – including linguistics, cognitive psychology, science, mathematics and the performing arts – shows that embodiment can enhance thinking and learning (Fragkiadaki & Ravanis, 2021; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013). Embodied cognition is an emerging interdisciplinary field of study whose findings can enhance educational practice (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). Traditional cognitivist and behaviourist accounts of the mind and learning fail to account for the close mind-body-environment relationship and that cognition is grounded in embodied action and lived experience. Discussing multiple studies by Arthur Glenberg and colleagues, Shapiro and Stolz point to the 'tight connection between cognitive processing and brain areas associated with physical motion' (2019, p.24) and the potential this has for approaches to learning and teaching.

The predominant classroom focus however remains on spoken and written words as process and evidence of learning, missing a rich array of understandings conveyed through other modes (Macedonia, 2019), whereby meaningful learning can be harder to access for students who find linguistic engagement more challenging (Twiner et al., 2014). This is not to downplay the importance of talk, which we argue is still central to understanding – but to emphasise that other modes of meaning making can add to and enrich co-constructed understandings.

In a study of science in early years settings, Fragkiadaki and Ravanis (2021) emphasised that the affective element of learning is

critical, and recommended nurturing learning situations where positive affective responses would be felt – i.e. where children enjoyed learning about science. Our programme seeks to offer an inclusive and active engagement with abstract ideas *about* emotions – thus focusing on the embodied and multimodal experience of learning about emotions, but not *stimulating* an affective experience of this. In this sense we distinguish between the affective and embodied domains of learning, and suggest that our programme is a contribution to knowledge and practice around multimodal, embodied ways of knowing. Our programme was directly seeking not to trigger children's unpleasant or introspective emotional responses to programme tasks, in a way that may be framed as therapy, in the context of the overwhelming body of literature highlighting that people tend to learn more when they enjoy and form positive affective connections with learning content and activities (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It was our hope therefore that participating children would enjoy the movement-based explorations of different emotions, but not internalise any 'heaviness' of unpleasant emotions being explored.

Our interdisciplinary programme combines movement with cultural artefacts (music, image, text) and talk around them in education contexts, offering an innovative model for building understanding of emotions through multimodal, embodied teaching and learning. We use dance, or movement, as a tool for embodied meaning making, framing it as interpretive and improvisational, rather than choreographed or focused on technique. Using guided and improvisational dance/movement activities to prompt embodied experience and talk, where movement is employed as a meaning-making tool, the programme allows flexibility between teacher structuring and children's own interpretation to support children to understand emotions.

To exemplify the programme, a warm-up (illustrated in Fig. 1) aimed to get children comfortable moving in different ways and to encourage their imagination. It asked what it would be like for someone stuck inside a large dirty bubble. The activity involved Year 1 children (aged 5–6 years) using different body parts to clean the bubble so they could see out: using their elbows, shoulders and then bottoms to do so – which they found enjoyable, as evident by their laughter. At the end they were invited to gently stretch their bubble – to make it bigger and have more space, to encourage exploration of an imaginary milieu of their own making.

Whilst engaging with the physical activity, children were invited to suggest how someone might feel if stuck inside a dirty bubble, to which they offered 'sad' and 'bored'. One linked the experience to a book they had read in class, about a tiger 'caught in a cage'. Asked how someone might feel after they had created more space, and were inside a bigger, clean bubble, children's suggestions included 'happy' (further analysis is offered in later sections). A sample lesson outline is offered in Appendix 1.

When we started this work we offered an embodied approach to understanding emotions, through dance alongside other modes of communication including talk, images, music and writing. The intervention and workshops were informed by this, as was the original name 'Dancemotion'. During the pilot it became clear that using the term 'dance' was distracting – and also missed the importance of teacher and learner agency: to really *use* dance/movement to *create* and *connect* multimodal, embodied understandings about

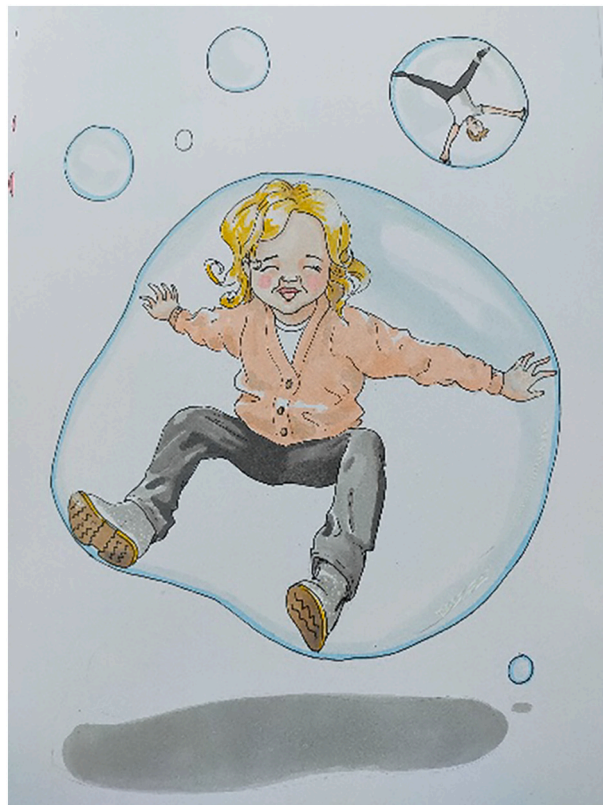


Fig. 1. Illustration of bubble warm-up activity.

emotions. We are therefore moving the work forward in a more general framing of dance/movement, under the name: Developing Understandings of Emotions through Movement (DUEM).

1.3. Policy and education context in England

A long-standing need to facilitate children's healthy emotional development is foregrounded in various English Government reports (2012, 2015 and 2018 - latter two both published by the Department of Health). The 2020 primary 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education' curriculum prioritises recognising abusive relationships and the importance of friendships – both very important – but does not specify how children come to recognise particular feelings or develop vocabulary to talk about such issues. (We have framed this writing in the curricular context in which the work occurred – with practitioners and pupils in English state schools. We are however mindful that curricula in other countries and contexts will be different, and for wider impact we would seek to understand the potential utility and alignment with other curricular frameworks.) Since these reports, the global outbreak of COVID-19 and resultant restrictions are likely to have profound impacts on pupils' experience of emotions for some time to come. Likewise, the physical restrictions most children have experienced at times throughout the pandemic have amplified the argument for physically active ways of learning. Exploring current SEL resources and gaps in this provision is therefore timely.

In England, dance is a compulsory element of the primary school curriculum under the umbrella of Physical Education (PE), although it is not assessed. For some teachers this can give scope for freedom; for others it can be overwhelming if they feel uncomfortable dancing themselves, or believe they need to teach dance routines. In many cases the time allocated to dance becomes marginalised, and other-formally assessed priorities understandably take centre stage. One potential response is to use dance to fulfil other curricular criteria, and it was in this context that this pilot was developed.

1.4. Social and emotional learning (SEL) evidence and approaches

Social and emotional learning 'is the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence' (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2), understood as the capacity to manage one's own social and emotional behaviours toward 'successful' engagement in life. This is a stance we largely agree with. We would make a distinction however, that through engaging with programmes such as DUEM, teachers and pupils work to 'co-construct' such competences – in contrast to perhaps more passive connotations of 'acquiring' (which we interpret as more akin to receiving, being given, or purchasing) skills, knowledge or competence. Thus, we foreground individuals' agency in building these competences – as noted above in the reframing from Dancemotion to DUEM. Along similar lines we agree with Muller Mirza et al. (2014), that acknowledging and building on what children bring individually to learning new or more complex concepts, in terms of experience and interpretation, can be valuable in making learning activities personally meaningful.

Meta-analytic reviews of the impact of SEL interventions across education sectors have evaluated US-based interventions, measuring variables including social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviours, and academic performance (Blewitt et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These concluded that programmes evidencing positive impact had 'SAFE' characteristics: 'Structured' training and stages; supporting 'Active' engagement; with 'Focused' time to support making meanings around material; and 'Explicit' learning objectives. We draw on these characteristics later in the paper, to address features of DUEM.

To examine whether there were any SEL studies specifically using dance – in line with our initial Dancemotion frame – we searched Academic Search Complete and the UK Data Service catalogue, using Boolean search operators and multiple search strings with combinations of the terms: "children", "young people", "emotion", "feelings", "mental health", "dance", "movement", and "education". Many studies reported research with children identified as 'at risk' of compromised mental health, with long-term conditions or specified physical and/or learning disabilities. Some took physiological and neurological approaches (e.g., Grabell et al., 2018); explored the 'place' of dance in schools or general PE curricula; addressed broader topics, including parents' perspectives on creative educational activities, or children's engagement in sport and how this influenced their psychosocial health (Moeijes et al., 2019); or addressed children's understanding of specific emotions, but not via dance or movement (e.g., Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018).

A dance for cross-curricular learning programme in Australia did not directly address emotional learning, but concluded dance activities may support emotion-focused learning in 20 children aged 4–5-years, in optional weekly sessions over 26 weeks (Deans, 2016). After analysing session videos, photographs, and dialogue between children and teachers after sessions, Deans concluded this encouraged '...sophisticated levels of perceptual, aesthetic and emotionally based reasoning, creative thinking and playful problem solving' (p. 51).

The only dance/emotion study we found was not offered to explore general emotion meanings, but rather to express emotions or as a remedy for negative feelings. Pereira and Marques-Pinto (2018) conducted a participatory research project with middle-school students in Portugal which developed a dance-based programme, consisting of 10 one-hour, after school workshops with six students aged 10–12 years, led by a psychologist trained in educational dance. A panel of experts offered feedback on the manualised programme, and participants' perspectives on SEL needs and interest in a dance-based approach were recorded. Student perspectives were gathered during workshops ($N = 6$), and with a wider group of adolescents via questionnaire and focus groups ($N = 22$, aged 10–17 years). Young people reported that dance was useful to express, mirror and deal with their emotions. One participating 12-year-old reported: "Sometimes when I feel sad I listen to music but when I'm feeling really sad I like dancing, it helps me" (p. 54).

On the issue of equity in SEL, and reporting on programmes largely in the US, Jagers et al. (2019) coined the term 'transformative SEL' to identify a gap and need for programmes and approaches that support academic, social and emotional development whilst actively challenging barriers to equity. We are mindful that there are many barriers to equity, and that our programme will not touch

many of these. However, DUEM's embodied and multimodal approach seeks to break down barriers to access due to language competence, as well as barriers around identified 'need' for programmes (e.g. behavioural markers or referrals) – whereby a combination of verbal, written and embodied ways in to engagement and understanding are facilitated for all children in a school or class.

As there are few curricular programmes for school-aged children using multimodal, embodied approaches to support SEL (though there are some, see [Blewitt et al., 2018](#)), to the best of our knowledge, DUEM is unique because:

- It is framed through embodied literacy, with a focus on a range of emotions expressed and felt by individuals and those around them – to normalise emotions as 'things' we all experience and may respond to differently;
- The DUEM pilot, with younger children, takes an education for all/approach, to pave the way for emotional understanding for all;
- Its aim is not to teach children dance routines, and there is no expectation on children (or teachers) to perform; and,
- It contrasts with targeted interventions or psychotherapy.

1.5. Underpinning theoretical approach

DUEM is founded on a sociocultural theory and approach to learning. Such a view is grounded in Vygotsky's first 'law' of human development, that every function in a child's cultural development appears twice: initially, on the social level, between people (interpsychological), and subsequently on the individual level (intrapyschological) ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). For example, by engaging in situations such as DUEM sessions, with focal concepts of different emotional states, and tools – in this context movement, books, music, images and facilitated discussions – on our own and with others, we can make meanings and extend our understanding.

Our interpretation of emotion is also grounded in sociocultural theory, viewing emotions as infused with cultural meaning ([Bruner, 1986](#)). For instance, asking pupils to think, talk about, or embody emotions may be interpreted and instantiated differently depending on the context. For example, the experience and expression of 'happiness' may differ whether celebrating an important cultural or religious festival (e.g., Eid or Christmas), a special event such as going on holiday, or a more regular part of life such as playing with a friend or family member. Culturally, contextually and individually, what happiness or other emotions *mean* can therefore differ substantially according to what is happening, and what we are aware of, around us.

Furthermore, emotions are embodied states whose communication can be amplified with language, which becomes particularly crucial for younger learners less experienced with verbal communication. [Fragkiadaki and Ravanis \(2021\)](#) demonstrate how the emotional experience (addressed through children's report of their – using [Fragkiadaki and Ravanis](#)' terms – 'attitude', 'motivation' and 'emotional state') of science learning combined with intellect and movement can be a useful tool in learning science with 4–6-year-olds. In this case, movement involved children enacting processes in the natural world (e.g. using hands to simulate stages in cloud formation).

DUEM builds on a successful model of interdisciplinary curricular education developed by collaborating dance organisation Dance Educates, which was found particularly valuable for children who struggle to understand concepts through language alone ([Twiner, 2011](#); [Twiner et al., 2021](#)). For history learning, children (aged 6–7 years) used dance/movement to embody the relationship of 'firebreaks' (i.e., buildings being pulled down), fire and buildings, to understand the changing pace of the spread of fire during the Great Fire of London in the 17th Century.

DUEM develops this earlier work into a new domain. We encourage teachers and children to use, or 'refract' their experiences – their *perezhivanie* of personal and situated interpretation through intellectual, active and affective engagement (drawing on [Blunden, 2016](#); [Vygotsky, 1994](#)) – in making meanings of emotion concepts. We use intellectual stimuli and discussion together with purposeful movement as a vehicle to explore and develop understandings of different emotions, through structured and interactive meaning-making activities, requiring no call on specific techniques or physical skill. Mindful that experiences are formed in specific social and cultural contexts, that will be similar for some children and different for others, flexibility to accommodate different interpretations is a feature of the embodied DUEM programme, aiming for activities to be truly meaningful, relatable and inclusive.

In this paper we explore the following research questions:

- How did stakeholders respond to this novel embodied, multimodal, creative, accessible approach to SEL (i.e., the children, teachers, dance specialist, mental health specialist, and practitioners who attended the workshops) – named at the point of participation as Dancemotion?
- What features of the programme were reflected upon in the data from the various stakeholders, and how were these features discussed?
- What are the implications for further developing an embodied, multimodal, creative, accessible SEL approach?

2. Method

2.1. Pilot lessons

A pilot was developed for Year 1 children (aged 5–6 years). Four sessions (two with each class) explored different emotional states, supported for instance by movement, images, picturebooks, music and discussion, offering a creative space for children to explore and extend understandings. On large sheets of paper, class teachers wrote emotion-related words the children came up with during sessions. Resources were used as they were deemed helpful (e.g. the addition in the second lesson of coloured dots to place on the floor, to help children spread out). Mindful of children's potential responses to embodying emotion, a mental health practitioner was involved

in the pilot. They monitored lessons and were prepared to intervene or follow up during any safeguarding or mental health concerns. This was trialled with 29 children from two classes in a London school in 2019/2020. Given the exploratory nature of the pilot, the school was selected on the basis of existing contacts.

2.2. Online workshops with practitioners

As an extension of the pilot lessons, five free 90-minute online workshops were run with 18 practitioners interested in trying the programme. The lead researcher and dance specialist shared the underpinning rationale for the programme, led activities for practitioners to engage with physically – if they felt comfortable to do so – and encouraged practitioners to reflect on the applications and usefulness of the programme in their own workplaces.

2.3. Ethics

This research project was reviewed by and received a favourable opinion from The Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee, HREC reference number: 3688 and 3241. Consent, privacy and data storage were underpinned by the University's ethical approval and safeguarding procedures, including the British Educational Research Association's (BERA 2018) ethical guidelines for educational research.

2.4. Participants

Participants for the pilot consisted of two Year 1 classes in a London state school (two teachers, 29 children) that served children aged 4 to 11 years. Of 30 children in the two classes, we received parental consent for all but one to take part in the lessons; one boy's parents, for religious reasons, felt that males dancing was not appropriate and so declined. As the programme does not involve performative dance *per se*, this highlighted the question of how we frame the programme in future – as movement and learning – to accurately manage expectations of potential participants and parents (a point raised above, which has informed our current reframing and renaming, and to which we return later in this article).

At the time of our involvement (March 2020) 45 % of pupils at the school were deemed 'Pupil Premium' eligible (i.e., additional funding is provided to the school by the UK government for extra provision for those with the greatest need). Of these, 94 % were identified as being from an ethnic minority background and 85 % spoke English as an Additional Language – a further rationale for offering a multimodal, embodied and creative approach to learning that does not rely from the outset on verbal or written competence.

We also ran two series of two online workshops – encouraging practitioners to try the activities between the first and second, and reflecting on this when we reconvened. One teacher felt colleagues in her primary school would be keen to learn more about the programme, and so a one-off workshop was offered for this specific group. Across the five workshops, participants included teachers and teaching assistants working in primary schools ($N = 11$); practitioners working in social care contexts with children and young people ($N = 4$); and others with more general interest in the programme ($N = 3$). Overall, 18 people participated across the workshops.

2.5. Data collection

In-person pilot lessons were scheduled during timetabled, curricular slots. Lessons were video recorded for research, focusing only on children for whom we had written parental and child consent ($N = 6$). Lessons with the two classes took place consecutively. After the second lesson each week a brief post-lesson discussion was held and audio-recorded, involving both teachers, the dance specialist, mental health specialist, and lead researcher. Post-lesson discussions were relatively unstructured, as informal spaces to reflect on what went well and what we could address differently in subsequent lessons. Separate online interviews were conducted and audio-recorded with the mental health practitioner, and the dance specialist, after all lessons were completed, to explore their reflections on the programme experience, potential value, and scope for development (see [Appendix B](#) for interview schedule). Video-recorded lessons, audio-recorded interviews and post-lesson discussions were transcribed for analysis.

Online workshops took place via Microsoft Teams, were audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis.

2.6. Analysis

Transcribed lessons, post-lesson discussions, interviews and workshop data were explored through reflexive thematic analysis (drawing on [Braun & Clarke, 2020](#)). Our thematic analysis was informed by our sociocultural approach and framework, as we considered how meanings were co-constructed between people and across different modes of communication and interaction, and acknowledging how participants responded similarly or differently to the situations. The themes we generated and elements in the data we 'noticed', therefore were influenced by this stance.

For analysis reported here, transcription included all audible speech, attributed to specific speakers where identifiable. Notable pauses were indicated, as was any overlapping speech. Transcription from video data of the lessons included detail regarding speech, movement, gesture, as well as use of other resources (such as writing onto the large sheets of paper) where it occurred in the flow of ongoing interaction, in line with our framing of dance/movement, talk and other resources as feeding into the multimodal meaning-making trajectories as they were instantiated ([Twiner et al., 2014](#)). Due to constraints of time however, in terms of our analysis, we consider this an annotated rather than a multimodal transcription or analysis ([Jewitt, 2009](#); [Twiner et al., 2021](#)). Themes were

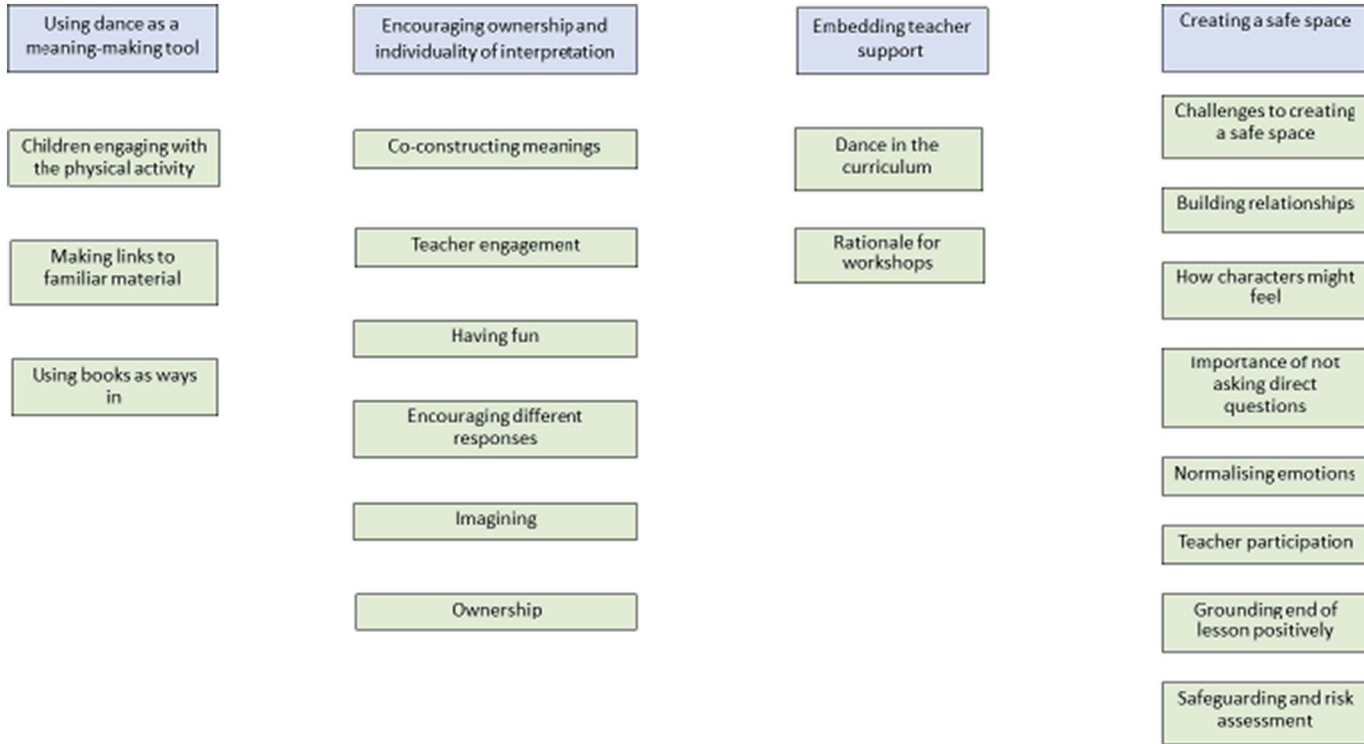


Fig. 2. Thematic map.

generated through repeated viewing and listening to the video and audio data and reading the transcripts, to represent ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent[s] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

Through this process, 26 codes were identified to represent the content and meanings raised. When all data was coded, four codes were merged with another. Three codes were reclassified as themes, as they were considered to reflect a more overarching level of meaning. After a further iteration of analysis, two themes were merged. This resulted in 19 codes (green boxes) grouped into four themes (blue boxes: see thematic map, Fig. 2).

When quotations included multiple meaning segments, they were allocated to more than one code, and sometimes more than one theme. For instance, if participants referred in the same sentence to fun activities fostering the feeling of a safe space – this was coded both as ‘having fun’, within the theme ‘encouraging ownership and individuality of interpretation’, as well as the theme of ‘creating a safe space’.

In displaying quotations we use the following abbreviations:

- DS for dance specialist;
- MHS for mental health specialist.

2.7. Theme: using dance as a meaning-making tool

‘I thought we were doing dance.’

This comment was voiced by a child, 11 minutes into his first ‘Dancemotion’ lesson. This is an interesting assertion, and perhaps understandable when the class had been taken into the school hall in their PE kit. It raises consideration about cultural assumptions of what it means to dance, or do dance, which the dance specialist reflected on. In this extract from a practitioner workshop when we were collectively grappling with how to convey what the programme is about, the dance specialist noted “I think it’s important that it’s creative dance, it’s individual movement” but went on to note that:

children say “when are we going to start dancing Miss?” Because they’re so used to watching Strictly [Come Dancing – the television series in the UK in which couples compete with weekly dance routines] or doing a routine or something like that, which is fine. I don’t want to stop children from enjoying that stuff, but ... there’s so much more comes out and it comes from

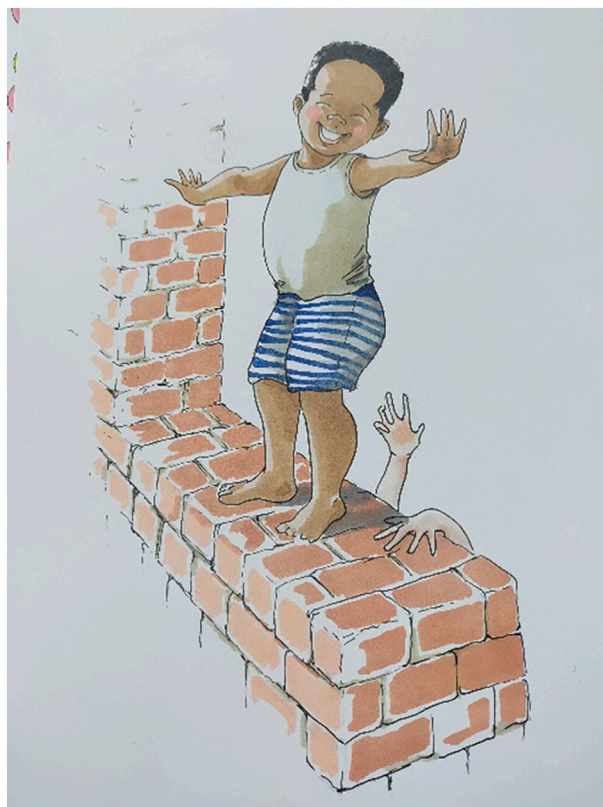


Fig. 3. Strong like a wall.

them, they're all different and they're all brilliant at it as well, and that's what's so exciting. You look around and every child is making a different shape, if that's the thing to do. ... We've given them a little starting point, or some language, and it's just all from their own minds' (DS, workshop 1, group 1)

Critically, the programme uses dance/movement as a meaning-making tool rather than as a lesson to learn or create a dance piece, allowing children to express different developing understandings through movement. A stimulus to us as a project team looking toward future iterations involves considering what dance means to us and how it is used in the programme. The dance specialist was keen to reinforce the inclusive nature of the programme – focusing on contextualised, interpretive movement, rather than 'correct' dance form.

Further emphasising the importance of a space to interpret and create meanings, one teacher in the pilot commented on the benefits of a possible picturebook

'There's no words so they can make up their own vocabulary' (teacher 1, post-lesson 1 reflection discussion)

Programme sessions were a multimodal meaning-making space, to embody abstract concepts and create vocabulary to represent different emotions. The dance specialist reiterated this, saying the children were:

'exploring language, but physically, and it gives them a deeper understanding' (DS, post-lesson 1 reflection discussion)

In structuring meaning making, some introductory activities used physical metaphors of familiar objects, to consider physical properties and how to embody concepts. In the dance specialist's instructions in the extract below, illustrated in Fig. 3, we see how children were facilitated to consider abstract concepts such as strength:

'Now on your back can you make me the biggest, widest, strongest shape you can make? ... take up as much of the floor you're on as you can. Big and wide, bigger. Stretch your legs out to the side. Excellent. Fabulous, and freeze, because this shape has got to be super strong so it's got a name, and it's called a wall. And like these walls [touches wall in room] it can't wobble because the ceiling would fall down, so you've got to be super strong.' (DS, Class 2, lesson 1)

Thus, together and through the dance specialist's structuring commentary and suggestion, the class were building physical ideas as well as a conceptual understanding and vocabulary: using dance, or movement, as a meaning-making tool as they together instantiated a meaning-making trajectory that was relevant and accessible to those involved (Twiner et al., 2014).

A space to house children's developing vocabulary was created on A3 paper with a large heart drawn inside a house shape (Fig. 4), aligned to 'In My Heart', by Jo Witek (2014), one of the books the dance specialist intended to use in the sessions. The aim was for class teachers to write words the children suggested to describe different emotions, to build this vocabulary across the planned sessions, and link between programme sessions and wider school activities.

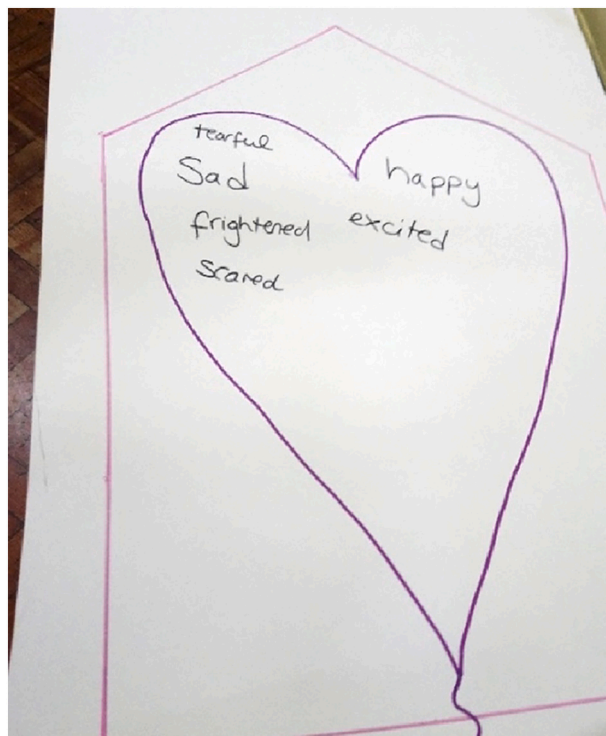


Fig. 4. Adding emotion words in a heart. Discussion during the bubble activity in particular was used as stimulus to share and record emotion vocabulary.

This multimodal representation of emotion understanding exemplifies how the programme activities supported switching across movement, talk and writing in a seamless flow.

In the online workshops with practitioners a similar pooling of emotion words, stimulated by movement prompts, was logged in PowerPoint through the Microsoft Teams interface: as participants together created a digitally-mediated improvable object (Twiner, 2011; drawing on Wells, 1999), as a visible instantiation of their collective understanding of the activity and underpinning contextualised concept of emotion. (Fig. 5).

In the lessons, children engaged physically with most activities, and at points spontaneously voiced their engagement, for example in a 'jungle' activity:

DS: You're going to stretch up as high as you can ... to pick a banana. Stretch.

[stretching, some on tiptoes]

Child: Got my banana! (Class 1, lesson 2)

Here we also get a sense of the intricate interlinking of the child in school doing a schooled activity, who understands what a banana is as something to eat (that they will almost certainly have seen and eaten) which grows on trees (that they may well not have seen); whilst simultaneously embodying the actions of an imaginary character in an imaginary place. Their physical action and verbal exclamation identifies engagement and hints at enjoyment in the shared moment. Following our underpinning sociocultural frame, the concept of *perezhivanie* (e.g. Vygotsky, 1994) is salient again here – as personal and social meanings are combined and created, with intellectual, active and affective dimensions brought together to make meanings and as multimodal building blocks for further discussion and development.

Relatedly, both teachers observed children's enjoyment of the embodied approach, and how little teacher encouragement was needed:

Teacher 1: 'they loved being physical' ...

Teacher 2: "they were all really engaged. There was rarely a time where you were – 'you need to join in'" (post-lesson 1 reflection discussion)

Paralleling the aim of children's enjoyment and engagement was teacher participation – an important element to a programme conceived as education for all. In structuring and implementing the programme it was critical to create a 'safe space' for children to feel comfortable exploring physical and conceptual, in particular emotional, ideas, including through teacher participation. We now explore this theme more fully.

2.8. Theme: creating a safe space

The teachers' shared reflections on one girl's engagement identified the importance of teachers actively taking part, and children's responses:

MHS: 'it worked really well when you were both [teachers] doing the activities as well'

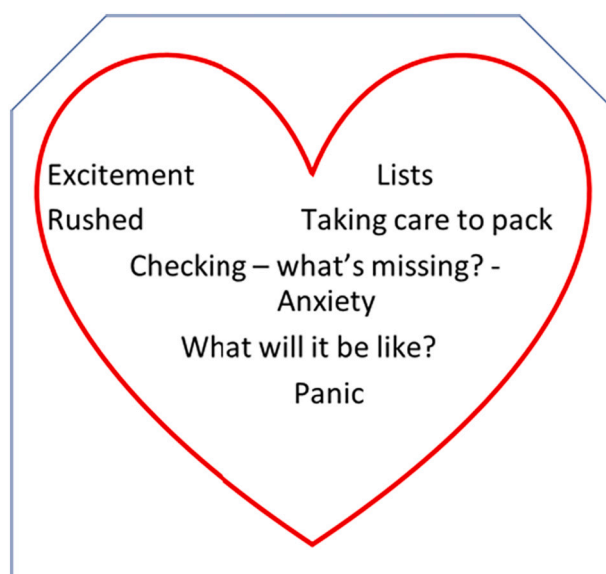


Fig. 5. Adding emotion words in a heart, with practitioners during online workshops.

DS: 'they like seeing you do it don't they'

Teacher 1: 'particularly with her [specific girl], because she's had to grow up in a very grown-up environment, she sees anything like that as babyish because she sees herself as a 14-year-old. She is a 14-year-old in a 5-year-old's body'

DS: 'That's hard'

Teacher 1: "so with us joining in, she thinks 'oh adults joining in as well'"

DS: 'so it's OK'

Teacher 1: 'so it's OK, and that helps' (post-lesson 2 reflection discussion)

Such comments reinforce a key programme aim: accessibility. It also reminds and realigns our intentions to the identified gap and critique that many SEL programmes do not offer equitable access to the development of social and emotional competence (e.g. [Jagers et al., 2019](#)). Here, the teachers' participation rendered more visible the co-creation of the experience, breaking strict boundaries of what society considers age-appropriate behaviours, creating a safe space for playful experimentation for all, in embodied meaning responding to a multimodal array of cultural artefacts.

We piloted the programme with a mental health specialist, who was involved in planning and observing the pilot, in case embodied emotion learning might trigger intense or unpleasant emotional responses. The specialist determined the pilot activities were low risk, with no need for further intervention. A key design feature was ensuring lessons were 'grounded' positively – such as standing tall and looking forward to what was coming next – rather than weighed down by 'heavy' content. The aim was to build a protective structure within the programme, so it could be embedded within a school's existing safeguarding and risk assessment procedures. Teachers play a pivotal role in anchoring this physical and conceptual space.

In her post-programme interview the mental health specialist considered that an aim of the programme to normalise and increase understanding of emotions at an early age, in age-appropriate ways, was beneficial:

'...the earlier the better, and I think that's what I take away from this. ... I think the sooner we can engage young people in thinking about mental health in a positive way, but also being able to identify emotions, I think the better ... So it's about making talking about emotions or mental health, however you want to frame it, talking about it in a way that's relevant and applicable to children of that age' (MHS, post-programme interview)

This underpins our aim that programme sessions be accessible to all.

In her post-programme interview, the mental health specialist described the programme as: 'a nice creative project which doesn't feel too threatening for young children'. One key aspect of the programme we incorporated, reinforced by the mental health specialist, was allowing connection to concepts without any direct calls to personal emotional experience:

'It didn't ask about direct experiences. But ... by the second week we were starting to get some really good insight into the emotions that children were aware of... [which could] really help them to build their emotional vocabulary around different emotions' (MHS, post-programme interview)

This was also emphasised in the practitioner workshops: by applying creative methods, children can learn about emotions and build their emotional literacy without being asked directly about their own experiences:

'With the very small children we were working with... we wanted to make an adventure. And with the guidance from our [mental health] specialist, finding a character to hook that on was beneficial. Because as a dance specialist I'm often saying 'well how would you feel if', but we can't do that. You can't ask a child how you feel, we don't want to be in a role of therapists. So having a character helped us' (DS, workshop 1, group 2)

Based on advice from the mental health specialist, we recommended practitioners draw on characters from films, books, and television programmes to provide a 'hook' with familiar material yet without making directly personal connections. We propose that such tools enable activities to be 'Focused', in terms of [Durlak et al. \(2011\)](#) four 'SAFE' criteria. Maintaining a safe space also applies to reservations children or teachers may have about 'dancing'. This led to our reconsideration of how to frame the programme – to avert concerns about needing 'technique', as the dance specialist said:

'We're doing embodied learning, which means you have to do it to get it. ... you have to just ignore all those preconceived ideas, feelings of negativity and just get on with it, and I think it suddenly becomes clear that it's not what they were expecting, ... and that's why we talk about dance in a safe space. So it's really important, it's important for all learning, but particularly with what we're trying to explore with the emotions and feelings. It's got to be safe, so everyone has to feel safe or included and not put off by a technique that they might not be able to do.' (DS, workshop 2, group 1)

These insights about not putting participants off by the idea of needing technique or skills – including the child whose parent or guardian declined consent due to concerns over their child dancing – meant that to better convey the content, activities and intentions of the programme, we decided to highlight the use of movement, rather than 'dance', and to link to emotion without suggesting therapy. We believe 'Developing Understandings of Emotions through Movement', or DUEM, more clearly represents this.

At the online adult workshops, we offered a rationale for the programme and facilitated voluntary taster activities. One was linked to the story of Ernest Shackleton, an Anglo-Irish 19th century adventurer who led perilous expeditions by ship to the Antarctic. Attendees were asked to combine some movements they related to concepts of 'opening and closing', aligned to the idea of 'packing for a

journey' (for instance opening drawers to find clothes, closing a suitcase or front door; thinking about whether things are heavy or light, high up or low down). Participants could link this to any packing they wished – for instance preparing to go on holiday, supermarket shopping or packing for an adventure. To begin with this activity was not related explicitly to emotion. After trying some opening and closing movements, we then developed it to consider how someone – such as those who signed up for Shackleton's expedition – might have felt when packing for such a journey.

In Durlak et al.' (2011) 'SAFE' criteria again, such tasks encourage 'Active' participation – physically and conceptually. One teacher reflected after this activity that she:

'thought it was fun to go into my own space and just do what I wanted to do. There was no judgement, we weren't likely to go back and sharing it afterwards.' (group 3 workshop after the 'Shackleton packing activity')

Linking 'fun' with a safe space, free from 'judgement' – using movement to explore rather than perform – and finding the right balance, was crucial in modelling the programme with practitioners who might feel uncomfortable about movement in front of strangers or colleagues. This was particularly important if practitioners were going to trial the programme in their own workplaces.

One key reason for supporting children to feel safe in the session space was so they could take 'ownership' of their interpretations – through movement and in building vocabulary to express their developing understanding.

2.9. Theme: encouraging ownership and individuality of interpretation

Articulating the rationale for the movement-based activities to workshop participants, the dance specialist emphasised the need to encourage children's ownership and personal interpretations: that what matters is 'their journey' around the material and concepts:

'We want them to embody that concept, that thought, feeling and idea. And if it's not super hundred percent clear to someone walking through a [school] hall [during the lesson], that's not important. The important thing is their journey, their experience, their exploration of those words, those feelings and moving through them.' (workshop 1, group 1)

In seeking to facilitate the particularity of each child's experience, the programme also meets Durlak's criteria for 'Focused' time to support children making meanings. Whilst there needs to be individual ownership and interpretation, DUEM also promotes co-construction of understanding through physical exploration and building vocabulary around embodied concepts – including teachers' willingness to deviate from plans to acknowledge unexpected ideas (Twiner et al., 2014). DUEM's framing of learning as co-constructed allows children to build understandings that are meaningful to them, but also to learn and deepen understandings from others' interpretations and suggestions. This is exemplified in the extract below from a practitioner workshop, guided by the dance specialist:

'I have a loose plan of a rough idea of what it might be like to walk through the jungle. And if they [children] bring other things in then I'm happy to use those. It's almost like having, giving time to listen to them. The first time you do it they won't suggest anything, they're just soaking up everything you say, and the more confident they get, and the more you repeat something, the more they'll have ideas of their own, and all of those are good. The only thing, the only arguments I've ever had [from children] with that game is "no, you wouldn't find a lion right here", or "let's go with jaguar". But you don't mind facts, and that's OK too.' (group 3 workshop)

In this sense, Durlak's criteria for 'Structure' in SEL programmes is incorporated, but also balanced with the need to offer opportunities for children's 'Active', co-constructive engagement – the outcomes of which may shift the planned lesson direction slightly.

Examples of children co-constructing meanings physically and verbally were noticeable when children participated in the 'bubble activity' – imagining someone in a dirty bubble who cannot see out, as described earlier (Fig. 1). This was used to explore how someone might feel in such a scenario, and to encourage children to start moving. In the brief exchange below, we see a child suggesting a continuation of the physical activity, by understanding the conceptual reason for moving (i.e., to clean the bubble), and the dance specialist responding:

[Prior to this they have used hands, shoulders and elbows to 'clean' the spaces in front of them, and also to their right and their left]

DS: 'Great, so now I can see there [points in front], I can see there [points right], and I can see there [points left].'

Child: 'Can't see [points behind] that bit.'

DS: 'I can't see behind me [points behind] you're right.' (Class 1, lesson 2)

Hence the child appreciated the conceptual framing of the activity – they had not focused on the area behind them in their movements, and so the character would not be able to 'see' behind them through their dirty bubble.

Related to this point, an aim of running the online workshops was to equip teachers to offer sessions in their own contexts, adapting to the children they teach and varying needs for freedom and structure. Therefore, the theme of teacher support was strong in our data analysis.

2.10. Theme: Embedding teacher support

From the outset, the mental health specialist emphasised the teacher's role in running the programme. In the online sessions, practitioners could experience and understand the content in a professional development framework, sharing ideas and learning

together. Practitioners responded enthusiastically, linking the framework to their contexts:

“I thought that was really good and I'm getting fizzy brain again where I'm like, ‘oh I could do this, I could do this’” (workshop 2, group 1)

One teacher played with movement after her first workshop with her Year 4 class (aged 8–9 years), and reflected in her second workshop on ‘powerful’ effects she saw in their free writing:

I had a go after the first workshop ... trying some things with my class, and using some of the story books that we were focusing on, the picturebooks, and just exploring them through movement rather than through words at first. And it was quite powerful in terms of their writing, and the type of vocabulary they came up with, because we had one character and we went through the emotional journey of the character through movement, and then that brought a lot of rich language that they actually used in their free writing.’ (group 3 workshop)

This indicates that using movement in the curriculum to explore meaningful emotions based on familiar fictional characters, and feeding into a creative writing activity, yielded rich results. This teacher also reflected on the pedagogical flexibility of the programme:

‘Because it’s an approach, it’s not like a pack where you take and you deliver, it’s something that we can develop in our practice’ (group 3 workshop).

The dance specialist emphasised the value of dance/movement for learning in workshops, to empower teachers in such a programme, and to really ‘use dance’/movement to meet curricular requirements as well as emotion learning. Combining the ‘Active’ element of Durlak et al.’s SAFE criteria with the need for flexibility, to support children’s learning in the interpsychological and intrapsychological frames, this programme offers a space where what each child and teacher bring to and take from sessions can be interwoven and validated.

3. Discussion and implications for practice

In preparing the pilot and workshops, we developed a theoretically-grounded framework to support accessible, embodied, multimodal exploration of emotions. This offered important ‘lessons learned’. In terms of our research questions, Year 1 children responded well to activities embodying emotions and building vocabulary in the interpsychological space. They showed enjoyment, mostly remained involved in, and responded to the structured tasks, and teachers commented on how few reminders to engage were needed. The importance of the ‘safe’ space was raised, alongside teacher participation as crucial to maintaining this space and encouraging engagement. Feeling comfortable using movement for developing understanding – not a measure of performance or ability – was an important point, and needed time to develop comfort for teachers and children. Other resources were also highlighted as useful, including the heart spaces to gather and write emotion words (whether paper- or powerpoint-based), and images of examples as multimodal building blocks interwoven with interaction through movement and talk. Workshop participants also started to envisage how they could use the programme, with one reflecting back on its ‘power’ in fuelling ideas when she trialled it with her class. Movement provided an opportunity – a bridge – to express children’s developing understanding in the shared but safely-grounded space, through physical, embodied representation.

As the programme addresses education for all, the mental health specialist recommended avoiding direct questions, or exploration about ‘how do you feel?’, yet still allowing scope for children’s individual interpretations. Instead, we used familiar characters from books, films or television, to encourage thinking about contextualised and commonly-experienced emotions. Therefore, some psychological distance is created which can then support the ‘Active’ physical and conceptual engagement and ‘Focused’ time for children to consider and make meanings (drawing on Durlak et al.’s, 2011 ‘SAFE’ criteria). In this sense we suggest that accessible social and emotional learning fundamentally requires opportunities for multimodal engagement, across the array of rich modalities including embodied, verbal, visual and auditory modes, whilst also drawing on and being filtered through individual interpretation and experience.

In keeping the programme accessible, it is important that illustrative or stimulus resources reflect diversity, so children feel included. Interested practitioners can explore texts and resources they may be using for other topics – for instance in English, as the teacher reported from her implementation of the programme to support creative writing – and drawing on children’s current reading and viewing interests. Such scope for contextualisation is key, so that teachers can work with children to make the experience meaningful and engaging without being a personal internalisation of emotional experience.

Likewise, the mental health specialist recommended the programme should normalise a wide range of emotions and reinforce them as nuanced with no outright ‘good’ or ‘bad’ emotions: validating the focus on exploring and understanding emotions, rather than triggering certain emotional responses. This represents an important ‘Explicit’ criterion (Durlak et al., 2011) of the programme, for practitioners and pupils, that all emotions can be topics for discussion and multimodal exploration within the structured safe space, toward the pursuit of greater understanding of a range of emotions. It also legitimises space for individual interpretation so young children are seen as independent thinkers (Fragkiadaki & Ravanis, 2021), recognising what they can each bring to their own and each others’ thinking through a lens of multimodal communication (Twiner et al., 2021). Equally important is encouraging all adults present to be involved physically, including teachers, teaching assistants and parent volunteers (who would normally support the class) to act as ‘anchors’ between content, engagement and physical activities.

3.1. Areas for development

The COVID-19 pandemic limited the extent to which we could explore the programme in-person with teachers and children and it heavily influenced the data we could gather. Five sessions were initially planned with each class, of which two took place before children moved to home-based schooling during the first COVID-19 lockdown, giving four in-person sessions overall. Consequently, more of the data is from adults' perspectives, rather than children's, than initially intended.

Bespoke online materials and structured video resources were prepared by the dance specialist, for pupils to use from home, or for teachers to use with the smaller number of children still on-site during lockdown. A brief article hosted by The Open University and one of the videos created for online use can be found here <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education-development/education/emotion-motion-supporting-childrens-understanding-different-emotions-through-dance>. These are only minimally referred to in this paper, as we were unable to gain data as to whether or how the videos were used during a nation-wide lockdown.

Despite these limitations, the sessions we trialled – both with children and online with practitioners – and data gathered offered valuable insights to develop a novel, timely programme further, as practitioners and learners tended to enjoy it and reflect positively on its value.

A key learning point for the project team was that the programme name and framing as 'dance' was distracting. It affected practitioners' and learners' expectations of what they would do, and people's willingness to engage. It therefore became apparent – as we strongly believe in the essence of the programme to support a multimodal, embodied 'way in' to developing young children's understandings of abstract concepts of emotions – that we needed a new name to convey these interconnections. Thus we shifted our frame, from Dancemotion to DUEM (Developing Understandings of Emotions through Movement).

4. Conclusions

Many resources are available to support children's SEL, however to the best of our knowledge, this multimodal, arts-based, physically-active intervention programme is novel. DUEM offers a movement-based SEL activity with the double benefit not only of movement itself but also of accessing and making meanings for complex concepts through embodiment, exploration of physical metaphors, and representations of emotions. It enables co-constructing of children's meanings for emotions, which in turn has potential to impact positively on children and their development. These pilot studies have been critical in trialling these concepts, evidencing ways in which movement and embodiment can be used to support richer understanding, as an alternative and addition to alphabetical literacy through embodied interpretation.

SEL programmes typically involve a set of short lessons over a limited period of time, implemented by an external expert (Clarke et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2010). Yet a whole school approach is considered essential for sustainable change. Similarly, parental engagement with school-based programmes is known to influence impact (Blewitt et al., 2018). Further iterations aim to develop a programme that can be used by schools and embedded without the need for onsite dance or mental health specialist support, and that work toward whole-school and parental engagement. Through sharing research-informed evidence and resources we can support practitioners to engage in creative, safe, enjoyable and meaningful exploration of emotional understanding with pupils. We also argue through this work for further research exploring the salience of multimodal meaning-making trajectories around understandings and interpretations of emotions.

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Appendix A

Appendix 1

Example lesson outline

Guide timings	Activity
00.00–00.03	Discussing, setting or revisiting ground rules for the safe space (e.g. be aware of others in the room; all verbal contributions are listened to – we can learn a lot from hearing what others think; all movement interpretations are valid and can be a space for discussion; questions are welcome)
00.03–00.10	Warm up – e.g. bubble activity described in main article. Gathering and writing down on large sheet of paper, words children suggest that relate to emotion
00.10–00.15	Experimenting with pace – taking small, medium and big steps, to get used to different strength, stretch, effort, and what they feel like for the body

(continued on next page)

Appendix 1 (continued)

Guide timings	Activity
00.15–00.20	Experimenting with shapes – trying different body positions around word stimuli, e.g. wall, ball, pin. Encouragement to try different things with different body parts, at different heights and levels. Encouragement to consider what they feel like for the body and how we can interpret the stimuli in different ways.
00.20–00.27	Jungle activity – character exploring a jungle using different pace and shapes: children invited to offer suggestions and to move with the discussion – what might the character find, how might the character move, how might the character feel and why. Gathering and writing down on large sheet of paper, words children suggest that relate to emotion
00.27–00.30	Plenary – what stands out to you from today's session? Positive grounding, standing and walking tall, looking forward to next part of the day

Appendix B. Post-programme interview schedule with dance specialist, and mental health specialist

Thinking back to the start of our conversations.
 What did you think of the project idea when you first heard about it?
 What intrigued you?
 Did anything concern you?
 Has anything changed in your thoughts?
 How might you sum up the project to a colleague or friend?
 Thinking about the lessons in school.
 When you saw [mental health specialist]/led [dance specialist] the first lesson – was it what you expected? (in what ways).
 What do you think worked well?
 Did anything concern you?
 Did anything surprise you?
 What's the key message you will take from it?
 Thinking about the video/online lessons.
 What were your thoughts when we suggested this?
 Thinking more broadly and considering future development of the approach.
 In your opinion, how can we make this approach available to more children and young people, but keeping the focus on emotions safe?
 What do we need to have in place to be able to do this?
 How do we pitch the role of the teacher in facilitating such lessons?
 Anything else you'd like to share?

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