

New research shows dance and movement therapy can increase emotional and social intelligence in middle school students

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Screenshot of a dance and movement therapy session with students. Credit: Nalini Prakash, Ph.D.

Bullying is the [most common](#) manifestation of violence in schools. With globalization and immigration increasing classroom diversity in schools across the United States, ethnic bullying—bullying that targets another's

ethnic background or cultural identity, including racial taunts/slurs and insulting references to culturally specific customs, foods, clothing, and accents and as well as exclusion from peer groups—has [increased](#).

Nalini Prakash, Ph.D., an assistant clinical professor in Drexel University's College of Nursing and Health Professions, developed a specialized dance and [movement](#) therapy (DMT) program to meet the unique needs of youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to foster a sense of community and connection. This research is the first to address ethnic bullying through DMT.

Recently published in [Social Sciences & Humanities Open](#), qualitative results showed DMT had a positive impact on empathy, peer relationships and cultural self-efficacy scores.

"Although the quantitative data did not show any significant increase or decrease in empathy, peer relationships, and cultural self-efficacy scores over time, participants reported that DMT fostered empathy, positive peer relationships, and cultural self-efficacy within cross-cultural contexts," said Nalini.

She added that participants noted improvements in intra- and interpersonal connections, increased emotional and social intelligence including empathy, and improved cross-cultural peer relationships, and participants achieved greater multicultural awareness, an understanding of different worldviews, and an openness to others who were different from themselves.

"Participants also reported being able to integrate the skills learned from the program into their everyday lives," said Nalini. "This validates the efforts of dance/movement therapists, like myself, who consistently strive for these results with clients."

Nalini's research focuses on violence prevention and examines the impact of dance/movement therapy (DMT) on interpersonal development, empathy, peer relationships, and cultural self-efficacy among racially and ethnically diverse middle school students, particularly in the context of ethnic bullying.

Students in three racially and ethnically diverse middle schools in the Washington D.C. and Philadelphia areas, including private, public, and [charter schools](#), participated in 10 weekly, 50-minute dance and movement therapy sessions. The students provided qualitative feedback at the end of each session and participated in interviews when the program ended to share their experiences.

The sessions included activities related to the weekly theme designed to support empathy and relationship building. Music was selected based on the theme of the session or on the preferences of the participants.

Sessions started with a verbal check-in supported by movement representing participants' current mood, followed by a semi-structured warm-up, a main activity including creative/expressive movement interactions, and ended with a cool down and group discussion.

- Week 1 "Getting to know each other" activities included introductions using verbal and gestural cultural greetings and creation of group safety rules.
- Week 2 "Body awareness" activities included body scan and embodying rhythm of the drum to bring awareness to bodily sensations.
- Week 3 "Self-compassion" activities included loving kindness meditation and building self-confidence through movement to enhance self-compassion.
- Week 4 "Understanding my emotions" activities included emotions charades, freeze dance, and the [4 B's of self-settling](#)

(Brakes, Breathe, Brain, Body) to enhance emotional awareness and emotional regulation.

- Week 5 "Spatial awareness" activities included establishing individual space bubbles to bring awareness to the use of space in relation to others.
- Week 6 "Reaching out, making connections" activities included embodied self-expression and mirroring movement in pairs to build connections.
- Week 7 "Understanding emotional expression of others" activities included mirroring each other's emotions and having an embodied conversation to enhance emotional understanding of others.
- Week 8 "Respectful exchanges" activities included group dance choreography using rhythm and music to enhance respectful communication.
- Week 9 "Compassion in action/finding common ground" activities included creative movement in groups, flocking like birds, and loving kindness meditation to build compassion for others.
- Week 10 "Mutual support" activities included dancing down the path of encouragement with [peer support](#) and building a group sculpture to encourage mutual support.

Student participants completed the surveys assessing empathy, peer relationships and cultural self-efficacy at weeks 1, 5 and 10. Survey results were analyzed to examine any changes in empathy, peer relationships and cultural self-efficacy over the 10 weeks.

"Key elements of DMT such as mirroring or empathic movement reflection, and rhythmic movement likely played an important role in developing group cohesion among the participants, resulting in positive psychosocial outcomes," said Nalini. "This study enhances existing research in the fields of DMT and education, particularly in violence

prevention programs that target bullying."

She noted that the findings provide a foundation for dance/movement therapists to inform their clinical practice and future research with this population. Additionally, since movement is the primary form of nonverbal communication, DMT can be particularly effective in diverse school settings where cultural differences and language barriers impede socialization.

"Incorporating embodied and creative arts-based approaches such as DMT into school-based violence prevention programs across the U.S. could strengthen these initiatives by offering nonverbal and creative methods to cultivate empathy and build positive cross-cultural peer relationships," said Nalini.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge to the recruitment and execution of the study by limiting the recruitment process to a small sample and reducing the program length from 12 to 10 weeks. Nalini hopes this study inspires additional research with larger sample sizes and extended program duration, and including a control group in future studies that could strengthen the validity of the findings.

"I hope school systems will incorporate DMT on a weekly basis throughout the school year as requested by the participants," said Nalini.

According to participant feedback, the program not only supported their psychosocial and emotional learning but also helped alleviate academic stress, enabling better concentration in the classroom. Nalini said regular inclusion of DMT in schools could offer students a unique opportunity to explore cross-cultural [peer relationships](#) through dance and movement while enhancing their psychosocial and academic skills.

More information: Nalini Prakash et al, Examining the impact of

dance/movement therapy on empathy, peer relationships, and cultural self-efficacy in middle school: A mixed methods study, *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100998](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100998)

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