

Where Stories Sing, Dance and Unfold: Arts-Enriched Play Narratives in Early Childhood Education

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Michel Hogenes¹

Keywords

Developmental Education; cultural-historical activity theory; early childhood education; performing arts; play narratives; professional development; pedagogical agency.

Abstract

This study examines how a collaborative, design-based professional development programme supported early childhood educators in integrating music, dance and drama into children's play narratives within Developmental Education. Grounded in cultural-historical activity theory, the study conceptualises artistic learning as participation in meaningful socio-cultural practices and explores the relationship between educators' pedagogical agency and children's artistic agency. Eleven educational professionals from two Dutch early childhood settings participated in three workshops, followed by approximately eight weeks of classroom implementation, coaching visits, online consultations and a concluding evaluation. The project drew on classroom observations, educational designs, participants' reflections and evaluation discussions. The findings reveal differentiated patterns of professional learning: some participants reported greater confidence and expanded pedagogical repertoires, while others experienced continuing uncertainty or limited changes in classroom implementation. The educational designs illustrated how rhythmic exploration, sound stories, movement improvisation and dramatic play could enrich thematic play narratives by connecting artistic expression with shared purposes. Collaborative reflection provided opportunities for educators to reconsider their pedagogical decisions and develop more differentiated

¹ Michel Hogenes, PhD, is principal lecturer at The Hague University of Applied Sciences and Lucia Marthas Institute for Performing Arts in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

approaches to supporting children's artistic participation. Although music received greater emphasis than dance and drama, the project demonstrated possibilities for connecting the three disciplines while acknowledging their distinctive expressive characteristics. The study suggests that professional development in early childhood arts education should extend beyond acquiring artistic activities to strengthening educators' capacity to design, mediate and sustain meaningful artistic practices. It highlights pedagogical agency as an important condition for creating opportunities for children's artistic agency.

1. Introduction

Music, dance and drama offer young children opportunities to explore experiences, express ideas and create meaning through sound, movement and imaginative action. Their educational significance extends beyond providing enjoyable activities or supporting learning in other curriculum areas. As culturally developed forms of expression, the performing arts enable children to encounter artistic traditions, develop knowledge and skills, and contribute their own ideas to shared creative processes (Connery et al., 2018; Van Heusden et al., 2016).

Integrating the performing arts into everyday educational practice, however, presents challenges. Early childhood educators must address diverse developmental and curricular objectives, while opportunities to develop subject-specific expertise in music, dance and drama may be limited. The challenge is therefore not simply to provide more artistic activities, but to develop pedagogical approaches that enable educators to recognise and extend artistic possibilities within children's play. Research into professional development in musical play has highlighted the importance of supporting early years teachers in developing their music education practices (Nieuwmeijer, 2023). Less attention has been directed towards connecting music, dance and drama within meaningful, integrated educational contexts.

Developmental Education [*Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs*], a Dutch educational approach grounded in Vygotskij's cultural-historical activity theory, offers a perspective from which to address this challenge. Within this approach, learning and development emerge through participation in meaningful socio-cultural practices in which children pursue shared purposes, assume roles and use culturally developed knowledge and tools (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024; Van Oers, 2021). Artistic learning can therefore be understood as participation in practices

resembling those of musicians, dancers and actors, adapted to children's experiences and developmental possibilities. Artistic knowledge and techniques become meaningful when they enable children to realise purposes that matter within these activities. Central to this understanding is the *cultural motive*: a shared purpose that gives direction to participants' activities and choices. Inviting children to explore musical instruments, for example, differs from inviting them to establish an orchestra and prepare a performance for another group. The latter introduces a collective artistic purpose within which listening, composing, rehearsing and performing acquire meaning. Such practices may foster *artistic agency*, understood as children's developing capacity to use, combine and transform artistic resources to express individual and shared meanings (Connery et al., 2018; Van Oers, 2021).

Play narratives provide a promising context for developing these practices. Within Developmental Education, thematic play evolves through children's participation in recognisable socio-cultural activities rather than being organised solely around predetermined topics (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024). A narrative involving a theatre, celebration or musical performance may invite children to compose music, explore expressive movement, develop characters and collaborate towards a shared artistic purpose. Music, dance and drama can thus become interconnected while retaining their distinctive expressive possibilities.

Realising this potential requires considerable professional judgement. As more knowledgeable partners, educators observe children's intentions, introduce relevant cultural resources and provide guidance when new knowledge or skills are needed. Their challenge is to support children's artistic initiative while making artistic conventions and techniques accessible. This involves balancing children's involvement, the rules and conventions of an activity, and opportunities for exploration and decision-making (Van Oers, 2021). Educators' *pedagogical agency* is therefore important in creating conditions for children's artistic agency. These considerations raise a question for early childhood teacher education and continuing professional development: how can educators be supported in connecting artistic knowledge, children's play narratives and informed pedagogical decision-making?

The present study examines a completed collaborative professional development project involving educators working with toddlers and children in the early years of primary education. The project focused on designing and implementing educational activities that integrated music, dance and drama within meaningful thematic contexts. The study is guided by the following research question: *How can a collaborative, design-based professional development programme support early childhood educators in integrating music, dance and drama into children's play narratives within Developmental Education?* By examining the relationship between professional learning, pedagogical design and artistic participation, the study seeks to contribute to an understanding of how educators can develop meaningful performing arts practices within Developmental Education. It also aims to inform professional development approaches that recognise the distinctive educational value of music, dance and drama while supporting children's participation in shared artistic practices.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interconnected theoretical perspectives: cultural-historical activity theory and Developmental Education, play narratives as socio-cultural and artistic practices, and educators' professional learning and pedagogical agency. Together, these perspectives explain how music, dance and drama can become meaningful components of early childhood education and how educators can develop the expertise needed to support such practices.

2.1. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Developmental Education

Cultural-historical activity theory understands learning and development as socially situated and culturally mediated processes. Drawing on Vygotsky and subsequent developments within the cultural-historical tradition, this perspective emphasises participation in historically developed activities, interaction with others and the use of cultural tools and symbols (Connery et al., 2018; Van Oers, 2021). Language, musical instruments, artistic conventions, movement patterns and symbolic representations are examples of resources through which children participate in cultural practices and develop new possibilities for action.

An important distinction concerns the relationship between activities, motives and meaning. Leont'ev (1980) emphasised that the personal significance of an activity is related to the motives directing it. Understanding children's participation therefore requires attention not

only to their actions, but also to the purposes they pursue and the meanings those purposes hold for them.

Developmental Education translates these principles into an educational approach in which meaningful participation in socio-cultural practices forms the basis for learning and development (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024; Van Oers, 2021). Educators connect children's experiences and interests with culturally developed knowledge and activities. Classrooms may become theatres, restaurants, museums or music studios in which children assume roles, encounter problems and expand their capabilities through participation. The educator acts as a more knowledgeable partner who supports children's developing participation without determining every action in advance. This understanding relates to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, in which learning opportunities emerge through socially supported activity. Such support involves more than transmitting knowledge: educators and children can collaboratively construct meanings and explore new possibilities for action (Connery et al., 2018).

Play occupies a central position within Developmental Education. Van Oers (2021) distinguishes three interrelated characteristics contributing to the play character of an activity: involvement, rules and degrees of freedom. Involvement concerns meaningful engagement; rules provide the conventions and structures enabling shared participation; and degrees of freedom allow initiative, experimentation and decision-making. These characteristics are particularly relevant to arts education. Musical, dramatic and dance activities require opportunities for artistic exploration alongside familiarity with the conventions that make collective artistic work possible. The relationship between involvement, rules and freedom therefore helps explain how educators can support both children's initiative and their developing artistic competence.

2.2. Play Narratives as Socio-Cultural and Artistic Practices

Within Developmental Education, play narratives provide contexts in which children participate in meaningful socio-cultural practices. Rather than functioning merely as fictional stories introducing learning activities, they develop through shared purposes, roles, problems and the use of cultural resources (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024). Central to these practices is the

cultural motive: a shared purpose that gives direction to participants' activities and choices. Inviting children to explore musical instruments, for example, differs from inviting them to establish an orchestra and prepare a performance. Although both situations involve similar materials, the latter introduces an artistic purpose that may require children to select sounds, organise musical structures, coordinate contributions and consider their audience.

Cultural motives can connect different artistic activities within a coherent practice. Children preparing a theatre performance, for example, may discover how music contributes to a scene's atmosphere, movement communicates characters' intentions and dramatic dialogue develops the narrative. Artistic disciplines become interconnected through their contribution to a shared purpose rather than through their simultaneous presence within a theme. However, integration does not imply that disciplinary distinctions disappear. Music provides cultural means for organising sound, rhythm, dynamics and silence. Dance enables expression through bodily movement, space, time and energy. Drama involves exploring roles, situations, relationships and meanings through imagined action (Heijdanus & Van den Brink, 2022; Heijdanus-de Boer et al., 2024; Hogenes & Knols, 2024). These expressive possibilities can interact while retaining their distinctive artistic characteristics.

From a cultural-historical perspective, creativity develops through engagement with existing cultural knowledge. Children draw on artistic examples, stories, materials and conventions, but can also combine, reinterpret and transform these resources through imagination and experimentation (Connery et al., 2018; Moran, 2018). Artistic freedom and the acquisition of knowledge are therefore not opposing educational aims. Familiarity with musical patterns, dramatic conventions or movement techniques can expand the possibilities available for creative expression. This relationship can be understood through the concept of *artistic agency*: children's developing capacity to use, combine and transform artistic and cultural resources to express individual and shared meanings. Artistic agency does not imply independence from others. It develops through collaborative participation and access to the knowledge, techniques and expressive possibilities made available by more experienced participants (Connery et al., 2018; Van Oers, 2021).

Play narratives can support artistic agency because children's choices have consequences for a shared activity. Selecting music for a dramatic scene, developing a movement sequence or preparing a performance requires participants to consider how their contributions relate to collective intentions. Such processes involve communication and reflection through words, sounds, movements, gestures and symbolic representations. Recordings, drawings and graphic notation can function as cultural tools through which artistic ideas become available for discussion and further development. Artistic learning consequently extends beyond producing a final performance or artefact. It involves interconnected processes of experiencing, imagining, investigating, experimenting, creating, sharing and interpreting. These processes need not follow a fixed sequence: artistic discoveries may alter a narrative, while emerging narrative purposes may create reasons to develop new artistic knowledge and skills.

2.3. Educators' Professional Learning and Pedagogical Agency

Integrating music, dance and drama into play narratives requires educators to recognise children's intentions, identify artistic possibilities, introduce cultural resources and decide when pedagogical intervention is appropriate. Within Developmental Education, the educator is neither a passive observer nor the sole director of children's activities, but a more knowledgeable partner who supports meaningful participation while preserving opportunities for initiative (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024; Van Oers, 2021). This responsibility requires both artistic subject knowledge and pedagogical sensitivity. Educators need sufficient familiarity with artistic disciplines to recognise possibilities children may not yet identify independently, while avoiding the replacement of children's intentions with predetermined outcomes. Oreck and Nicoll (2018) distinguish educators' greater technical expertise from children's ownership of what they wish to express. Professional guidance should therefore expand children's artistic possibilities rather than control the meaning of their work.

Within artistic play practices, educators may fulfil several complementary roles. As cultural mediators, they introduce artistic examples, traditions and techniques. As co-players, they participate in developing narratives and exploring possibilities. As investigative partners, they encourage children to compare alternatives and reflect on artistic problems. As subject specialists, they provide relevant knowledge and instruction when these can extend children's

capabilities. Educators also support communication, collaboration and the relationship between artistic conventions and opportunities for experimentation. These roles are not successive stages of a teaching method. Their relevance depends on the developing activity, children's intentions and the artistic challenges encountered. Educators must continually interpret situations and determine which interventions may extend participation. This requires *pedagogical agency*: the professional capacity to make informed, context-sensitive decisions about educational action. In this study, pedagogical agency refers to educators' developing ability to draw on theoretical understanding, artistic expertise and situated professional judgement when designing and facilitating meaningful artistic practices.

Professional learning consequently involves more than acquiring activities for classroom use. Although workshops introducing songs, dances or drama exercises may expand educators' repertoires, integrating these activities into play narratives requires understanding when, why and how they contribute to children's participation. Nieuwmeijer's (2023) research into professional development in musical play provides a relevant point of reference for understanding how professional learning can support early years teachers' music education practices. The present study extends this focus by considering music, dance and drama as interconnected artistic practices within Developmental Education.

A collaborative, design-based approach creates opportunities to connect theoretical understanding with professional practice. Through artistic experimentation, educational design, classroom implementation and reflection, educators can investigate how pedagogical principles operate in specific situations. Such processes may reveal tensions between educational intentions and practical realities, including uncertainty about artistic competence, unexpected contributions from children or the need to adapt planned activities. Collaborative reflection can turn these tensions into opportunities for professional learning. By examining experiences, comparing decisions and reconsidering assumptions, educators may expand their repertoire of pedagogical possibilities. Professional development can thus be understood as a collaborative process through which educators investigate and strengthen their capacity for informed educational action.

2.4. An Integrated Conceptual Framework

The three theoretical perspectives provide complementary foundations for this study. Cultural-historical activity theory and Developmental Education explain learning through meaningful, culturally mediated participation. Play narratives provide contexts in which children can engage in interconnected artistic practices. Educators' professional learning concerns the knowledge, skills and judgement required to design and support these opportunities. Together, these perspectives suggest that the educational value of integrating music, dance and drama depends not simply on providing artistic activities, but on how these activities contribute to shared socio-cultural practices.

For the present study, this leads to three interconnected analytical dimensions:

1. Meaningful artistic participation: How are music, dance and drama connected to children's play narratives, roles and shared purposes?
2. Pedagogical mediation: How do educators introduce cultural resources, support artistic exploration and balance guidance with children's initiative?
3. Professional learning: How do educators develop and apply the knowledge, confidence and professional judgement needed to facilitate integrated artistic practices?

These dimensions guide the examination of the professional development process and the interpretation of the findings. They distinguish the artistic practices developed during the project from the professional learning associated with designing, implementing and reflecting on those practices.

3. Research Context and Methodology

3.1. Project Context and Aims

The study was conducted within the Dutch research and development project *Music, Dance and Drama for Toddlers and the Early Years of Primary Education* [*Muziek, Dans en Theater voor Peuters en de Onderbouw*], supported by the Frea Janssen-Vos Fund. The project aimed to strengthen performing arts education within Developmental Education by supporting educators in integrating music, dance and drama into thematic play. Inspired by the educational legacy of Frea Janssen-Vos, the project approached artistic learning as participation in meaningful socio-cultural practices rather than as a collection of isolated

activities (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024). Three objectives guided its development: expanding educators' artistic and pedagogical repertoires; creating opportunities for children's meaningful participation in music, dance and drama; and strengthening the position of these disciplines as distinctive but interconnected components of Developmental Education. The project centred on collaborative professional learning. Educators developed artistic activities within existing educational themes, implemented them in their own settings and reflected on their experiences with colleagues and facilitators.

3.2. Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative, practice-oriented approach to examining educators' experiences of a collaborative, design-based professional development programme. The inquiry was embedded in authentic early childhood educational settings and focused on how participants developed, implemented and reflected on artistic activities within children's play narratives. The professional development programme combined practical workshops, collaborative educational design, classroom implementation, coaching and evaluation. Consistent with Developmental Education, these activities connected theoretical understanding with observation, reflection and pedagogical action (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024). Participants were encouraged to adapt their educational designs to children's interests, existing themes and the circumstances of their educational settings.

The research drew on documentation generated during this process, including educational designs, observations, educators' reflections and evaluation discussions. These materials were examined to identify reported developments in artistic participation, pedagogical mediation and professional learning. The study therefore sought to develop a contextualised understanding of educators' experiences and practices rather than to measure programme effectiveness or establish causal relationships.

3.3. Participants and Educational Settings

Eleven educational professionals from two Dutch early childhood settings participated. Kindcentrum 't Schrijverke in 's-Hertogenbosch contributed six primary school teachers, three pedagogical practitioners and one teacher education student. One primary school teacher participated from Kindcentrum De Margriet in Zwijndrecht. Participants worked with toddlers

and children in the early years of primary education. Ages and group sizes varied between settings. All participants contributed to the development or implementation of artistic activities, while their professional experiences and reflections formed a central focus of the inquiry. Two researchers and professional development specialists facilitated the project, leading workshops, supporting implementation and contributing to observation and reflection.

3.4. Design of the Professional Development Programme

The professional development programme combined three collaborative workshops, classroom-based experimentation, coaching visits, online consultations and a concluding evaluation. Rather than following a prescribed sequence of lessons, participants were encouraged to develop and adapt artistic activities within their existing educational themes. The programme connected practical exploration of music, dance and drama with the principles of Developmental Education, particularly the development of play narratives, socio-cultural roles and meaningful participation.

The first workshop, held on 25 March 2025, focused on participants' experiences with the performing arts and the possibilities for integrating them into children's play. Through introductory dance and drama activities, discussion of classroom examples and theoretical exploration, participants examined how play narratives develop around roles, actions, materials and shared purposes. They also considered opportunities for extending their existing educational practices through music, dance and drama.

The second workshop, held on 1 April 2025, extended this exploration through dance improvisation, circus activities, puppet play, rhythmic building blocks and musical play. Attention was given to the expressive possibilities of movement, rhythm and dramatic representation, and to the ways in which these disciplines could contribute to socio-cultural practices. Participants worked collaboratively on educational designs, considering how artistic resources might support children's developing play narratives.

The third workshop, held in May 2025, combined further artistic exploration with reflection on participants' experiences. Activities included musical listening, graphic notation, rhythmic

patterns and sound representations within the theme *In and Around the Pond (In en om de sloot)*. Participants also discussed how artistic activities could be observed, documented and evaluated using HOREB, the observation and evaluation system associated with Developmental Education. The workshop provided opportunities to reconsider educational designs and identify possibilities for further development.

Classroom implementation took place alongside and following the workshops. Educators adapted artistic activities to their groups, educational themes and children's emerging interests. Coaching visits supported this process through observation, discussion and collaborative consideration of pedagogical alternatives. For example, documentation from a group visit on 13 May 2025 describes the development of a palaeontologists' play narrative. Educators planned a progression from modelling dramatic roles and actions to shared role-play and increasingly independent participation. Related movement and musical activities were considered as ways of extending the narrative. This example illustrates how coaching connected artistic possibilities with decisions about children's developing participation.

Online consultations provided further opportunities to exchange experiences, address practical challenges and refine educational designs. The programme documentation also includes evaluation conversations conducted in December 2025, in which educators reflected on their use of music, dance and drama, their professional learning and the organisational conditions affecting implementation. These discussions offered a retrospective perspective on participants' experiences beyond the initial workshop period.

3.5. Data Collection

Data were collected through documentation generated during the professional development programme and its subsequent evaluation. The available material included workshop presentations, educational designs, lesson plans, coaching records, classroom observations, educators' written questionnaire responses and retrospective evaluation conversations conducted in December 2025. Project documentation also identified field notes, children's statements and photographic or audiovisual material collected where available. These sources provided complementary perspectives on the inquiry. Workshop materials and educational designs documented the artistic and pedagogical possibilities introduced and developed

during the programme. Coaching records provided examples of planned activities, observed classroom practices and decisions about pedagogical mediation. Written questionnaires captured participants' existing artistic experience, reported changes in practice, perceived benefits and continuing difficulties. The December evaluation conversations offered further retrospective accounts of implementation, professional learning and organisational conditions. The analysis distinguished between activities documented as implemented, proposals for further classroom development and participants' retrospective interpretations. This distinction was important because the available evidence did not support systematic assessment of changes in educators' competence or children's development.

3.6. Data Analysis

The project documentation was examined through a qualitative, theory-informed approach. The analysis focused on educators' reported experiences, documented educational practices and observations of children's participation in artistic activities. Three analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework guided the examination of the material: meaningful artistic participation, pedagogical mediation and professional learning. These dimensions provided a conceptual structure for interpreting how music, dance and drama were connected to children's play narratives, how educators supported artistic activities and how participants described their professional development. The available documentation was reviewed to identify recurring observations, reported developments and challenges relevant to these dimensions. Attention was given to similarities and differences between participants' experiences, educational designs and evaluation accounts, including the unequal emphasis placed on music, dance and drama.

The findings were subsequently organised into four themes: professional confidence and pedagogical repertoire, artistic participation within play narratives, integration of the performing arts, and collaborative professional learning. These themes provided a descriptive structure for presenting the principal findings in relation to the research question. Given the retrospective and predominantly descriptive character of the available documentation, the analysis did not involve formal coding or independently validated assessments of professional competence or children's development. Interpretations were therefore restricted to

documented practices and reported experiences, without attributing causal effects to the programme.

The interpretation of the project documentation also considered differences between participants' experiences and reported practices. Written questionnaire responses and retrospective evaluation conversations were examined alongside educational designs and coaching records to identify both recurring observations and contrasting accounts. Particular attention was given to participants' prior artistic experience, perceived professional learning, reported classroom implementation and the practical conditions influencing their work. Accounts indicating increased confidence or expanded pedagogical repertoires were considered alongside those describing limited change, continuing uncertainty or organisational constraints. This comparison informed the presentation of the findings and helped avoid interpreting professional development as a uniform process. Given the descriptive and retrospective nature of the available evidence, the analysis does not establish causal relationships or independently verified changes in professional competence.

4. Findings

The findings are organised into four interconnected themes: professional confidence and pedagogical repertoire, artistic participation within play narratives, integration of music, dance and drama, and collaborative professional learning. The analysis draws on workshop materials, educational designs, documentation of classroom coaching and retrospective evaluation conversations conducted in December 2025. These sources provide evidence of planned activities, reported classroom practices and educators' reflections, although they do not establish independently measured changes in competence or children's development. Table 1 summarises the principal findings and their evidential boundaries.

Table 1. Overview of the evidence supporting the principal findings

Finding	Supporting evidence	Interpretation boundary
Developing professional confidence	Educators' accounts in the December evaluation conversations	Self-reported development; experiences varied

Broader artistic and pedagogical repertoire	Workshop materials, educational designs and reported classroom activities	Implementation not systematically quantified
Opportunities for artistic participation	Classroom coaching documentation and educators' accounts of thematic activities	Planned activities and reported experiences must be distinguished from observed outcomes
Collaborative professional learning	Coaching documentation, workshop reflection and evaluation conversations	Longer-term effects and programme-specific contributions cannot be established

4.1. Developing Professional Confidence and Expanding Pedagogical Repertoires

The evaluation conversations revealed differences in educators' confidence, artistic preferences and reported changes in practice. Participants did not describe a uniform increase in competence across all three performing arts disciplines. Instead, their accounts suggested greater awareness of artistic possibilities, selective expansion of their repertoires and, in some cases, continuing uncertainty.

During the collective evaluation, one participant explained that she remained apprehensive about music but had become more comfortable participating in musical activities. She associated this development partly with the support of a colleague who was more confident in the discipline. Importantly, she did not report a substantial increase in the frequency of her own musical activities. Her account therefore suggests a change in perceived confidence rather than demonstrable growth in implementation. Another participant described a different development. Having already incorporated music regularly, she reported making more deliberate use of dance and drama. Her examples included movement and dramatic activities connected to children's thematic interests, as well as musical exploration involving pitch, sound bars and bodily movement. She also described the establishment of a shared music area in which children could explore instruments and musical possibilities. These accounts indicate an expansion of the reported pedagogical repertoire beyond familiar singing activities.

The individual evaluation offered a further perspective. An educator from the second setting reported becoming more deliberate in selecting songs that related to classroom themes. However, she found it more difficult to devise dance activities and acknowledged that doing

so required additional preparation and artistic exploration. The written questionnaires reinforced this differentiated picture. One experienced educator, who already incorporated music and dramatic play regularly, reported becoming more conscious of the possibilities of dance expression within thematic activities. Another participant, despite acknowledging the value of the ideas introduced, explicitly indicated that the project had not yet resulted in greater use of music, dance or drama. This educator identified uncertainty about musical and rhythmic competence and the demands of an already full programme as continuing barriers. A third participant, who had considerable prior experience in music and drama, reported introducing a dance activity that would previously have been unlikely to feature in her practice. These contrasting accounts indicate that professional learning did not follow a uniform trajectory: increased awareness, experimentation and actual changes in implementation represented distinct outcomes. Together, these accounts suggest that professional learning was shaped by educators' existing expertise, personal confidence and access to collegial support. The findings indicate perceived changes in awareness and pedagogical possibilities, but do not demonstrate equivalent development in all participants or across the three disciplines.

4.2. Enriching Play Narratives Through Meaningful Artistic Participation

The educational designs and coaching documentation illustrate how music, dance and drama were connected to thematic play through roles, actions, materials and developing narratives. A particularly informative example comes from coaching visits documented on 13 May 2025, involving a theme centred on palaeontologists searching for dinosaur remains. The activity began with educators modelling the work of palaeontologists. Materials included digging tools, brushes, stones, dinosaur footprints and objects representing discoveries. Children were subsequently invited to take on the role of palaeontologists and search for remains in small groups. The documentation identified a sequence of role-related actions: searching, discovering, examining objects, cleaning finds and consulting books.

The accompanying plans distinguished between educator modelling, shared role-play and increasingly independent participation. They also proposed extending the activity into an indoor discovery area and an outdoor sandpit, with photographs supporting reflection on the developing play narrative. Movement activities based on dinosaurs' characteristics and

musical resources intended to evoke atmosphere were considered as further possibilities. This example is significant because the artistic activities were connected to the actions and intentions associated with a recognisable socio-cultural role. Dramatic representation provided a structure for participation, while movement and music offered possibilities for extending the experience. Nevertheless, the coaching record contains both descriptions of activities and plans for subsequent implementation. It therefore illustrates the pedagogical design process more clearly than it establishes the effects of every proposed activity on children's participation.

The workshop materials provide another example through the theme *In and Around the Pond*. Musical listening, rhythmic patterns, graphic notation and representations of animals offered ways of connecting artistic exploration with thematic content. However, these materials primarily document the professional development activities and educational possibilities presented to participants; they should not be interpreted as evidence that all these activities were subsequently implemented in classrooms. The findings consequently demonstrate how educators designed opportunities for artistic participation within play narratives, while the available evidence remains insufficient to establish the extent of children's independent artistic initiative across the participating groups.

4.3. Connecting Music, Dance and Drama Within Thematic Educational Practices

The documentation demonstrates both possibilities for interdisciplinary artistic work and differences in the attention given to individual disciplines. Music featured prominently throughout the workshops, particularly through rhythmic exploration, listening, musical play, sound representation and graphic notation. Dance and drama were addressed through movement improvisation, expressive play, puppetry, dramatic roles and the development of play scripts.

The retrospective evaluations provide concrete examples of how educators connected these disciplines with classroom themes. During the collective evaluation, a participant described exploring the distinction between high and low sounds in connection with a theme involving a building. Children encountered these musical contrasts through sound bars and bodily movement, linking musical concepts with physical experience.

The individual evaluation from 3 December provides another example. An educator described using a song about preparing vegetable soup within a cooking theme, connecting the song's content with practical classroom activities. She also reported designing a movement activity around a picture book and seasonal music, using actions such as passing parcels and balancing objects. These examples illustrate how educators drew on existing thematic content to create connections between music, movement and play. The written questionnaires provided further examples of how educators connected artistic resources with existing themes. Within a theme concerning pond life, one educator described singing about aquatic animals, exploring their sounds and the properties of water, and using movement and fabric to represent animals and water. Children's observations during a visit to a pond, together with animals present in the classroom, informed these expressive activities. Another educator described using water sounds within a pond theme and kitchen utensils as sound-producing materials within a restaurant theme. These examples illustrate how educators drew on sensory experiences, thematic knowledge and familiar materials to develop artistic possibilities. However, their connection to a shared theme does not, in itself, demonstrate that children engaged in sustained artistic practices or independently shaped the developing narrative. The extent to which educators integrated the different artistic disciplines nevertheless varied. The same educator explained that suitable songs often came readily to mind, whereas planning dance activities required more deliberate searching and preparation. Her account suggests that familiarity with a discipline influenced how readily she could recognise and develop artistic opportunities.

The findings therefore point towards selective rather than comprehensive interdisciplinary integration. Participants reported examples of combining artistic resources within thematic practices, but the evidence does not establish equivalent implementation or increased expertise in music, dance and drama.

4.4. Collaborative Reflection as a Resource for Professional Learning

The programme created opportunities for educators to exchange ideas, examine classroom experiences and reconsider pedagogical decisions. The workshop materials show that participants were invited to share experiences, identify developmental questions and work

collaboratively on educational designs. The coaching documentation demonstrates how such reflection could focus on specific decisions about the development of play. The palaeontologists' theme provides an example. The coaching record identified a progression from modelling a dramatic role to shared participation and more independent role-related activity. It also considered how additional materials, photographs, language and artistic resources might support the development of the narrative. A comparable approach was proposed for a beekeepers' theme, involving role-related actions, movement representing bees and musical exploration through buzzing and changes in speed. These proposals illustrate how professional reflection connected artistic possibilities with the structure of children's play.

The December evaluations added evidence of the organisational conditions influencing professional learning. One participant attributed her increased confidence partly to the encouragement of a colleague with greater musical expertise. Another described how a music area had become an established resource shared across several classes. Such accounts suggest that collegial support and accessible artistic resources could facilitate continued experimentation. Other experiences revealed constraints. The individual evaluation on 3 December described difficulties finding time for dance activities amid competing classroom priorities. During the collective evaluation, a participant who had moved to an older primary class reported that a more tightly structured timetable made it difficult to sustain comparable artistic activities. These accounts indicate that opportunities for implementation depended not only on individual expertise but also on curricular priorities, time and organisational arrangements.

Taken together, the documentation suggests that collaborative professional learning involved more than acquiring additional activities. Participants reflected on how artistic resources might contribute to children's play, how educators could support their use and what conditions enabled or restricted implementation. The December conversations offer a retrospective indication of reported practices beyond the initial workshop period, but they do not establish their long-term sustainability or permit the effects of individual programme components to be isolated.

5. Discussion

This study examined how a collaborative, design-based professional development programme supported early childhood educators in integrating music, dance and drama into children's play narratives within Developmental Education. Participants reported differing experiences of professional learning, including increased confidence, broader pedagogical repertoires and, in some cases, limited changes in classroom implementation. The educational designs illustrated possibilities for connecting artistic activities with thematic play. These findings raise questions about meaningful cultural participation, pedagogical mediation, professional learning and the relationship between artistic integration and disciplinary expertise.

5.1. From Artistic Activities to Meaningful Cultural Participation

A central implication concerns the distinction between providing artistic activities and facilitating meaningful artistic participation. From a cultural-historical perspective, artistic knowledge and skills acquire significance through participation in socially situated practices directed towards shared purposes (Connery et al., 2018; Van Oers, 2021). Within Developmental Education, the educational value of music, dance and drama therefore depends not simply on their presence in thematic activities, but on their contribution to children's developing intentions and participation.

The educational designs developed during the project illustrate this distinction. Within *In and Around the Pond*, rhythmic exploration, sound stories and movement were connected to animals, environmental phenomena and developing play narratives. These connections demonstrate how artistic resources can acquire meaning through a cultural motive: a shared purpose that gives direction to participants' activities and choices. However, thematic connections alone do not establish meaningful artistic participation. Children also need opportunities to influence activities, make artistic decisions and use cultural resources to realise their intentions. This interpretation is consistent with Developmental Education's emphasis on active participation rather than the acquisition of disconnected skills (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024).

Integrated artistic practices may support such participation by connecting different expressive possibilities. Music can contribute to dramatic atmosphere, movement can communicate

character and dramatic play can provide reasons for musical exploration. Nevertheless, these disciplines are not interchangeable. Their educational value lies in how their distinctive knowledge, techniques and conventions contribute to shared artistic purposes. Integration and disciplinary specificity should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competing priorities.

5.2. Pedagogical Mediation: Balancing Artistic Expertise and Children's Initiative

A second implication concerns the educator's role in supporting artistic participation. Participants' reported development suggests growing awareness of the value of children's exploration and of introducing artistic resources in response to emerging interests. This corresponds with cultural-historical understandings of pedagogical mediation, in which educators connect children's intentions with culturally developed knowledge and practices (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024; Van Oers, 2021). The pedagogical challenge is not to choose between teacher-directed instruction and child-initiated activity, but to determine which interventions can extend participation. Recognising exploratory sound-making as potentially meaningful, for example, does not eliminate the need for musical guidance. Demonstrating a rhythmic pattern, introducing an instrument or encouraging attentive listening may expand children's expressive possibilities when these interventions serve a developing artistic purpose.

Oreck and Nicoll (2018) distinguish educators' technical expertise from children's ownership of their expressive intentions. Although educators may possess greater artistic knowledge, effective guidance requires sensitivity to what children wish to communicate. Van Oers' (2021) relationship between involvement, rules and degrees of freedom further clarifies this responsibility: artistic conventions provide structure, while opportunities for initiative and experimentation remain essential. The findings suggest that participants began to reconsider the relationship between exploration, modelling and instruction. However, the available documentation does not establish precisely how individual pedagogical interventions changed over time. The contribution of the project is therefore best understood as an indication of developing professional awareness rather than independently demonstrated changes in pedagogical expertise.

5.3. Professional Learning as the Development of Pedagogical Agency

The findings suggest that professional development in the performing arts should extend beyond acquiring activities for classroom use. Although practical workshops can broaden educators' repertoires and increase confidence, meaningful integration requires professional judgement about when and how artistic resources can contribute to children's play.

Nieuwmeijer's (2023) research into professional development in musical play provides a relevant point of comparison. The present study extends this focus by considering music, dance and drama within an integrated framework of Developmental Education. Its collaborative structure connected artistic experimentation with classroom implementation, coaching and reflection, enabling participants to consider how artistic possibilities could be adapted to their educational contexts. These processes can be understood through *pedagogical agency*: educators' capacity to draw on theoretical understanding, artistic knowledge and situated professional judgement when making educational decisions. Professional learning involves expanding the possibilities available for action rather than merely reproducing prescribed exercises.

The relationship between practical experimentation and reflection is particularly important. Workshop experiences introduced artistic resources, classroom implementation created opportunities to explore their relevance, and collaborative discussions enabled participants to reconsider pedagogical decisions. This process reflects the interaction between observation, reflection and action emphasised within Developmental Education (Janssen-Vos et al., 2024). The reported developments suggest that collaborative professional learning may strengthen educators' perceived capacity to make informed artistic and pedagogical choices. The variation between participants further suggests that pedagogical agency should not be understood as a uniform outcome of professional development. Educators entered the programme with different artistic experiences, preferences and levels of confidence. For some, professional learning involved recognising new possibilities within familiar practices; for others, it involved experimenting with a less familiar discipline or reconsidering existing assumptions about artistic competence. Increased awareness did not necessarily lead to changes in classroom implementation. Moreover, opportunities to act on new insights were influenced by collegial support, available resources, preparation time and organisational

priorities. Developing pedagogical agency therefore involves not only expanding individual knowledge and professional judgement but also creating conditions in which educators can translate those capacities into educational action. Nevertheless, confidence and perceived professional growth should not be equated with demonstrated competence. More systematic evidence would be needed to establish how participants' pedagogical decision-making developed throughout the project.

5.4. Integrating Artistic Disciplines Without Losing Their Distinctive Value

The uneven emphasis on music, dance and drama raises an important question about the relationship between interdisciplinary integration and disciplinary depth. Music provided the principal starting point for many activities, while dance and drama were often introduced through connections with musical exploration or thematic play. This approach offered possibilities for integrated artistic experiences, but it also raises the risk that individual disciplines receive insufficient attention. Furthermore, arts education can become primarily instrumental when artistic activities are valued only for their contribution to language, social interaction or other developmental objectives. Van Heusden et al. (2016) offer a relevant perspective by understanding artistic activity as cultural reflection through which individuals interpret and give meaning to experience. From this standpoint, children should encounter music, dance and drama not only as resources for other educational purposes, but also as disciplines with distinctive expressive possibilities, knowledge and conventions. The project illustrates the potential of connecting these disciplines, but the documentation does not establish equivalent development of educators' expertise across all three. Future professional development may therefore benefit from combining interdisciplinary educational design with opportunities for focused artistic exploration. The aim need not be equal representation of every discipline within each play narrative, but meaningful participation in the particular artistic practices relevant to the developing activity.

5.5. Implications for Early Childhood Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development

The findings suggest several implications for initial teacher education and continuing professional development. First, artistic subject knowledge should be connected to meaningful educational contexts. Rather than introducing music, dance and drama exclusively

through separate activities, professional learning can examine how their knowledge and techniques contribute to children's developing play narratives.

Second, accessible opportunities for artistic experimentation may help educators overcome uncertainty about their own competence. Such experiences should be accompanied by attention to the distinctive knowledge and expressive possibilities of each discipline.

Third, professional development should address pedagogical mediation explicitly. Educators need opportunities to consider when to observe, participate, model, question, introduce resources or provide instruction, and how these decisions relate to children's artistic intentions. Finally, collaborative learning deserves sustained attention. The combination of workshops, classroom experimentation, coaching and reflection may offer greater opportunities for contextualised professional learning than isolated training sessions. Organisational support for exchanging practices and jointly developing educational designs may also contribute to sustaining arts education beyond individual initiatives.

These implications point towards professional development that integrates artistic expertise, pedagogical judgement and collaborative inquiry rather than treating them as separate areas of competence.

5.6. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of the findings. The project involved only eleven educational professionals from two settings, limiting the transferability of its conclusions. Moreover, the available evaluation evidence relies substantially on participants' reported experiences and facilitators' interpretations. Although observations and educational designs were documented, the material available for this manuscript does not provide a sufficiently detailed account of the analytical procedures to substantiate every interpretation independently.

Because the programme combined workshops, implementation, coaching and consultation, the contribution of individual components cannot be established. Reported developments should therefore be considered in relation to the programme as a whole. The study also provides no basis for causal claims about children's artistic or broader development. Educators' reports of increased engagement and expression cannot substitute for systematic

assessment of developmental outcomes. Furthermore, music received more attention than dance and drama, limiting conclusions about equivalent professional learning across the disciplines. The documentation also does not establish whether reported changes in practice were sustained beyond the concluding evaluation. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal observations of educators' pedagogical decisions, more systematic examination of children's artistic participation and follow-up studies of professional learning. Comparative research could investigate how discipline-specific and integrated approaches contribute to educators' artistic expertise and pedagogical agency.

5.7. Towards a Cultural-Historical Understanding of Professional Development in the Performing Arts

From a cultural-historical perspective, professional development can be understood as expanding educators' possibilities for meaningful participation and action. Through artistic exploration, educational design and collaborative reflection, educators may develop the knowledge and judgement needed to create opportunities for children's participation in artistic practices. This interpretation connects educators' *pedagogical agency* with children's *artistic agency*. Children require access to cultural resources and opportunities to make meaningful artistic choices; educators require the expertise and professional judgement to make those opportunities available and support their development. The broader significance of professional learning therefore lies not simply in increasing the frequency of artistic activities, but in strengthening educators' capacity to facilitate practices in which children can investigate, create and contribute to shared cultural meanings. The project offers a context-specific illustration of this possibility, while further research is needed to establish its longer-term effects.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how a collaborative, design-based professional development programme could support early childhood educators in integrating music, dance and drama into children's play narratives within Developmental Education. The findings suggest that combining practical artistic exploration, classroom implementation, coaching and collaborative reflection can create opportunities for professional learning, although participants reported differing developments in confidence, pedagogical repertoire and classroom implementation. The

project illustrates how artistic activities can become meaningful components of thematic play when connected to children's shared purposes and developing narratives. From a cultural-historical perspective, the educational significance of such integration lies not simply in combining artistic disciplines, but in enabling children to participate in socio-cultural practices in which musical, physical and dramatic expression serve meaningful intentions. Music, dance and drama offer distinctive cultural resources through which children can explore, communicate and create shared meanings. A central contribution of the study concerns the relationship between educators' pedagogical agency and children's artistic agency. Supporting meaningful artistic participation requires educators who can recognise children's intentions, introduce relevant cultural resources and make informed decisions about the balance between guidance and initiative. Professional development should therefore extend beyond providing artistic activities to strengthening educators' capacity to design, mediate and develop artistic practices within children's play. These conclusions must be interpreted cautiously. The study involved eleven professionals from two educational settings and relied substantially on participants' reported experiences. It does not establish causal effects on children's development or the long-term sustainability of changes in professional practice. Furthermore, music received greater attention than dance and drama.

Nevertheless, the project suggests that collaborative professional learning can provide a promising foundation for arts-enriched play narratives. Its broader educational potential lies in enabling educators and children to become active participants in shared artistic practices, drawing on the cultural resources of music, dance and drama to investigate possibilities, construct meanings and create together.

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