

Innovation in Primary School Dance: featuring DanceEast Digital Primaries

By Bryony Hope



We are one year on from Ofsted’s subject report into PE, that said:

“In two thirds of the schools, dance is not taught to all pupils, or the dance content being taught is not well organised. In some schools there were limited opportunities for dance and OAA (Outdoor Adventurous Activities) in the curriculum because staff lacked competence and confidence to teach these areas. In dance specifically, it was not always clear what knowledge was being taught and when; this meant that how pupils would make progress over time was not clear.”

After the pandemic lockdowns, all primary schools faced difficulties in accessing culturally enriching opportunities. Even for those located close to venues with dance learning and participation programmes, restricted school budgets meant schools were less likely to prioritise them as part of ‘catching up’ strategies. Here in East Anglia, many schools are rurally isolated and must consider travel costs and implications too.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-pe/levelling-the-playing-field-the-physical-education-subject-report>

Digital Primaries is an innovative solution to overcoming these barriers. In development since 2016 with the aim of overcoming inconsistent nature of dance provision/education, the programme uses cutting-edge technology to embed dance education within primary schools, removing financial and geographical barriers to school children engaging with high quality dance activity.

In 2021 DanceEast secured investment of £334,000 from Paul Hamlyn Foundation towards establishing a new pedagogy. Digital Primaries now delivers free, creative, cross-curricular dance in primary schools across Suffolk and Norfolk for Key Stages 1 and 2 (ages 5 – 11), through the innovative application of green-screen technology. Digital Primaries sessions are linked to Science and PSHE topics, using dance to embed curriculum learning.

INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

These sessions are streamed live from the Jerwood DanceHouse and are co-delivered between a specialist on-screen dance artist and in-person classroom teacher, supporting the effective dissemination of live interactive digital content into schools while building teachers' confidence in dance.

This live/ digital, co-delivered model represents an entirely new pedagogical approach to teaching dance.



With Digital Primaries, professional dancers worked with education consultants to design a programme where children:

- Learn fundamentals of dance and movement components
- Embed learning from the statutory requirements for Science and PSHE
- Work with a professional dance artist
- Gain essential social skills with peers by working in pairs or teams
- Have opportunities to be creative while having fun.

Unpacking the programme in greater detail, extracts from the September 2024 Evaluation Report by Dr Rebecca Warren, Professor Rosemary Klich & Teal Darkenwald at the University of Essex, show the benefits and successes so far.

COST EFFECTIVE

The model has been developed so any school can take part, regardless of budget or location, and has proved particularly impactful for schools operating in rural/ remote areas with limited cultural infrastructure, or those in areas of deprivation and experiencing budgetary challenges meaning they are unable to invest in in-person dance sessions.

In a cost-of-living crisis, projects that deliver quality at a reduced or subsidised cost can determine whether schools can take part.

“Whilst interviews indicated that the classroom teachers would prefer a dance artist to be present in-person, programmes such as Digital Primaries that offer increased inclusivity and accessibility, particularly in the rural areas of East Anglia, may be a way to support embodied learning, promote physical activity, build creative confidence, enhance cooperative learning, and improve self-esteem.” Page 43

In times where it isn't viable to put a professional dance artist in every Primary school, Digital Primaries introduces the artists to multiple schools with the added benefits of peer learning, through connecting with other schools.

The overall Social Return on Investment for Digital Primaries for one year = £1: £6.19.²

SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Recruitment and retention of teachers remain challenging; controlling teachers' workloads continues to be an important part of the solution. Digital Primaries supports teacher confidence in dance without additional burdens on their time. Co-delivering dance education alongside expert dance artists has enabled teachers to become upskilled. Teachers who were interviewed said that they 'viewed the Digital Primaries sessions as Continued Professional Development' and 'appreciated the opportunity for undertaking CPD within the working school day'.

“She [the artist] does things I'd never do; little steps, little ideas. They would never learn as much dance from me, I love the ideas.” (the teacher was referring to a lesson on **Dance and Science teaching magnets and forces**) Teacher quote, Howard Primary, Summer 2024

CREATING ACCESS FOR ALL

Always mindful of the disparities in opportunities between children, Digital Primaries reaches into schools even in cultural cold spots, giving all children equal exposure to creative careers and the benefits of creativity. As well as enjoying the sessions, children are reported to have:

- Increased engagement in school life
- Developed teamwork and social skills
- Increased self-confidence and creative confidence
- Retained cross curricular learning
- Developed language and interpersonal skills

The methodology of the delivery appeals to all learners, unlocking different learning aspects through the combination of images, movement, direct instruction and key vocabulary displayed. Findings from the learning retention study conducted by the University of Essex:

“evidenced particular value for neurodivergent pupils; based on researcher observations, neurodivergent pupils could recall as many of the activities as their neurotypical peers despite appearing disconnected and disengaged in the sessions. Based on researcher and teacher observation, the neurodivergent pupils seemed better able to interact, socialise, and work in teams and pairs after engaging with the Digital Primaries content for a five-week session.”

CREATIVE WITH CURRICULUM

Whilst the Department for Education reviews and reflects on the PE curriculum, Digital Primaries delivers a model where dance fundamentals can be protected for 40 minutes every week.

Schools are required to encourage young people to have active lifestyles, learn water safety (through swimming), and use PE sessions as a space for team skills and supporting wellbeing. Digital Primaries introduces dance in a way that complements and supplements that PE curriculum, also factoring in creative thinking, independence, individuality, performance and reflection.



Programme manager Abi Marrison says:

“We have incredible dance artists with a wealth of expertise. Teachers and children get to build a rapport with the artist over the course of 6 weeks, learning to progress their creative skills and dance fundamentals whilst consolidating learning from the Science/ PSHE curriculum. The use of green screen technology to embed the artist into the concepts of the lesson gives it a unique multisensory element. It’s helpful for all students but particularly benefits those with English as an additional language.”³

In the University of Essex’s final summary of their evaluation report, they concluded:

“This report showcases the impact of Digital Primaries in building innovative dance education for young people, with positive effects on pupils and teachers, at a time when education in the UK has been challenging for many young people.”

“The principles behind the project should be taken as important for the transformation of arts and cultural education in the UK and can be used to enhance and expand the delivery of dance education across the country and internationally.”