

# **Dance Movement Therapy and its Positive Effects: A Literature Review**

*Victoria Rose Villani, York University, Toronto, Canada*

## **Abstract**

Dance Movement Therapy is a prescription for well-being. This paper will explore the efficacy of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) in creating creative and positive learning environments, the relationship between movement and music therapy, and the promotion of diverse and equitable classrooms. DMT has been introduced and utilized in healthcare and educational settings. Upon engaging with DMT, people living with chronic illnesses such as dementia, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease have been seen to have an increase well-being and happiness. Dance has also been integrated into K-12 education settings to encourage inclusion and accommodation in the classroom. DMT has also been used to help with depression and anxiety, in conjunction with traditional therapy and pharmaceutical drugs. DMT has started to be recognized as an effective treatment for various conditions and encourages learning.

**Keywords:** *Dance Movement Therapy, engagement, Laban Movement Analysis, embodied movement*

*Victoria Rose Villani* is a Master of Education student at York University. She also completed the concurrent education program at York, graduating with a B.F.A in dance and a B.Ed. She is an OCT-certified teacher, currently teaching dance at the secondary level. She is working on completing her master's thesis, which uses Hannah Arendt's theme of "worldlessness" to tell a cautionary tale about what the education system might look like if it fails to recognize the importance of dance education in grade 9-12 classrooms in Ontario. You can connect with Victoria through email at [vicv27@my.yorku.ca](mailto:vicv27@my.yorku.ca).

## **Introduction**

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is clinically proven to be just as effective as pharmaceutical prescriptions in the promotion of physical and mental well-being. When applied to educational contexts, DMT improves student learning and engagement, as well as cognitive and physical competency. Furthermore, DMT is an effective form of physical and psycho-social therapy for children and adults. This paper will explore the efficacy of DMT in creating creative and positive learning environments, the relationship between movement and music therapy, and the promotion of diverse and equitable classrooms. As a dance educator, I will draw upon my lived experience to highlight the connections between dance education and positive mental health outcomes.

## **History of DMT**

To understand DMT, it is critical to first understand its theoretical progenitor in Laban Movement Analysis. The theoretical framework is named after its creator, Rudolph Laban, who was born in Hungary in 1879 before emigrating to England, where he became one of the most sought-after choreographers in Europe (Davies, 2006, p. 1). Laban's work focused mainly on large community dance works that involved hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of participants (Davies, 2006, p. 15). Throughout his career, Laban revolutionized the ways in which movement was consumed and studied. He created a system for recording and understanding dance using kinesiology (Davies, 2006, p. 9). Laban's work led to the creation of what modern dance scholars refer to as 'the elements of dance': space, time, body, shape, and relationship. He also developed the planes of movement to categorize the way the body can move. The three planes are horizontal, vertical, and sagittal (Davies, 2006, p. 42). The idea is that the body can move through space, time, and shapes with different body parts and

relationships to itself and one another along these planes of movement. His work created a recipe for choreography and movement in any style, culture, and setting (Davies, 2006).

Inspired by Laban's work, American dancer Marian Chace was the first person to study and publish work using the term Dance Movement Therapy (Barkai 2025). Chace trained at the Denishawn institution, founded by modern dance pioneers Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn (Barkai, 2025, p. 92). At the institution, she was introduced to a variety of movement experiences, which sparked her interest in the relationship between movement and well-being (Barkai, 2025, p. 93). She perceived dance as a creative movement infused with emotional depth (Barkai, 2025, p. 93). Eventually, Chace established her own studio that emphasized diversity and equity within the classroom. She worked with students of varying cognitive and physical abilities and created a safe haven for therapeutic movement classes. (Barkai, 2025, p. 94).

### **Theme 1: Creative and Positive Learning Environments through DMT**

My first theme delves into the transformative power of DMT for creating positive learning environments, as discussed in Valerie Blanc's *The Dance of Becoming: Pedagogy in Dance/Movement Therapy in the United States* (2021). The article showcases the profound impact of DMT in the daily practices of fourteen different classrooms. The researchers evaluated their results based on four categories: self-awareness, culture, embodied learning, and embrace of the unknown. Participants reported a connection to their inner selves while practicing in DMT and a sense of vulnerability. One participant expressed, "The way we do therapy is to use deep parts of ourselves and ... to be fully present at the body/mind level while moving" (Blanc, 2021, p. 171). DMT allowed participants to access new aspects of their emotional and physical realms that they had not previously accessed.

With the integration of more diverse pedagogy, DMT opened new opportunities for social-emotional learning, inspiring educators to explore new avenues in their teaching methods. Students were also exposed to various perspectives on culture and movement, with the author explaining, “The idea of exploring the concept of movement signature through a cultural lens, for this participant, helped to shape the students’ awareness of their own movement in the world as well as their own cultural lens.” (Blanc, 2021, p. 176). Students can explore the unique aspects of cultural dance through movement. They learn authentic expressions through signature movements specific to each style, fostering deeper connections with themselves and their peers. Students and teachers expressed how eye-opening these experiences were in learning about one another. While this study suggests benefits to participants’ self-awareness, there was a lack of diversity in instructors and geographical boundaries. Twelve of the fourteen classroom instructors identified as white and/or cisgender women, and they were all located in the United States (Blanc, 2021, p. 183). The students in the study emphasized the need for a socioeconomic perspective in DMT practices through their integrated approaches using culturally relevant pedagogy (Blanc, 2021, p. 183).

Finally, to express different subject areas, students could explore embodied learning through various art forms, including acting, visual arts, and movement. It is crucial to be open to arts-based learning, especially in the post COVID classroom, which often lacks engagement and focus (Santos & Lopes, 2022). In a study conducted between 2017 and 2019 , students were assessed based on their overall health, engagement and retention of knowledge with an integration of movement-based learning (Norris et al. 2020). In over 42 classrooms, students improved their learning outcomes when participating in movement-based learning, such as jumping while reciting timetables (Norris et al. 2020). This study helps further prove that

physical movement in classrooms, when integrated with other subject areas, is an effective way to encourage embodied learning. Similarly, in the Blanc study, students had outlets to express their learning, “One participant stated, “I often say, ‘Can you move the theory, can you talk the theory, and then can you write the theory, can you see the theory?’” (Blanc p. 176). Students feel free to express themselves cognitively, emotionally, and physically when the space is safe and open to new learning ideas.

In my experience, I have often adopted arts-based practices in non-arts subjects, such as the social sciences, to give students new ways to absorb difficult theory. I have received nothing but positive feedback, with students often forgetting it is ‘schoolwork’ when they are allowed to be creative. Dance Movement Therapy targets many learning domains, which I believe is the future of education.

## **Theme 2: Music and Movement Therapy**

The second theme relates to movement and music therapy. Dance is often accompanied by music, which, along with DMT, has been effective in creating therapeutic experiences for students. In Ginman et al.’s (2022) study, the paper explores different ways students can interact socially through movement and music in the classroom and its lasting effects. Besides the improved mobility skills, the participants valued the sense of community it fostered.

In traditional classroom settings, students are often told to sit still at their desks and listen, forgoing social interaction (Ginman et al. 2022). Understanding body language for students is important to their daily social interactions as stated, “Interpreting body motion is an important dimension of adaptive social interaction [16,35], and healthy social development is important for well-being and learning” (Ginman et al., 2022). Students need to recognize how

they interact with their peers on a deeper level, which DMT can help them achieve. The psycho-social realm of learning is often cast aside in normative teaching environments. However, the study suggests that integration of arts-based activities like movement and music can help the development of the social-cognitive realm of learning (Ginman et al., 2022). The study suggests that “Social cognition links with motivation, empathy and morality” (Ginman et al., 2022). Social-emotional learning is new to many educational spaces but vital to creating well-rounded, autonomous learners. The skills students learn at school are not just how to read and write but how to make friends, share their toys and when to apologize when they have done something wrong. An integrated arts-based classroom can support that goal and make social-emotional learning flourish.

### **Theme 3: Using DMT to enhance diverse and equitable classrooms**

My third theme focuses on using DMT to enhance diverse and equitable classrooms, especially in special education settings. In Christine Deveraux’s *Educator Perceptions of Dance/Movement Therapy in the Special Education Classroom*, she explores four recurring themes over thirteen separate participants. The study proves the effectiveness of DMT in regulating behaviour, catering to individual learning styles and sensory experiences, as well as various other long-term benefits. As a public-school dance teacher, I have had the privilege of teaching an integrated dance class with special needs students in attendance. I did not realize the influence movement had on their daily lives, such as interacting with the other dance students and expressing their learning through movement when verbal questions were sometimes difficult. As Deveraux suggests in the study, “Both the teachers’ assistants and the teachers alike noted that at the end of the session hour their students were often ‘more focused,’ ‘less

distracted,’ ‘relaxed’ ‘calm’ and their nervous systems appeared ‘more regulated.’” (Deveraux, 2017, p. 56-57). This suggests students can regulate behaviour through movement since dance allows for cognitive and social-emotional learning. They can self-soothe and express emotions through movement as a form of communication.

In Australia, a recent arts-based curriculum for elementary-aged children focusing on DMT has been developed for students with cognitive disabilities. (Mullane & Dunphy, 2017, p. 494). The implementation of this curriculum has coincided with rapid growth in student well-being, confidence, and overall happiness (Mullane & Dunphy, 2017, p. 496). The research shows that higher engagement levels are closely associated with positive classroom environments and better mental well being in the classroom (Mullane & Dunphy, 2017, p. 497). Since DMT is focused on the well-being of the mind and the body, students can experience holistic movement experiences. DMT’s main goal is connection. Therefore, it does not have limitations to the type of connections between the self and others that can occur in dance. Students with varying levels of ability can participate in movement in the way that suits them best and does not require anything more than being themselves. DMT focuses on the movement experience of the student to further develop positive emotional and physical interactions with learning (Mullane & Dunphy, 2017 p. 501). Students taking part in this type of learning were able to express themselves in a plethora of ways, including even the smallest gestures or movements, to create new pathways for growth and learning in their bodies (Mullane & Dunphy, 2017, p. 501).

Accommodations are especially important when teaching students of varying abilities. DMT provides the opportunity for individualized embodied learning that accommodates both the group and individual experience. This helps provide a more welcoming and accommodating classroom for students with different needs (Deveraux, 2017, p. 57). Similar to differences in

behaviour regulation, students can have various sensory experiences. However, regardless of individual differences, DMT is often calming for all students. Deveraux explains, “The favourable reports of the use of tools that address the sensory needs for the children (albeit auditory or tactile) may point to a perceived value of the ‘soothing’ effect that the DMT sessions can have on the students” (Deveraux, 2017, p. 59).

Finally, students and educators can feel the long-term effects integrating DMT can have on their classroom. One educator was quoted stating, “[DMT] has taught me many strategies to teach body awareness, mobility, and self-awareness to each my students” (Deveraux, 2017, p. 60). In all classroom settings, we prepare students for their future and give them skills to assist them in the ‘real world.’ Special needs classrooms are often called “Planning for Independence,” providing students with the tools they need to adapt to life after graduation. DMT is an effective way to give students with behavioural, physical and cognitive exceptionalities tools to regulate emotions and promote hands-on learning strategies to self-soothe and express themselves in various ways.

#### **Theme 4: Dance and Mental Health**

Despite the perceived novelty of the field, movement has been the focus of theoretical study in many cultures around the world for many years. For example, in the Japanese culture, Butoh dance was created in response to the aftermath of World War II (Esposito & Kasai, 2017). It was started by Tatsumi Hijikata, who created the style around abstract and provocative movements (Esposito & Kasai, 2017). The style was intentionally shocking, often evoking strong outbursts of anger, crying and disgust by audience members. The style reflected the underlying resentment, shame, and trauma of the Japanese public following the war. It was a style that



represented rebellion and served as a resonant emotional outlet (Esposito & Kasai, 2017). Today, both participation in and observation of Butoh has become a therapeutic experience for many people across the globe. The dance asks both participant and viewer to dig deep and sit in the uncomfortable and often traumatic reality of life—much like traditional therapy.

While completing my undergraduate degree, I volunteered at Canada's National Ballet School, helping demonstrate DMT classes to people with Parkinson's disease and the elderly. What I noticed while partaking in these classes was the immense joy of the participants. This was during the height of the pandemic, so these classes had been moved to Zoom. The participants initially signed up as a means of treatment for their physical challenges but continued because of the sense of community and belonging it gave them. There is ongoing research to suggest DMT benefits people with Parkinson's disease and those with aging bodies. Similarly, there has been much research to suggest DMT can assist people with dementia. A recent study followed a patient with dementia in her weekly DMT sessions (Hill, 2017). The results showed the participant felt a greater sense of happiness and connection during and after the DMT sessions (Hill, 2017, p. 835). The participant reported she felt DMT contributed to greater confidence and well-being. Another study showed significant improvement in well-being in patients with late-stage Alzheimer's disease (Bräuninger & Bacigalupe, 2017, p. 742). There is also a growing body of research on the benefits of movement and dance therapy for people suffering from various chronic conditions,

“DMT appears to be more effective in reducing symptoms and increasing cognitive performance, empathy, physical and psychological wellbeing, self-efficacy, self-image, social interaction, and tolerance in complex illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, dementia, depression, Parkinson's disease, posttraumatic stress disorders, schizophrenia, and stress. Moreover, through DMT patients may experience hope, joy, and self-worth. This is crucial when aiming to achieve patients' satisfaction and cooperation in the overall treatment goal and to improve quality of life and restore a sense of wholeness.” (Bräuninger & Bacigalupe, 2017, p. 750)

This research highlights the validity of DMT treatment and the benefits it provides to individuals with various conditions and abilities.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout my life as a dancer, dance has provided me with my highest highs and lowest lows. Growing up in a competitive dance environment, my happiness in dance never seemed like a primary concern for my teachers. We were expected to produce high-quality performances to win competitions and prizes and represent our studios with pride. In a 2023 study, researchers found that eating disorders and anxiety were primary issues for professional dancers (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023). These issues were associated with the presence of mirrors and unrealistic body standards in the profession, especially ballet-based environments (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023). I do equate my high anxiety and obsession with perfectionism to my experience in a high-pressure dance environment. Even though I can associate some of these negative attributes to dance, there were also many positives. While I may not have been aware of it at the time, dance was my therapeutic outlet. I always felt like my most authentic self when dancing. As I have grown older, I have come to truly understand what dance means to me. Dance is exactly what this paper has shown it can achieve through DMT, it fosters connection, well-being and happiness. Dance has allowed me to express myself in ways I would have never imagined and share my love for it with so many others. Dance showed me what my body and mind are capable of when they work together, thus embodied movement.

This paper has shown the efficacy of Dance Movement Therapy in classroom and healthcare. Dance, in both my own experience and in the research, unites and includes everyone, regardless of culture or cognitive and physical abilities (Blanc, 2017). DMT fosters powerful

community building and creates more positive environments for people to grow (Deverauz, 2017). Patients experiencing chronic physical and mental illnesses report increased happiness and hope regarding their conditions (Bräuninger & Bacigalupe, 2017). Dance offers an alternative approach to prescribing happiness. It is hard not to feel when moving. Even when movement may be difficult, either emotionally or physically, it is still a sense of relief to express emotions physically. Dance allows the body to process emotions and pour them out for the world to see. It creates vulnerability, relationships, and commonality for us to all recognize what we have in common: our bodies and minds. So, why not live life fully embodied?

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