

# An Analysis of the Problems and Challenges in Teaching and Learning Creative Dance as a Pedagogical Tool in Malaysian Preschools

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## Abstract

Creative dance is a Western-based dance pedagogy that aims to provide participants with a creative and artistic dance experience. In the National Preschool Curriculum Standard of Preschool Education 2017, the Ministry of Education Malaysia listed creative movement as a teaching method for enhancing the creativity of preschool children. However, the literature shows that Asian educators encounter problems and challenges when adopting a Western-based pedagogy due to the differences in social-cultural context. This paper intends to study these problems and challenges in the context of creative dance in Malaysian preschools, based on expert perspectives. The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with four local experts from the field of creative dance in preschool. The study found six problems and challenges, which were misconceptions, a lack of teaching resources, resistance to change, negative attitudes, a lack of ability and creativity in giving instructions, and environment and education system. These problems and challenges were caused by two social-cultural factors, which were (1) educational beliefs with different values than creative dance and (2) a learning environment that discourages creative behaviour. The study highlights that there is an urgency to develop a creative dance teacher training module and it must take these factors into account.

**Keywords:** Creative Movement, Creative Dance, Malaysian Preschool, Western-based Pedagogy, Problems and Challenges

## Introduction

Preparing students to acquire 21<sup>st</sup> century skills has become today's worldwide educational trend where the focus of education is not just on the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) but also on the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity). These skills are

recognised as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, where students need these skills to succeed in their future careers (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). In accordance with this trend and to enable Malaysian students to compete globally, the Ministry of Education Malaysia integrated these skills into Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025 (*Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia*, henceforth referred to as PPPM 2013-2025). PPPM 2013-2025 greatly impacts teaching and learning practices at all levels, including preschools. The National Preschool Curriculum Standard 2017 (NPCS 2017) called attention to higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and creativity as the important skills where teaching and learning activities in preschool should be inquiry-based and project-based (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017, p. 1).

Preschool Education is categorised under Malaysia's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Preschool in Malaysia is also known as kindergarten, Tadika or Tabika. It provides education for children aged from four to six years old. There are four types of preschools in Malaysia which are differentiated by their operators: (1) MOE (Ministry of Education) preschools, (2) KEMAS Preschools and (3) PERPADUAN preschools and (4) preschools operated by private sectors and NGOs (Rahmatullah et al., 2021, pp. 5-6). The first three types of preschools are public schools operated and fully funded by the respective ministry and the fourth type of preschool is operated either on a business basis where the parents pay the school fees or are funded by NGOs. MOE Malaysia modulates all these preschools through the NPCS. Although the adoption of the standard is not mandatory, it still serves as an important guideline for all types of kindergartens in Malaysia.

NPCS 2017 listed creative movement as a teaching method for enhancing the creativity of preschool children. The term "creative movement" appeared in the learning standard through the Physical Development and Healthcare as well as Creativity and Aesthetics strand (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017). Although creative movement was listed in NPCS 2017, the annotation of creative movement and how this method should be implemented were not fully established. The terms "creative" and "movement" link creativity in musical activities. Under the Physical Development and Healthcare strand, "create creative movement by using tools according to music" is a learning standard for students five years old and above (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017, p. 82). Under the Creativity and Aesthetic strand, "move creatively according to music" is also a learning standard for students five years old and older (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017, p. 90). Besides these statements in the standard, there is no guidance or example of a lesson plan for the preschool teachers on how to nurture children's creativity through musical activities.

Creative movement or dance is a western-based and student-centred pedagogical approach. It is a new approach to Malaysian educators. Introducing such an approach to an education system means bringing an educational change to that system. New possibilities and challenges will occur from the change, but this study intends to focus on the problems and challenges in adopting this approach. As Fullan (1993) mentioned, an education system is fundamentally conservative because it operates hierarchically and is highly influenced by the political decision-makers, and a change in the system will cause resistance. Therefore, this study intends to explore the problems and challenges, based on expert perspectives, in adopting creative dance as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian preschools.

It is significant to understand the problems and challenges in practising creative dance from the experts' perspectives because experts' insight is informed by their professional knowledge in the field. Four experts were selected as the subject of study. Expert 1 was initially a lecturer in a public university, and currently, she is a creative dance teacher at a performing arts centre. Expert 2 is an experienced creative dance teacher in kindergartens and childcare centres. Expert 3 is a lecturer in a public university, and Expert 4 is an education service officer who teaches creative movement to pre-service teachers in early childhood education. They are the pioneers in promoting creative dance to the local kindergarten communities. Their perspectives will provide a first-hand experience which reveals the real situation in the field.

## **Literature Review**

This section reviews the relevant literature related to the problems and challenges in teaching and learning creative dance as a pedagogical tool. The first subsection explores the meaning of creative movement or dance to understand the origins of creative dance as a western-based pedagogy, its ideology, and the rationale to use it for preschool education. The second subsection continues with an overview of previous studies of creative dance in Malaysia. The last subsection reviews the Asian scholarly studies to identify the problems and challenges in adopting a western-based pedagogical approach.

### *(a) Creative Dance /Movement*

Creative dance originated in the West, where its emergence was influenced by the ideology of modern dance. According to Spiesman (1960), the pioneers of modern dance, Gertrude Colby, Bird Larson, and Margaret Il 'Doubler, have integrated the ideology of modern dance into American education. Their concepts of dance education are the foundation of the creative dance teaching method. Chang (2007) claimed that Gertrude Colby's natural dance concept that emphasises self-expression through personal and free movement, Rudolf von Laban's educational dance envisions providing holistic education through dance, and Laban Movement Analysis, are the three significant influences on the development of creative dance. Besides that, the concepts of "the development of self through dance" by Bird Larson and "appreciation of dance" by Margaret Il 'Double have also influenced the formation of the creative dance pedagogical methods. Today, Laban movement concepts (body, space, time and flow) are the main content of creative dance reference books (see Gilbert, 2015; Lloyd, 2014; Carline, 2011; Chang, 2007).

Creative dance is defined as "a unique self-expressive art form which blends rhythmic movement and aesthetic expression that is selected by the participants to communicate their ideas, thoughts and feelings" (Lloyd, 2014, p. 1). It is a dance pedagogical approach that aims to provide participants with a creative and artistic experience by exploring, creating, performing and appreciating dance movement. Through this process, participants are encouraged to express their ideas, thoughts and feeling through movement expression.

It is rational to include creative dance in education because the creative dance approach achieves four major learning outcomes: cognitive, affective, physical (psychomotor) and social (Gilbert, 1992; Cone & Cone, 2005). "Dance students exercise their cognitive domain when they engage in critical thinking skills and problem-solving that are required to learn sequences, patterns, [and] create dances" (Lloyd, 2014, pp. 7-8). For the affective aspect, children learn

“to make decisions, develop their imaginations, express ideas and feelings, and share with others. The discovery and learning experiences become part of a child’s self- concept and self-esteem” (Cone & Cone, 2005, p. 12). For the psychomotor aspect, they also “gain strength, improve balance, and increase flexibility and coordination through creating movements” (Cone & Cone, 2005, p. 10). For the social aspect, children interact and cooperate with their partners and groups through the process of creating dance (Gilbert, 1992). Mac Donald (1991) affirmed that creative dance can help children reach their full potential and encourages the ‘whole child’ development. She also suggested that creative dance should be integrated into all core subjects.

Through the literature review, the term “creative dance” and “creative movement” are referring to the same teaching method that aims to promote the creativity and artistic expression of oneself through rhythmic movement (Lobo & Winsler, 2006; Kaufmann, 2006, Kaufmann & Ellis, 2007). In this writing, the authors use the term “creative dance” because the term “dance” provides a wider meaning and positions creative dance as an expressive, intentional and aesthetic form. The term “creative movement” still appears due to direct citation or paraphrasing from its source.

#### *(b) Creative Dance in Malaysia*

In Malaysia, the application of creative dance in preschool is still in the infant stage. Although “creative movement” is mentioned in NPCS 2017, so far, there is no systematic teacher training from MOE to prepare preschool teachers in applying creative dance as a pedagogical tool. The dissemination of creative dance is through creative movement or dance subject offered in diploma or degree programme in tertiary institution, or teacher professional development training or workshop. For example, creative dance expert, Marcia L. Lloyd taught creative dance to preschool and kindergarten teachers, preschool children, school administrators, and university students during her visit in 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988 and 1989 (Lloyd, 2014).

From the literature review, the research on creative dance module development or teacher training in Malaysia is limited. To date, only Muhamad and Loy (2017) developed a creative movement module which emphasises drama elements in promoting oral interaction between preschool children between 5 and 6 years of age. Other scholars in Malaysia focus on the advocacy for integrating creative dance into the educational system (Ayob, 1987/1988), and proving the benefits of creative dance for student development, especially in identity consolidation (Saerani, 2011) and for therapeutic aid, especially for special needs children (Backer, 2011).

#### *(c) Challenges and Problems in Adopting a Western-based Pedagogical Tool*

Research found that educators of Asian countries faced problems and challenges in adopting Western-based pedagogies in their local contexts, such as student-centred approach or creative pedagogy. Thanh (2011) stressed that implementing a Western-based pedagogical approach in Asian countries will not necessarily have the same outcomes because the social- cultural values are different. Lin (2014) implemented a drama-based creative teaching project in Taiwan’s local primary schools, which the education ideology is rooted in Confucianism. Although positive feedback was shown among students based on the reasons of enjoyment in class and development in creativity, the research found that both teachers and students doubted and

complained about the practice of the proposed creative pedagogy. The teachers taught that traditional pedagogy is irreplaceable, and there was no serious learning in creative pedagogy. Li and Li (2019) studied the beliefs and practices of in-service kindergarten teachers in Shanghai, China and found a divergence between their beliefs and practice of creative pedagogy. The teachers had strong beliefs on creative pedagogy dimensions but focused less on these dimensions in their practices. In the Malaysian context, Puteh-Behak et al (2015) investigated the implementation of the Multiliteracies Pedagogy in a Malaysian university classroom and found three problems: (1) students tended to reject collaborative-based learning, (2) they lacked the ability to create original works and (3) they lacked critical analysis ability. All these research claimed that social-cultural context was the main factor in the occurrence of these problems and challenges.

From the literature review, it shows that Asian educators encounter problems and challenges when adopting a Western-based pedagogical approach due to social-cultural differences. Creative dance is a Western-based pedagogical tool that aims to fulfil Western countries' educational vision that emphasises freedom, creativity and a student-centred learning environment. There has never been an exploration of how an Asian country like Malaysia can adopt this teaching approach. This study intends to fill this gap.

### **Research Objectives**

The two objectives of this research are:

- (1) To explore the problems and challenges in adopting creative dance as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian preschools.
- (2) To identify the factors for the problems and challenges in adopting creative dance as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian preschools.

### **Methodology**

This study employs an interpretivist perspective to study the status quo of creative dance practice in preschool Malaysia based on experts' perspectives. According to Saunders et al. (2016), interpretivist research sees that the subject's perceptions can contribute to a new understanding of the research topic. Besides that, interpretivist research utilises a qualitative method to run an in-depth investigation on a research topic with a small sample size. Therefore, this study employed the semi-structured interview approach to interview two groups of experts—the field experts and the subject matter experts.

The selection of experts is based on two characteristics suggested by Baker et al (2006): knowledge and experience. The characteristic of knowledge is determined by the experts' qualifications or training background in creative dance or early childhood education. The experience is determined by the experts' expertise and experience in creative dance teaching in preschool. Table 1 shows the details of the selection criteria, and Table 2 describes the attributes of the selected experts for the interviews. This study uses pseudonyms Expert 1, 2, 3 and 4 to represent the four selected experts to protect the privacy and benefits of the participants.

Table 1

*The Description of selection criteria of expert for the interviews*

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Key characteristic      Details of selecting criteria

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|  |   |
|--|---|
| Qualification or training background in creative dance | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Poses qualification in dance or early childhood education.</li><li>2. Received training in creative dance or movement teaching.</li></ol>  |
| Expertise and experience in creative dance teaching    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Involved in creative dance teaching either teaching in preschool or teacher training.</li><li>2. Minimum 5 years of experience in practising creative dance as a pedagogical tool.</li><li>3. Constantly participating in creative dance teaching for preschool children or creative dance teacher training.</li></ol> |

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Table 2

*The list of experts for the interviews with the details of qualification, creative dance training background, experience in creative dance, length of involvement and current position*

| <b>Expert number/<br/>Selecting criteria</b> | <b>Expert 1</b>   | <b>Expert 2</b>  | <b>Expert 3</b>   | <b>Expert 4</b>   |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Qualification                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree in Performing Arts (Dance)</li> <li>• Master of Arts (Performing Arts)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree in Performing Arts (Dance)</li> <li>• Master’s degree in education (Physical Education)</li> <li>• Ballet teaching certificate from RAD</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doctorate in Performing Arts and Visual Arts Studies</li> <li>• Master of Arts (Drama &amp; Theatre)—Field of research: Dance education</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education)</li> <li>• Diploma of Early Childhood Education</li> </ul> |

Table 2 (Continued)

*The list of experts for the interviews with the details of qualification, creative dance training background, experience in creative dance, length of involvement and current position*

| Expert number/<br>Selecting criteria | Expert 1  | Expert 2   | Expert 3   | Expert 4   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Creative dance training background   | She was trained under the creative dance expert Marcia Lloyd  | She was trained under the creative dance expert Marcia Lloyd                     | He was trained under the Malaysian creative movement pioneer Salmah Hj Ayob.   | She was trained under Azhar bin Buhari during her diploma study. She also attended creative movement workshop conducted by Tabika Kemas. |
| Experience of in creative dance      | She was a lecturer at <i>Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Indris (UPSI)</i> , teaching creative dance to diploma students | She is a professional dance teacher in primary school and private kindergarten.  | He has been actively contributing to the education of creative movement for preschool teachers in Malaysia through training workshops by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and creative movement workshops for teachers of Tabika Kemas in the national level. | She has been teaching the subject of Music and Creative Movement to student-teachers of Diploma in Early Childhood Education.            |
| Length of involvement                | 6 years   | 10 years   | 14 years   | 5 years  |
| Current position                     | She is currently a creative dance teacher at Penang Performing Arts Centre  | She is currently teaching creative dance in kindergartens and childcare centres. | He is currently the deputy dean and a lecturer in the Faculty of Music & Performing Arts of UPSI. He is teaching creative dance to diploma students.   | She is currently an education service officer. She is teaching music and creative movement to early childhood diploma students in UPSI.  |

The four selected experts have been practising creative dance in the local kindergarten context for many years. They are field experts (Experts 1 and 2) and subject-matter experts (Experts 3



and 4). Among these four experts, three are experienced in training teachers in utilising creative dance as a pedagogical tool. Their experience and expertise will provide valid input to understand the problems and challenges in adopting creative dance in the Malaysian preschool context.

Experts 1 and 2 are experienced creative dance teachers teaching creative dance to children for more than five years. They learned creative dance from the creative dance expert Marcia Lloyd during their undergraduate study at Universiti Malaya (UM). Expert 1 has six years of creative dance teaching experience. She graduated from UM with a Bachelor in Performing Arts (Dance) and a Master of Arts (Performing Arts). She was a lecturer at *Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris* (UPSI), teaching creative dance to diploma students. Currently, she is a creative dance teacher at Penang Performing Arts Centre. Expert 2 has ten years of creative dance teaching experience. She graduated from UM with a Bachelor in Performing Arts (Dance) and a Master's in Education (Physical Education). She was also awarded a certificate of ballet teaching from RAD (Royal Academy of Dance, United Kingdom). She is a professional dance teacher currently teaching creative dance in kindergartens and childcare centres.

Experts 3 and 4 are lecturers from UPSI. They teach preschool teachers creative movement or creative dance. Expert 3 holds a Doctorate in Performing Arts and Visual Arts Studies. He was trained under the Malaysian creative movement pioneer Salmah Hj Ayob. His field of research for his master's was dance education. He is currently a lecturer in the dance department of UPSI, teaching creative dance to diploma students. He has been actively contributing to the education of creative movement for preschool teachers in Malaysia through training workshops such as *Bengkel Modul Kesedaran Alam Sekitar* organised by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (*Kementerian Sumber Asli dan Alam Sekitar*) and creative movement workshops for teachers of Tabika KEMAS in the national level.

Expert 4 graduated from UPSI with a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education). During her diploma study, she learned creative movement under her lecturer Azhar bin Buhari. She is currently an education service officer (*pegawai perkhidmatan pendidikan*) who has been teaching the subject of Music and Creative Movement to student-teachers of Diploma in Early Childhood Education for five years in UPSI. Her teaching method is based on the integration of drama and creative movement.

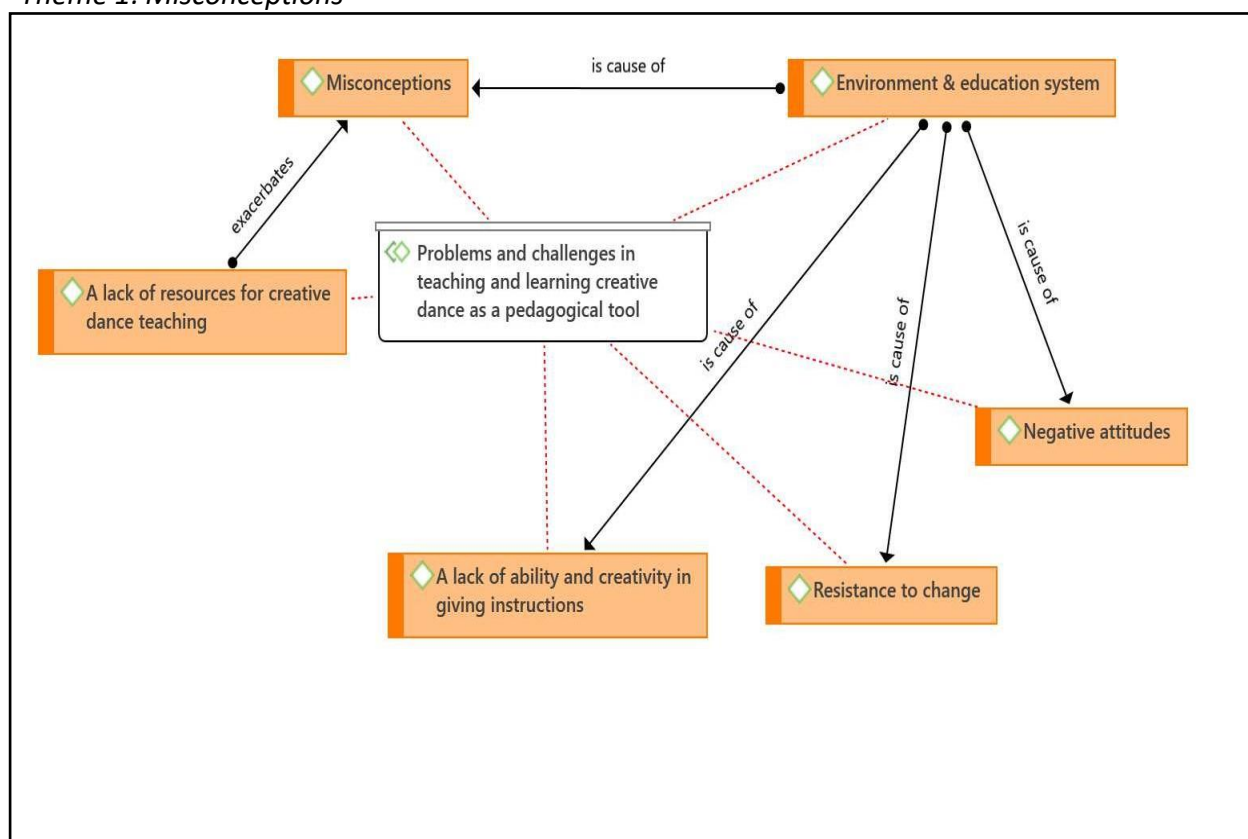
This study employs a thematic analysis approach for data analysis and research software—ATLAS.ti to conduct the data analysis process. This study utilises an inductive coding approach for theme development. All the interviews were transcribed and uploaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis and coding. The output of codes was transformed into diagram format and exported in JPEG format. The findings of the analysis are presented in the following section.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The data was collected from the semi-structured interviews with the four experts. The interviews were conducted through the online video conferencing software Zoom Meeting. Based on the analysis of the interviews, six themes emerged from the topic of problems and challenges in teaching and learning creative dance in the Malaysian preschool context. These

themes represent the problems and challenges of teaching creative dance to student- teachers or practicing creative dance as a pedagogical tool in preschools. Six emerging themes which represent the problems and challenges are (1) misconceptions, (2) a lack of resources in creative dance teaching, (3) a lack of ability and creativity in giving instructions, (4) negative attitudes, and (5) resistance to change, and (6) environment and education system. Figure 1 shows the summary of themes and their relationships.

### Theme 1: Misconceptions



The most challenging situation the experts faced on teaching creative dance as a pedagogical tool in preschools was the misconceptions between teachers and the preschool communities. Two codes that emerged are “misconception of the value of dance education for children” and “misconception of creative behaviour is bad behaviour”.

All four experts claimed that the local teachers and kindergartens still see the purpose of dance education as performance instead of education and child development. When teachers and kindergarten communities approached dance merely for the purpose of performance, they employed the product-based teaching method and neglected the aesthetic aspect. Expert 3 echoed this, saying: “There is another problem with the teachers that they do Zumba for children. It’s not cannot, but where are the aesthetical elements? And most importantly, the teachers emphasised the product instead of the process” (Expert 3, personal communication, 2021).

Expert 1 commented that local preschool teachers lacked an understanding of the benefits of dance for children and they approached dance performance mainly for the parents' entertainment. She shared her observation by saying:

As a parent and teacher, I observed throughout the dance journey that dance in early childhood education is only for the parents' pleasure or the purpose of the school concert. But whether the students have benefitted from the dancing body or whether they have learned anything during the class, I do not think that the teachers understand and are absolutely detached from the true purpose of dance education. (Expert 1, personal communication, 2021)

Another misconception was creative behaviour is bad behaviour. Preschool teachers tended to prioritise class discipline over creative behaviour. They believed it was more important to teach students to be obedient so that the class was always disciplined. In contrast, creative dance that encouraged students to express their enjoyment was always seen as noisy, messy, and not disciplined. This behaviour was seen as bad behaviour and it was not encouraged in kindergarten.

Expert 4 stated that preschool teachers who prioritised class discipline over creative behaviour tended to reject creative dance as a teaching approach because they found it was hard to manage the class. According to Expert 4,

If a teacher wants a class always to be *cantik* (beautiful), not messy and quiet, she might think this method is impossible for her class. She will think it is difficult to handle the children in those activities and need more time to control them. (Expert 4, personal communication, 2021)

Expert 2 faced a similar challenge when conducting a creative dance class in kindergarten because the kindergarten principal could not accept noisy and playful behaviour. She stated, "One time my students got very excited and playful in my dance class, the principal rushed into my class with a cane in her hand and questioned why it was so noisy" (Expert 2, personal communication, 2021).

There are distinctions between teaching dance for education and teaching dance for performance. McCutchen (2006) positioned dance education in the US formal education system based on an arts education perspective. According to McCutchen (2006), dance education from the arts education perspective, aimed to promote students' development in artistic, cognitive, social, and kinesthetic aspects and it should be taught student-centred. Smith-Autard (1997) distinguished dance for education and dance for performance by listing out the characteristics for these two types of teaching model. He termed dance for education "Educational Model" and dance for performance "Professional Model". The Educational Model is a more "open" and "child-centred" approach with an "emphasis on the process of dance and its affective/experiential contribution to participant's overall development as a moving/being", while Professional Model aimed "to produce highly skilled dancers and theatrically defined dance products for presentation to audiences" (Smith-Autard, 1997, p. 4). Issues may occur when there is a lack of awareness between these two concepts and when preschools employ the Professional Model in an educational setting. For example, Liu (2009) claimed that employing the Professional Model in teaching dance for children in Taiwanese kindergartens has impacted the children negatively. The teaching method of the Professional

Model, which aimed to produce well-rehearsed movement through repetitive practices, might have limited the creative development of children.

### **Theme 2: A Lack of Resources for Creative Dance Teaching**

Another major problem faced by teachers in teaching and learning creative dance as a pedagogical tool is a lack of resources. Three experts revealed that the resources for creative dance or movement teaching were very limited in Malaysia. Expert 3 reported that there was no guideline to support teachers to teach creatively and there was a guideline to teach creative dance but it was very brief. He said,

Currently we do not have guidelines for teachers to be creative when teaching creative dance. [...] In 2020, before the outbreak of Covid, there is another workshop with about 20 KEMAS teachers in Perak, they also felt that what they get from the KEMAS guidelines are very limited, for example, the guideline would only say teacher needs to sing a particular song, but without reason or how movements can be applicable to the song. (Expert 3, personal communication, 2021)

Expert 4 stated that she was still constantly looking for a guideline to teach student- teachers in the early childhood education program. She claimed that “there is no guideline for teachers. It will be good if there is guideline be created for us to teach” (Expert 4, personal communication, 2021).

Expert 2 observed that the lack of resources for creative dance was the reason in-service teachers tended to source their materials online and their dance content was taught through teacher-centred approach merely for the purpose of performance in school concert. Quoting Expert 2 observation,

The in-service teachers are normally teaching dance based on the materials they got from Youtube. They don't have a dance class. They just have concert preparation. The concert preparation mostly takes 2 to 3 months. The kids learn and repeat the dance movement from Youtube endlessly. In some cases, the kids do not learn from the teachers but learn right away from the Youtube video. (Expert 2, personal communication, 2021)

This finding is consistent with the point mentioned in the literature review where creative dance modules or creative dance training for preschool teachers in Malaysia is limited. This problem reveals that the guidelines about the application of creative movement in NPCPS 2017 is too general and not sufficient in supporting preschool teachers to adopt creative dance or movement as a new pedagogy. This implies the lack of the teaching resources is also one of the reasons that exacerbates teachers' misconceptions of dance or creative dance.

### **Theme 3: A Lack of Ability and Creativity in Giving Instruction**

Another problem faced by student-teachers in teaching creative dance was they lacked ability and creativity in giving instruction. According to Expert 3, student-teachers were rigid and lack interaction skills and creativity when it came to teaching creative dance. They found difficulty in executing an instruction that could lead to creativity and tended to do too much and left no space for children to explore their creativity. Below are extracts that support his arguments:

The teaching of creative movement is all about instruction to guide the children on how to be creative. Things like that are difficult. [...] The first is the ability for execution. The second is the interaction skill, and the third is the idea to create instruction. These are lacking. For example, if it is to roar like a tiger, the teacher could just tell the students to roar like a tiger. There are other ways, but the ways the teachers used are rigid, and they right away (directly) to give the instruction. [...] In Malaysia, we (teachers) did a lot for the children. We forget to let the children explore. (Expert 3, personal communication, 2021)

The situation of lacking ability and creativity in giving instructions among preschool teachers is like a problem found in Puteh-Behak et al (2015), where Malaysian university students lacked critical thinking skills and ability in creating original works because of a “copy- paste” culture. Puteh-Behak et al (2015) proposed that this was caused by a student learning culture that emphasises a teacher-centred approach which does not encourage students to think but expecting teachers to be the primary source to provide them knowledge. This implies that lacking creativity is a common problem for Malaysian students, and the findings of this study further suggest that when these students grow up to be teachers, they either have difficulty in giving instruction that promotes creativity or do not see the necessity in promoting creativity in classrooms. This explains why creative dance experts faced challenges in teaching creative dance to student-teachers in Malaysia, which will be discussed in the next two sections.

#### **Theme 4: Negative Attitudes**

Three experts claimed that they found difficulty to teach creative movement or dance to student-teachers because of student-teachers’ negative attitudes. Expert 4 observed that some of her student-teachers did not see the necessity in promoting children’s creativity and they preferred to employ a teacher-centred approach rather than a child-centred one like creative dance. As Expert 4 said:

Some felt that as long as they could teach ABC, that is enough, but not in a fun way. [...] And then one more thing is when we want the movement to be movement A, movement A must be the only movement. Children are not allowed to change the movement. Creative movement is dependent on the child. If the child wants to do movement A creatively, we should not force him (Expert 4, 2021)

Expert 2 and 4 shared that another negative attitude among student-teachers was shyness and unwillingness to move their body during the training session. According to them, the student-teachers’ perception of dance, body shape and their relationship with the instructor affected student-teachers’ attitudes and performance in the training sessions.

Expert 2 observed that some teachers thought they were not qualified to teach dance because they did not have the flexibility and nice body shape like the dancers on the television programmes (Kindergarten creative dance teacher, personal communication, 2021). Besides that, the gap between the instructor and the student-teachers was also the factor that affected student-teachers’ attitudes. Expert 4’s personal experience as a student- teacher helped us understand why student-teachers were unwilling. Quoting her story

Like me, I have a big body size. When I was first learning creative movement, I felt shy to move my body. One reason is that my lecturer was a male. How to say? There is always a gap

between lecturer and students at the beginning. The gap will make the students worried and shy. If we can break the gap and make them feel that the lecturer and students are together, they will think that the lecturer can also be my friend then the shyness will disappear (Expert 4, personal communication, 2021)

The findings stated above suggest that student-teachers' attitudes in a creative dance teacher training are determined by their pedagogical beliefs that they are accustomed to and their perception of teacher-student relationships. If a student-teacher believes that the existing approach is the best way of teaching, it is difficult for them to accept a new pedagogical approach because the new approach might have value that goes against their existing beliefs. Lin (2014)'s case study of the attitudes of a Taiwanese teacher supports this argument. According to Lin (2014), the Taiwanese teacher hesitated to accept a creative pedagogical approach because the teaching approach emphasised enjoyment and exploration and neglected the serious learning, which was the emphasis in traditional learning.

Student perceptions of teacher-student relationships is the key factor that affects the active participation of students in class. Puteh-Behak et al (2015) claimed that the teacher-student relationship in Malaysia is based on a hierarchical structure (teachers are superior), and this affected the students' willingness to express themselves in front of the teacher. Their findings are consistent with the facts found in this study where the gap between the lecturer and student-teachers made them hesitate from actively participating, but the situation in a dance class where it involves student-teachers' perception of their dancing body is more complex. The perception of the dancing body as a professional dancer's body or the gaze of lecture who is the opposite sex may give student-teachers more reasons to hesitate in participating actively in dance training sessions.

#### **Theme 5: Resistance to Change**

Another challenge in teaching creative dance to student-teachers faced by Expert 1 was their resistance to change their teaching practice especially in a real-life setting. Expert 1 discovered that there were differences in student-teachers' performances in creative dance training sessions and real-life settings. The student-teachers were more open and creative in their training sessions but became rigid in the real classroom. Expert 1 continued,

Differences can be seen with my undergrad students. When they had the creative dance class with me, they were more open to creativity and fun, but when they had to create a lesson plan for their own class (practicum session with children), they were more careful. They tended to use the way they were familiar, the way they were taught. (Expert 1, 2021)

Expert 1 thought that the resistance to change in teaching practice was caused by the student-teachers learning experiences and the education system, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **Theme 6: Environment and Education System**

The analysis from interview found that environment and education system was the main cause of problems and challenges in teaching and learning creative dance in the Malaysian preschool context. Expert 1 stressed that the environment and education system shaped the student-



teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching dance, which caused resistance to creative dance as a new pedagogical approach. According to her,

It was true that the lack of teaching experience affected the way they teach improvisation, or maybe they were worried that the children would be out of control. But a lot of it was also because this was exactly how they were being taught when they were younger and wanted to be in control. [...] I think it is a reflection of our training background and how the education system is structured, including our learning experience in kindergarten, primary school and secondary school. (Expert 1, 2021)

Expert 1 reflected that the Malaysian environment and education system still accustomed to teacher-centred and product-based pedagogy, especially in dance teaching. This was also the reason of the misconceptions of the value of dance education for children and that of creative behaviour as bad behaviour. She shared,

Like I myself, I learned ballet since I was very young. But after I learned contemporary dance in my degree program, I would never want to do ballet again. This is because I like dancing and the only dance that I know is ballet, but my body shape and ability doesn't fit the aesthetic of the dance form. My dance learning was aimed to fulfil the aesthetic. It's like our education system. It is always to fulfil a standard. (Expert 1, 2021)

Besides that, she also thought that the environment and education system was the main factor that determined the success of the changes in student-teachers' practice. The acceptance of creative dance among the student-teachers relied on how the environment and education system values creativity and freedom of students. Promoting creative pedagogy in a subject is not sufficient to bring changes in student-teachers' practice. She shared,

I think that it is not I didn't teach creative dance subject well or my students didn't do well in my class. It's because the concept of creative dance didn't exist in our system. It only exists in the subject. When the course is done, the students return to the other dance classroom, when they do something wrong in their dance movement, they will get scolded; If they say something wrong in their theory class, they will get thrown by a book [*sic*]. We didn't have an environment to sustain such a pedagogy method. So, building an environment is very important (Expert 1, 2021)

Expert 1's comment revealed that the Malaysian educational environment did not encourage creative behaviour that allows students to explore and make mistakes and to be free in expressing their thoughts and feelings either through movement or speaking. Her comment was supported by Expert 2's statement that creativity and freedom of movement were not encouraged in kindergarten. Stated below is her teaching experience in a Chinese kindergarten:

Chinese school students are not open to play and explore because their teachers of other subjects use a cane in their class. So, when they come to your class, you say: "Come on everybody, shake your body", no one would dare to do so. They would stand there looking at you doing the shaking because the teachers from other subjects are too serious. (Expert 2, personal communication, 2021)

Besides that, Expert 4 also claimed that she faced the same situation in Malay kindergartens as well as in the neighbourhood and home. Quoting her story:

Our culture is different when it comes to education; everything has to be quiet and controlled. But if I were to have a kindergarten, I would love the children to have excitement and mess in the school. It is not a problem. Let them explore. I want it to be noisy and messy so that children can explore. I want the kindergarten to be far away from the neighbourhood so that they will not be complained [*sic*]. If it is near the neighbourhood, you cannot play music loudly or make noise, then how? The children are stressed. They are not allowed to play music loudly because the parents would not allow it. After all, they (the parents) are tired. And the same thing also happens in school, can you imagine how their life is? This might happen to a lot of us. Like me, I needed to stay quiet at school; luckily, I was staying with my grandmother (Expert 4, personal communication, 2021)

Under the theme of environment and education system, the analysis of the experts' opinions identifies two social-cultural factors that contribute to problems and challenges in teaching and learning creative dance. The first factor is the educational belief of a product-based, examination-based or teacher-centred pedagogy. The second factor is the learning environment that does not encourage creative behaviour. The educational belief of a product-based pedagogy leads to the misconception that the purpose of dance education is merely for performance and neglects child development. The examination-based education system does not encourage students to think creatively. Therefore, student-teachers who come out from the examination-based education system lack ability and creativity in giving instructions and prefer to use a teacher-centred approach. Besides that, a learning environment that does not encourage creative behaviour causes them to resist a change in their practice to creative dance, even though they were trained to teach creatively.

This implies that the Malaysian Ministry of Education intends to promote creative movement as a pedagogical tool to benefit the development of children but implanting creative movement in the standard (NPCS 2017) is not sufficient to bring change in preschool teachers' practice. Although Neuman et al (2015) claimed that teachers with higher qualification or more training are more likely to accept a child-centred approach (p. 23), the findings of this study suggest that short-term creative dance training might not be able to change preschool teachers' practice in the long term when they return to their teaching environment. Scholars suggested that Asian educators should explore new creative pedagogy models through contextualising Western-based pedagogies (Lin, 2014) or modifying the principles of Western-based pedagogies to become culturally appropriate to Asian countries (Thanh, 2011). Hence, this study proposes that there is an urgency to develop creative dance educational programmes and teaching materials for Malaysian preschool teachers and communities which take social-cultural factors into account and lead student-teachers to discover the benefits of creative dance and the value of creativity for children.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, among the six themes that emerged from this study, the theme of misconceptions is the major one. The misconception of education as performance caused Malaysian preschools to still employ a product-based teaching method and neglect child development needs. On the other hand, the misconception of creative behaviour as bad



behaviour caused the rejection of creative dance among Malaysian preschool teachers and communities. These misconceptions also caused experts to face three instructional problems and challenges in teaching creative dance to student-teachers, which were negative attitudes, resistance to change, and a lack of ability and creativity in giving instructions.

Two social-cultural factors for the problems and challenges are the educational belief in a product-based, examination-based or teacher-centred pedagogy and a learning environment that does not encourage creative behaviour. In addition, the lack of teaching guidelines and resources for creative dance was also the reason that exacerbated teacher misconceptions of dance or creative dance.

We can conclude that the guideline regarding the application of creative movement in NPCS 2017 is too brief and insufficient in supporting Malaysian preschool teachers to adopt creative movement or dance as a pedagogical tool in their classrooms. A clearer guideline as well as a teacher training module and teaching materials for creative dance are needed to support local teachers in adopting this pedagogical approach.

The social-cultural factors identified in this study have three implications on the professional development of creative dance teachers. First, the development of a creative dance teacher training module must take social-cultural factors into account. Second, the module has to address how to change their existing beliefs and fix their misconceptions by leading them to discover the benefits of creative dance and the value of creativity for children. Third, the dissemination of the benefits of creative dance and the value of creativity should not be restricted to the teachers who teach dance, it should also reach teachers of other subjects and principals as well as parents and kindergarten communities. A change in educational beliefs has to go beyond teachers and the field of dance to bring about success in promoting creativity in the Malaysian education system as a whole.

This research extends prior studies to explore the problems and challenges in adopting creative dance specifically in preschool Malaysia and identifies the factors for the problems and challenges. Theoretically, this research adds new factors for consideration in future studies, which are teachers' perceptions of their dancing bodies, dance education, and creative behaviour. Future studies may confirm these findings with bigger sample size or quantitative research methodology. Contextually, this research identifies the key causes of teachers' misconceptions of dance or creative dance as limited teaching materials and ambiguity in NPCS 2017 and recommends that the education of creative dance should happen within the kindergarten communities. These findings contribute to the knowledge for teacher education research and policy making in the future.

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