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‘There is no right or wrong way’: exploring expressive dance assignments in physical education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has indicated that an aesthetic perspective on movement is lacking in physical education and that exploratory teaching assignments are rare.

Purpose: The aim of the paper is to explore how PE teachers approach the issue of teaching expressive dance and which learning processes students are involved in while dancing.

Participants, research design and data collection: Sixty-eight students from three different secondary school classes and four PE teachers at one municipal school in Sweden participated in a pedagogical intervention. A dance education unit built around Rudolf Laban’s framework of movement was video recorded. Careful attention was paid to ethical considerations.


Findings: Most transactions occurring during the dance unit were interpreted as narrow transactions, meaning that the students’ actions followed responses to the teachers’ initiation of a dance assignment. Expanded transactions occurred when the students were given the opportunity and responsibility to find their own solutions to dance assignments. This is interpreted as leading to an expanded purpose, which involves new ways of moving. Interrupted transactions, i.e. when actions were stopped and no encounters occurred, were observed in the form of students hesitating or avoiding participation. Teaching methods involving a certain degree of risk enable creative and non-predetermined movements. The use of unfamiliar music avoided a reproduction of stereotypical dance styles. Dimmed lighting in the sports hall and the opportunity to work in separate rooms helped the students negotiating environmental risks by attending to the organisation and aesthetics of the space.

Conclusions: Expressive dance assignments can take teaching in PE in new and expanded directions. The teachers programmed gradually more risks.

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Expressive dance; pedagogical intervention; physical education; risk; transaction

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The students developed new ways of expressing themselves and were able to focus on the meaning of the movements. Expressive dance assignments are well suited to an exploratory method of teaching and this interplay can challenge existing logics of competition and ranking in PE.

Introduction

For many years and in many countries dance has been a compulsory content of school physical education (PE) (Buck 2006; Sanderson 1996). However, the position of dance is contested and, in the main, little time is devoted to it (MacLean 2007; Mattsson and Lundvall 2015). A body of research argues that PE teachers are not only insecure about teaching dance and which content to use, but also frequently avoid teaching it (Goodwin 2010; Lundvall and Meckbach 2008; Zavatto and Gabbei 2008). However, MacLean (2018) notes an increase in dance provision in school when PE teachers share the teaching goals and work collaboratively around planning and teaching. When dance is presented in PE it mainly seems to consist of reproducing certain dance steps and dance styles in a decontextualised and technical manner (see e.g. Quennerstedt 2013). This reflects what Kirk has termed ‘physical education-as-sport-techniques’, which highlights that teaching in PE is based on the idea that the practice of decontextualized techniques, mainly in different sports, will improve students’ abilities to participate in movement culture in the future (Kirk 2010). The view of ability as techniques may explain why dance seems to transfer its aesthetic values into becoming just any physical activity in PE.

It may seem surprising that aesthetic and expressive aspects of movement are rarely connected to dancing in PE, although in an historical perspective ‘dance as expression’ held a strong position during the 1960s, at least in the Swedish PE curriculum (Mattsson and Lundvall 2015). However, moving aesthetically with grace and elegance was primarily for girls and regarded as something feminine. After the 1980s and the introduction of co-education in Swedish PE curricula, aesthetic and expressive aspects of the movement were marginalised. This development may explain why most dance education in Swedish PE is about dance techniques that are linked to a functional perspective of movement.

Contemporary dancing in PE is predominantly about learning a dance, rather than learning to dance. At the same time, dance is sometimes taught differently. Larsson and Karlefors (2015) draw attention to how boys and girls sometimes deliberate and create their own dances. On these occasions, instead of instructing the correct technique, teachers encourage students to compose a choreography in which aesthetic and expressive aspects of movement are emphasised. Here, the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator. This indicates that dance may support embodied learning in PE and possibly allow for more student-centred teaching methods (Karlefors and Larsson 2018). However, as many teachers feel uncertain about how to teach dance in this fashion, and because teacher education does little to help fairly unexperienced student teachers to become proficient dance educators, we wonder how this creative and deliberative teaching method could be supported.

In an attempt to understand the teaching of expressive dance in PE, this study uses a pedagogical intervention to investigate teacher and student learning during an expressive dance unit. The aim is to explore how PE teachers approach the issue of teaching expressive dance and which learning processes students are involved in during the dance unit.

Theoretical background

Our theoretical approach is based on American educationalist John Dewey’s transactional perspective of learning, i.e. a perspective in which learning is seen as the outcome of encounters between people and the environment. The term experience is central in this perspective, in that it comprises
the person experiencing and what is being experienced and is the way in which living organisms access reality (Dewey 1920; 1934/2005; 1938/1997). Dewey and Bentley (1949/1991) describe the term transaction as a dynamic, reciprocal process of interplay, through which both organisms and surroundings are impacted and changed. Transaction means, a double relation where both individuals and environment change as a result of encounters. Dewey and Bentley (1949/1991) emphasize that we are always in motion and involved in ongoing dynamic transactions with the surrounding. It is important to comprehend the historical, cultural and social context in which learning takes place, because what is learned is not isolated, but always contextual. According to Quennerstedt, Öhman, and Öhman (2011), a transactional perspective of learning is valuable for understanding PE when it comes to exploring learning through physical actions. In this paper, we use practical epistemological analysis (PEA) as an analytical tool to highlight different kinds of transactions. PEA is based on Dewey’s pragmatist approach and includes the terms ‘gaps’, ‘relations’ and ‘encounters’. Gaps can be explained as the participants’ expressions of a need for new relations (Wickman and Östman 2002). Encounters should be understood as what is actually happening in a situation and it includes earlier experiences. Encounters take place if gaps are filled with relations that lead towards a purpose. When gaps are not filled with relations, and the action leads away from a purpose, no encounters take place. When a gap occurs the participants need to solve and reconsider the situation (Wickman and Östman 2002). If the students in this study explore and create new actions that are more nuanced, as for example more body parts are involved in movements or the music and the movement are more intertwined, an encounter has arisen and learning in relation to the purpose.

Our preliminary analyses indicated that creativity and aesthetic values were foregrounded when teachers endeavoured to offer students open and unpredictable situations during the lessons. Based on this insight we turned to Gert Biesta’s conceptualisation of the term risk to the forefront of a critical pedagogical practice. This is a way of highlighting how teachers are important and have something to offer, although there are no guarantees for what students learn, or how. This paper deals with the teacher’s role in broadening their students’ life-worlds. When Biesta (2013) refers to risk, it is not about students failing to learn, but rather the opposite. The risk of teaching is about how teachers let go and create prerequisites for the challenges of transactions in open and unpredictable situations that can spearhead learning in new ways. According to Biesta (57), the involvement of risk gives students opportunities to challenge themselves and not avoid ‘difficult questions and inconvenient truths’.

In Biesta’s interpretation students are not objects to fill with knowledge but instead seen as active subjects who are engaged in actions. Expressive dance is chosen as learning content in this paper as a possible counterweight in PE to movement activities with pre-established movement patterns that are to be reproduced by the students. Pre-established movement patterns are often linked to social norms of different sorts. For instance, Gard (2003; 2006) stresses that dance in PE could be a way of problematising different (gendered) ways of moving and offer students possibilities to step out of their comfort zones. The term risk is mainly used in relation to the didactic situations in the paper. Also, students have to negotiate risks if they move in new and in this context unusual ways and in this way broaden their life-world. To explore how PE teachers approach the issue of teaching expressive dance and which learning processes students are involved in while dancing the paper addresses the following research questions:

- Which transaction processes occur in didactic situations in the dance unit?
- How do teachers programme risk-taking into their lessons in the unit and how do students negotiate risks?

**Method**

Because expressive dance is unusual in contemporary PE, a pedagogical intervention was designed and implemented in three secondary school classes. The pedagogical intervention was documented...
and subsequently analysed from a transactional perspective of learning. Below we will present, first, how the pedagogical intervention was planned and implemented, and secondly how data from the intervention was generated and analysed.

**The pedagogical intervention: design and participants**

The pedagogical intervention involved planning a dance unit that included expressive dance assignments with four secondary school PE teachers. The dance unit was designed collaboratively by one of the researchers and the four teachers. The dance artist and choreographer Rudolf Laban’s BESS concept (Laban 1948/1988) formed the basis of the design. According to Buck (2006) and Vertinsky (2015), Laban’s educational ideas of dance have had a great impact on PE curricula in the western world. It provides a framework with which expressive dance can be both developed and discussed.

The BESS concept consists of four interrelated aspects, **Body, Effort, Space** and **Shape** (Laban 1948/1988). The **body** aspect considers what the body does. The **effort** aspect focuses on how the body moves, which is understood as the inner core of a movement. The four effort components are weight (light/strong), time (sudden/sustained), space (direct/indirect) and flow (free/bound) as expressive qualities of movements. The **space** aspect is about where movements are performed, i.e. at different levels, directions and planes. Finally, the **shape** aspect is intertwined in both body and space (Laban 1948/1988). Laban’s idea was that all movements are dynamic and always in a process. Teaching based on the BESS framework focuses on students’ experiences of and relations to different ways of creating movements as a way of expressing feelings and thoughts. It should be noted that Laban’s framework was used in the design of the dance unit in the pedagogical intervention and not explicitly as an analytical tool. **Table 1** shows the overall content of the dance unit.

**Participants**

Four licenced PE teachers, one female and three male participated in the study. The female teacher had a long experience of teaching and the three male teachers had only worked a few years as teachers. The PE teachers were qualified but had no specific dance training in addition to their Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE). The teachers’ preparations for the dance unit commenced in May 2013 and the dance unit extended from early November until end of December the same year. The preparations included a presentation of the research project, readings of and discussions about dance literature and scientific articles, workshops with various components of artistic dancing and cooperation with The Skåne (regional) Dance Theatre which gave the teachers inspiration to create the dance unit. Sixty-eight students (aged 14–15 years) from three different secondary school classes (8x, 8y and 9z) in one municipal school in a city in southern Sweden volunteered to participate in the study. The classes were selected by the teachers and consisted of 68 students, in total 28 girls and 40 boys.

**Table 1.** The dance unit in schematic description of the lessons.

| Lesson 1 | Introduction to the dance unit. Play, rhythm and moving individually or adapting to partners and different music styles. |
| Lesson 2 | Shape processes in movements and space. Work on creating new movements based on an original dance. |
| Lesson 3 | Themes concerned with awareness of the body. Attention to isolated and overall movements and a focus on different body parts. |
| Lesson 4 | Themes concerned with space orientation. Focus on the personal and general space. Awareness of directions, levels and planes. |
| Lesson 5 | Effort components or moods of movements: weight, space and time. |
| Lesson 6 | Students create their own choreographies. |
| Lesson 7 | Students create their own choreographies. |
| Lesson 8 | Student performances. |
**Data generation and analysis**

While the teachers led the lessons during the dance unit, the researcher was involved in data generation. Interactions between teachers, students and content are complex. In view of this, video observations were used to allow for a repeated viewing of the dance lessons (Öhman and Quennerstedt 2012). The data comprised approximately 48 h of film from two cameras. One camera was placed in a corner of the sports hall to capture a general impression of the activity taking place. The other was a hand-held camera used by the researcher to record selected events and actions in more detail (cf. Quennerstedt et al. 2014).

The analysis focused on transactions in didactical situations and risk-taking in teaching in the dance unit. Öhman and Quennerstedt (2012) emphasise the importance of analysing the empirical material based on the research questions, and that the researcher’s focus and earlier experiences are crucial. Video recordings can only produce selective data, but allow repeated viewings of video clips and selection of sequences (Table 2).

In line with Dewey’s (1938/1997) perspective, interactions and situations in this study are understood as inseparable. Didactic situations were selected from video observations if they were discerned as playing an important role in the teaching (cf. Quennerstedt et al. 2014), i.e. that patterns of action were altered as a result of interactions between teacher and students. The coded didactic situations were analysed based on practical epistemology analysis, or PEA (Wickman and Östman 2002; see also Quennerstedt 2013). As was outlined above, practical epistemological analysis (PEA), including the terms gaps, relations and encounters, was used in this study to explore transactions during the dance unit. In the context of this paper, narrow transactions designate that students’ actions lead towards a narrow purpose of an assignment. The students fill the gaps with relations, and encounters lead towards the purpose of the assignment but they used a limited repertoire from Laban’s BESS concept. It could be illustrated by a student trying to solve a dance assignment without hesitating and when the movements are ongoing without interruptions. Expanded transactions designate that students move beyond the teacher’s invitations and extend possible solutions using a rich repertoire according to Laban’s BESS concept. Interrupted transactions occur when students do not fill the gaps with relations and their actions lead away from the purpose. There are no encounters in relation to the dance assignment. This could be illustrated by a student doing nothing in a dance assignment and just watching what the classmates are doing.

The concept of risk (Biesta 2013) is utilised in the study to explore how teachers’ pedagogical methods interact with the environment in the pedagogical intervention. When teachers use risk in their teaching they become more of a sounding board rather than defining the outcomes; it implies exploratory tasks and open solutions. When they incorporate risk they do not use instructions for specific movements or dance steps and there is little control of students’ actions and solutions. The teachers thus create a situation in which students assume responsibility for their actions and do something beyond what they already know and are familiar with. In the dance unit, the teachers initiate a dance assignment where the purpose is to express and embody feelings and thoughts through dancing. In this paper, the didactic situations selected from the video observations reflect an important role for the teaching purpose.

**Ethical considerations**

Wright and ÓFlynn (2012) emphasise the importance of protecting the participants and identifying possible harmful risks. All participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Number of lessons</th>
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that they could withdraw at any time. Video observations require careful considerations and PE lessons include special ethical issues (Quennerstedt, Öhman, and Öhman 2011). The study followed the Swedish Research Council’s guiding principles for social science research (Swedish Research Council 2017). The participants were given detailed information about the study in advance, the school’s principal approved the study, and all the parents gave their written consent for their children’s participation.

In accordance with the ethical guidelines, the school and the classes are anonymous and the teachers and students have been given fictitious names. No video sequences are or have been disseminated and the video films are securely contained in a locker at Malmö University.

Findings (1): transactions in didactic situations
The following sections answer the research questions about which transaction processes appear in didactic situations and the direction of student learning. Three themes of different didactic situations are highlighted: (i) leading to a narrow purpose, (ii) leading to an expanded purpose and (iii) hesitating or avoiding.

Leading to a narrow purpose
Most of the transactions that occurred during the dance unit were regarded as transactions leading to a narrow purpose of the dance assignment. As the intention of the dance unit was to be creative and express and embody feelings and thoughts, the students were never asked to imitate certain dance steps or dance styles. Rather, the students were encouraged to create their own solutions to dance assignments, albeit within the frames of certain tasks that the teachers assigned. These actions are elaborated on below.

In an initial dance assignment, the teacher in class 9z (lesson 1) asked the students to walk in rhythm to music using different shapes in space. Laban (1948/1988) emphasizes that all movements are in a shape process and this dance assignment was meant for the students to experience this process and different shapes of basically the same movement—walking. To begin with, the students walked mechanically in a large circle showing no sign of inspiration or feelings. Many of the students looked uncomfortable and instead watched how their classmates acted. The teacher gently steered the dance assignment and encouraged the students to move their arms to increase the scope of action. The teacher demonstrated moving along a line with punching movements and in a circle with floating movements. The students switched movements when they passed each other. The teacher initiated a dance assignment using a particular concept or exercise as a common starting point. The students filled the gaps with relations by creating new arm movements and making different shapes in space. They developed more movement alternatives, all of which were in line with the teacher’s invitations but still using a limited repertoire from the BESS concept (Laban 1948/1988).

In another dance assignment, the students in class 8x worked with a ring dance (lesson 2). The dance consisted of simple movements involving the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet and switching partners. Instead of reproducing certain dance steps, the students’ task was to create new movements and replace the original moves. The teacher also used Laban’s concept of space (Laban 1948/1988) and encouraged the students to dance on a low spatial level and experience the changes in movements when dancing close to the floor instead of when dancing upright. The students worked in gender-mixed groups and negotiated and discussed which movements they might create. The new movements were more complex than the original ones and this time the students danced with feeling. They used more body parts and interacted in time to the music. The students used different levels and planes in space while moving (Laban 1948/1988). It was evident that when the teacher gave the students examples of movements using different body parts and limited space it helped them create their own movements but still in line with teachers’ invitations. Later during the dance unit, the students organised themselves without the teacher’s involvement and
the ‘class dance’ was used as both a physical and social warm up. The students filled the gaps with relations and the directions of their movements led towards a narrow purpose. The teacher collaborated with the students by trusting them and giving them responsibility and was unable to predict which movements they would create.

Class 8y have their third lesson in the dance unit and are working with themes concerning awareness of the body. Ayla, Benny, Johanna, Jonas and Julia are in the same group. Teacher: “Listen to the music and decide on a feeling that you experience. You should then write the word of the feeling by forming your bodies into letters.” Calm music from a Swedish folk song emanates from the loudspeakers. Johanna takes command and suggests that they should form the word ‘sorg’ (En. sadness). She lines up the group members and helps Benny to model the letter ‘R’. Johanna forms Benny’s arms into a circle and bends down and moves his leg to the same side. Three students shape themselves into the letters ‘S’, ‘O’ and ‘G’. Confusion arises because the word ‘sorg’ only has four letters, whereas there are five students in the group. Ayla suggests that she can be a full stop after the word and rolls into a little ball on the floor. (lesson 3)

In forming themselves into the letters of the word, the students used several parts of their bodies and different spatial levels. To maintain a feeling expressed through their body work, the students explored different ways of using the group. The students added a full stop in order to include everyone and thereby solve the original task. Their actions led towards a narrow purpose and they filled the gaps with relations. After a while, the group performed their dance in front of their classmates. They interacted with the music and tried to express sadness by constructing the letters of the word with their bodies.

### Leading to an expanded purpose

Expanded transactions occurred when the students were given opportunities to and responsibility for finding their own solutions to dance assignments by introducing new movements for this context. This resulted in solutions that were beyond the teachers’ invitations and interrupted patterns of desired or predictable movements.

The students in class 8y are dancing in pairs, holding hands. The pairs are both mixed sex and same sex. They jump around in the sports hall to rhythmic instrumental music. The teacher stops the exercise and says: “I want you to discover more ways to move together.” He demonstrates one possibility, dancing at a low level, close to the floor. The students laugh at the teacher as he exaggerates the movements. The music is turned on and two students suddenly dance hanging on the wall bars of the sports hall, and another couple spin like balls on the floor. (lesson 1)

The teacher demonstrated one way of moving, but the students in the class discovered several other and for them new ways and found their own solutions to the dance assignment. In this case, the teacher paved the way for the students to break patterns. The space for possible actions was both enlarged and beyond the teacher’s invitations. As the teacher facilitated processes for dancing in more ways than simply standing up, the students filled the gaps with relations that led towards an expanded purpose. It was like an explosion of actions that facilitated many different ways of moving. The students used both isolated and total movements according to Laban’s body concept (Laban 1948/1988) and they explored several levels in space, such as dancing while hanging on the wall bars or spinning on the floor.

When the students in class 9y danced a ring dance, two girls who were often passive during the dance unit, chose to dance separately from the group and the teacher accepted this dissociation. They created a new dance by transforming the ring dance in a group to instead dance as a pair and shaped both symmetric and asymmetric movements according to Laban’s BESS concept. In this didactic situation, the students filled the gaps with relations and did something that was beyond the teacher’s invitations which led to new ways of acting in a dance in pair and to an expanded purpose.

The students in class 8y worked with themes concerning space orientation (lesson 4). The concept of space involves personal as well as general space. It also focuses awareness of directions, levels and planes (Laban 1948/1988). The students explored directions by dancing both spread out in the sports
hall and close together in a smaller space. In one dance task, the students were asked to evoke a group feeling. One boy, who was often seen alone, was chosen by the teacher to be the leader of the whole class. He improvised movements, as for example crawling on the floor or jumping while spinning, and the rest of the class imitated his movements. When the boy was shown trust by the teacher, and when everyone in the class followed him, new and in this context unusual movements were created. This became an example of expanded transactions, when the teacher interacted with the environment and when the students’ actions enlarged the space of actions.

In another example, students in class 8x focused on directions in space:

The students are gathered in the middle of the sports hall. Teacher: “Now I want you to imagine that this wall is a huge magnet, and all your movements must show that you are being dragged towards the magnet.” The teacher points to one of the walls in the sports hall. He then goes into a roleplay and pretends to fight the magnetic force. The students seem dedicated to the dance assignment and move in the direction of the magnet. They then run along the sides of the hall back to the centre and start new variations of movements. One student does cartwheels, another does a somersault and a third student crawls backwards. The movements become more and more complex and the students explore different levels in space. (lesson 4)

In this dance assignment, the teacher set up a situation in which the students were encouraged to create their own movements. They filled the gaps with relations that led towards an expanded purpose and explored new movements, thereby acting beyond the teacher’s invitations and breaking patterns of desired or predictable movements. The students used many different body parts and combined different effort components. They did for example both pressing movements (strong weight/sustained time/direct space) and flicking movements (light weight/sudden time/indirect space). The teacher used a metaphor “magnet” to work with directions in space and the students developed many complex and in this context unusual movements.

**Hesitating or avoiding**

Interrupted transactions, i.e. when actions are stopped and no encounters occur, were observed when the students hesitated or avoided acting in didactic situations.

The students in class 8y are lying down and are spread out on the floor in the sports hall. They are working with themes concerned with body awareness and classical instrumental music is flowing from the speakers. The teacher stands in the middle of the hall and suggests that the students keep their eyes closed. Teacher: “Lift your right arm to the ceiling. Try to form big circles. Let your arm fall slowly to the floor. Lift both arms and swim a stroke. Let your arms slowly drift down to the floor. Wiggle your feet back and forth. Place your hands on your stomach.” Most of the students act in the way the teacher encourages them to act. Their eyes are closed and they work with different body parts as isolated movements. Some of the students, mostly the boys, have their eyes open and do not move at all. They watch their classmates and some boys make comments or laugh. One of the boys calls out: “Is this ballet?” (lesson 3).

Participating in this dance assignment seemed to be difficult for some of the students, who clearly felt uncomfortable doing the movements to classical music (Mozart: Elvira Madigan). In the above described situation, the teacher did not tell the students to move gently but to follow the music. The students could choose their own movement interpretation of the music. There was no interaction between the students, no feedback from the teacher and no agreements reached. It was mostly the boys who behaved like what is described in the excerpt and it can be said that their actions led away from a purpose. No relations filled the gap and no encounter took place. When ballet was mentioned by one boy, it was clear that the movements were coded as ballet movements in the boy’s mind and that he did not want to move in that way. Some of the boys avoided acting altogether and expressed dissociation by laughing and making comments.

In another example, the students in class 8x worked with themes concerned with space orientations (lesson 4). The dance assignment was called ‘The Magnet’ and the students performed different movements involving moving in the direction of a specific wall. One boy in the class avoided more complex movements and only acted at the beginning of the exercise. Even though the teacher
emphasised that there was no right or wrong way to move, he hesitated and avoided moving. This situation could be interpreted that the teacher suspects that there are movement patterns which the students will avoid, alternatively that the students think that they actually should move in specific and to them unknown ways. The teacher and the rest of the class were busy with other things and paid no attention to him. He stood in the middle of the sports hall and watched what his classmates were doing. When the dance assignment was complete he approached the teacher and did a high five. Our interpretation of this situation is that the student did not want to risk failing when doing more complex movements, yet still he wanted to clarify his participation with the teacher.

On several occasions, both individuals and groups hesitated in or avoided the dance assignments. For example, in class 9z the teacher wanted to challenge the students by giving them a dance task to transform a feeling into movement and to use Laban’s effort components weight, time and space (Laban 1948/1988). To succeed in this didactic situation, the students needed to interact with the environment and cooperate with each other.

The students in class 9z have their fourth lesson in the dance theme. They have recently formed words by using their bodies to write a feeling. Teacher: “Now I’m going to switch on the music and I want the group to identify a feeling in relation to it. Then I want you to express that feeling while dancing.” Carlo, Emeli, Yannis and Amanda are in one group and when the music starts they stand still in the middle of the sports hall. After a while Carlo does some movements on his own. He spins and jumps, but no one in the group follows him. After a while Amanda does a few moves, but does not cooperate with Carlo. The teacher walks around the hall but does not give any feedback to the group. A little later the group is invited to perform the movements for their peers, but because they have not decided what to do they line up in front of the audience and do nothing. (lesson 5)

In the above example, the students’ actions did not lead towards a common purpose. They did not fill gaps with relations and no encounters occurred. The explanation could be because it was difficult to transform an abstract feeling into movement. Two of the students in the group tried to improvise, but acted as individuals towards purposes that were not shared by other students. There was no interaction between the students and no agreements were reached.

To summarise, three different types of transactions were observed in the dance unit: narrow, expanded and interrupted transactions. Three themes of different didactic situations were then highlighted and analysed: (i) leading to a narrow purpose, (ii) leading to an expanded purpose, and (iii) hesitating or avoiding. In the next part of the paper, the focus is on the teaching including – or not including – a risk dimension.

Findings (2): risks in the dance unit

This section considers the second research question about how teachers programme risk-taking, in Biesta’s (2013) understanding, into their lessons and how students negotiate risks. The teachers’ pedagogical methods are illuminated in (i) programming risks in teaching, and (ii) negotiating environmental risks.

Programming risks in teaching

In the initial phase of the dance unit, the PE teachers programmed fewer risks into their lessons than in the later phases. Gradually during the eight lessons they worked more systematically with Laban’s BESS concept by exploring different effort components such as weight, time and space to create learning situations. Bit by bit the teachers became more able to build on the students’ earlier experiences and chose content and music that was familiar to the students, as is illustrated in the following extract.

The students in class 8x are exploring rhythm and form in a dance assignment that the teacher Anna calls ‘Higgledy-piggledy’. The students are divided into groups of four. They move in a circle and walk eight steps clockwise and eight steps anti-clockwise in time to the music. Teacher: “I want you to improvise your own arm
movements. Try to feel the beat in the music.” After a while, the teacher tells the students to combine the circle with walking in pairs along a line. The students walk forwards and backwards. When they meet in the middle they make a gesture. The third step in the dance assignment is that the students separate from the group and try to find new dance partners. There appears to be some chaos in this situation and the students run around to find someone to dance with. The new constellation is to improvise movements whilst walking in circles or along lines. Most of the students stick to their known moves during the dance, but some explore new ways by picking up movements from classmates. (lesson 1)

It became evident that even the initial teaching involved some risks and opened up for students’ creativity. The teacher provided an initial frame for the didactic situation by initiating different forms in space (circle, line and unstructured, i.e. ‘higgledy-piggledy’). They also invited students to explore different effort components, such as weight, time and space, thereby allowing the students to further risk taking in their creative expressions. The teacher had a playful teaching approach and participated in the dance assignment together with the students.

In another dance assignment in class 8y, the teacher allowed the students to explore space by pretending to be aeroplanes (lesson 4). The teacher and the students spread out their arms like aeroplane wings and ran in spirals to music in the sports hall. The students did not seem to think that the task was too childish for teenagers. They laughed, ran or jumped and experimented with forms and levels in space. All the teachers involved in the pedagogical intervention used different metaphors to inspire and challenge the students. In one dance assignment, the students were asked to imagine that they were stuck in a huge piece of chewing gum, with the aim of exploring strong weight as an aspect of the movement quality of effort. In another dance assignment in class 9z the teacher encouraged the students to explore lightness of weight by imagining that balloons were attached to their legs and arms (lesson 5). The metaphors were used as a shared starting point for the students to explore different ways of using their bodies and a way for the teachers to integrate risk, meaning that they let go of any aspiration to control student responses.

The programming of risk-taking into the lessons also opened up for collaborations between teachers and students. There was no ‘correct’ answer to a dance assignment. When the students explored time, they could experiment with different parts of the body and forms of movement. Laban’s framework of movements (Laban 1948/1988) became a particularly important tool here for clarifying what the teaching was about and which qualities the students needed to develop and improve. In this dance task, the students experienced the difference between slow and fast movements. As the pedagogical intervention progressed, the students acquired an increasing number of tools according to Laban’s BESS concept with which to express themselves in movement. These experiences opened up for more complex movements as, for example, using more body parts, moving in different spatial levels or exploring different effort components as weight, time and space.

The teachers’ propensity to include risk as one aspect of the teaching increased during the unit as they became more experienced and had more interaction with the environment. It was evident that the PE teachers’ previous experiences from the pedagogical intervention paved the way for the propensity to programme more risks into their lessons. This facilitated more nuanced and differentiated interactions with the surrounding environment. The teachers became more of sounding boards in their teaching and gave the students space and time to find their own solutions instead of direct instructions. To use Biesta’s (2013) words, ‘[t]his makes the educational way the slow way, the difficult way, the frustrating way, and, so we might say, the weak way, as the outcome of this process can neither be guaranteed nor secured’ (3).

When the students in class 8x focused on space orientations and directions while performing movements in relation to ‘the magnet’, a practice that was described above, risks were programmed into the lesson in that the students were able to create their own movements without specific
instructions. One boy described earlier in the paper did not take part in that particular dance assignment but did participate in later dance assignments. He devised a choreography with his group and performed in front of an audience in the last lesson (lesson 8). Even though the student did not participate in every didactic situation he succeeded in and completed the dance unit. Programming risk in this situation is not about forcing students to participate in every learning task. Teaching with risks allowed the students to solve the assignments in their own ways and to refrain from participating in certain elements if they wished. If the teaching had simply focused on instructions about specific movements or sport activities, the situation would have been tightly controlled and preventing free movement.

It proved important for the teachers to not assign all responsibility to the students. Paradoxically, excessive freedom in the dance assignments formed hierarchies between the students in their dancing.

In class 8x the students are working with themes concerned with space orientation. Teacher: “I’m going to switch on the music and I want you to improvise and use the whole sports hall. You can dance in whatever way you like. There is no right or wrong way to move.” The students divide themselves into gender-segregated groups. Some of the boys start to dance in the middle of the sports hall. They dance hip hop and breakdance with powerful and acrobatic movements. Some of the other boys do nothing and simply watch what classmates are doing. The girls move together close to the walls in the hall. Some of the girls dominate in their dancing by shaking their hips and bodies. Some of the other girls try to imitate their movements. (lesson 4)

When the students were able to dance freely to their own music, hierarchies were formed that divided those students who were perceived as ‘good’ from those who were not. Some of the boys used more space in the sports hall than the girls and some other boys did. These boys danced in the middle of the hall while the others danced in small groups close to the walls. There was a gender dimension on how the students selected different movements. Many of the boys’ movements were connected to strong weight in the BESS-concept and they used the whole body. Girls more often chose light weight and used isolated movements according to Laban (1948/1988). The choice of music was identified as a determining factor for how the students could create new movements. Music that was not connected to any particular dance style seemed to encourage students to move in new and unfamiliar ways. It thus became evident that teaching methods containing a certain degree of risk-taking, i.e. when teachers and students found ways to let go of the control and be creative, the students started to move in non-predetermined ways.

Negotiating environmental risks

In the initial dance assignments the students negotiated fewer environmental risks in the didactic situations than they did later on in the pedagogical intervention. Later in the process, the students were able to build on their earlier experiences, at the same time as the teachers experimented and interacted with the environment.

The students in class 9z walk in rhythm to music the teacher has chosen. It is rhythmic music and therefore it is easy for the students to find the beat. The students do not seem to enjoy the music but walk mechanically without inspiration. The teacher changes the music to a song suggested by the students. Now the students develop more nuanced movements and start to involve more of their body parts. Some of the students seem to enjoy the music and sing along as they move. (lesson 1)

When the students chose their own music it seemed to inspire them to dance with feeling. It can be said that the music helped them to deal with the risks. The familiar music interacted with the students’ actions to the extent that they performed more dynamic and varying movements. On the other hand, the students also described some of the music in the pedagogical intervention selected by the teachers as ‘weird’ and difficult to dance to. It was often the case in this study that music that was familiar to the students led to a reproduction of traditional dance styles. New and unusual movements occurred more often when unfamiliar music was used and when the students had to negotiate with music as an environmental risk.
During lessons 6 and 7, the students created their own choreographies in small groups. The teachers decided on the group composition and the choice of music.

In class 8y, Amir, Hannes, Linda and Sara are working together. The selected music comes from the film *Saw* and it is very dramatic. The group decides that their choreography will reflect strong feelings of love and hate. The students listen to the music several times and they try to interpret and analyse it. The choreography includes fights. Amir is fighting with Hannes and Linda is fighting with Sara. They simulate careful punches in the air. The teacher, Benny, gives feedback to the group: “The fight doesn’t look authentic. I want you to punch more distinctly.” The students then adapt their moves and act more powerfully and precisely. (lesson 6)

The students were given instructions and criteria for the choreography by the teachers, where it was important to visualise the concepts of body, effort, space and shape (Laban 1948/1988). Laban’s concepts became important tools for dealing with risks in the didactic situations and helped the students to develop communication and clarify the purpose of the choreography.

The organisation of space was also an important factor in negotiating environmental risks in the didactic situations. The teachers turned off the lights and placed spotlights on the floor of the sports hall. The students were then able to choose to move in darkness or in the light of the spots. Many of the students expressed a feeling of relief at not being exposed and it was stated by one student that ‘no one stares at you’. Dimmed lighting in the sports hall and the opportunity to work in separate rooms facilitated the students’ learning processes and helped them to negotiate environmental risks in the didactic situations. It became clear that teaching that includes risk has consequences for the students’ possibilities to move beyond stereotypical ways of moving/dancing. Here, the students explored new ways of using their bodies and experienced aesthetic movements individually, in pairs, or in groups. The students had something important to express in movement and took advantage of that opportunity.

**Discussion and conclusions: exploratory assignments and aesthetic aspects of movements**

We believe this study shows that the inclusion of expressive dance assignments can take teaching in PE in new and expanded directions. The results of this study contrast a huge body of research which have highlighted that certain typically sporting abilities and fit bodies frame what is worth learning in PE (eg. Evans 2004; Gard 2006; Kirk 2010; Larsson and Quennerstedt 2012). These studies also pinpoint that PE entails social injustice and unequal opportunities for students. It is also shown that most teaching in PE is teacher centred and contributes to the reproduction of predetermined movement patterns at the same time as student-centred exploration of non-predetermined movement patterns are rare (Tinning 2010). Larsson and Karlefor (2015) draw attention to dance as an exception from such a teaching. Negotiations and cooperations between students were distinguished when students made their own choreographies in PE. This study aimed to explore how PE teachers approach the issue of teaching expressive dance and which learning processes students are involved in during the dance unit. The reason to choose expressive dance as content in the pedagogical intervention was to explore both teaching and learning in PE when an aesthetic non-sporty activity was included within the subject.

Our analysis shows that teaching methods change to more student-centered teaching when teachers provide students with exploratory dance assignments where movements are not pre-determined and when the focus is directed towards the purpose and meaning of the movements. In this study, the teachers are collaborators in the various dance assignments expanding bodily knowledge. They programme more risks into their lessons in line with Biesta (2013) and create situations in which students are able to explore different movements. Transactions occur all the time (Dewey and Bentley 1949/1991) and various types of transactions, both narrow and expanded ones, can be distinguished in the study. Programming risks into lessons helps to create expanded transactions, where students can break patterns and perform body movements beyond the teacher’s invitations. Expanding bodily knowledge was crucial for the results for both teachers and students. This can be explained by that neither students nor teachers in the pedagogical intervention expected any particular results.
of the dance unit – more than discovering new meaning in movements. During the unit they tried and explored different solutions and they interacted and changed the dance practice together. Exploratory assignments and a focus on aesthetic aspects of movements serve as a counterweight to a teaching that consists of instructions of specific and pre-determined movements, which Tinning (2010) states is the dominant teaching style in PE (see also Kirk 2010).

Over the course of the eight lessons of the dance unit, the hierarchy and power structure between the students and teachers changed somewhat. The teachers gradually gave more responsibility to the students to find their own solutions in the exploratory dance assignments. Neither the teachers nor the students had an exact answer as to how they should respond to the different dance assignments. The longer the unit progressed, the more knowledge and experience was gained in the different ways of moving the body in space, both among teachers and students. The use of Laban’s concepts (Laban 1948/1988) became important for dealing with the aesthetic aspects of movements and to deal with risk-taking. Both the teachers and the students seemed to experience the BESS concepts (body, effort, space and shape) as a meaningful starting point, in that it helped them to clarify and communicate the purpose of the practice in the didactic situations. The teachers encouraged the students to experiment with different parts of their bodies and with different movements.

Teachers’ earlier experiences of combining dance and teaching seem to be key factors when planning and implementing expressive dance assignments according to this study. This also raises questions about prioritised knowledge areas in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) and whether PE teachers can offer the appropriate skills to students in challenging didactic situations. The teachers’ preparations for the dance unit included reading and discussing scientific articles about dance in PE. Expanding their bodily knowledge of artistic dance was also crucial for the results in the pedagogical intervention. This can be explained in that neither students nor teachers expected any particular results as they tried new movements. This allowed them to focus more on discovering new meaningful movements. As Gard (2003; 2006) argues, dance can be used as a change from sporting activities and as a way of challenging students’ and teachers’ comfort zones. In the concluding student choreography it became apparent that students had something to tell through their movements. Their choreographies were different from earlier teaching in dance in these PE classes and involved themes that were important to them. The students did not just create a dance but they danced using their bodies in space with different effort components (Laban 1948/1988). The students performed their earlier experiences from the dance unit and developed new and for them unusual movements to share their feelings and thoughts. This shows that expressive dance assignments can help students express themselves and to devise movements that offer more than physical benefit.

Although this paper considers dance, its purpose is also to broaden the content of PE teaching to other movement-based activities and to shift the focus from techniques and functions of pre-determined movements to experiences, explorations and meanings of non-predetermined movements. This shift could be a counterweight to fitness training and competitive sport. According to Dewey (1920; 1934/2005; 1938/1997) and Dewey and Bentley (1949/1991), education concerns experiences in a mutual interplay between organism and environment in ongoing processes. What becomes clear in this study is the possibilities to influence the directions in teachers’ pedagogical methods, which in turn affect the possible didactic situations in PE.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**References**


