

Systematic Review

Redefining Community Dance: A Systematic Review and Dual-Perspective Analysis of Rhetoric and Reality Intersections (2000–2026)

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Abstract

This systematic review adopted a dual-perspective approach to examine how community dance is conceptualized and operationalized in the literature published between 2000 and 2026. The review was reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020, with eligibility and search concepts informed by SPIDER. Searches of five bibliographic databases and Google Scholar produced 423 records, of which 30 peer-reviewed articles were included in a thematic and cross-cutting narrative synthesis. Explicit accounts framed community dance through macro-level aspirations toward cultural democracy, equity, social connection, and eco-social sustainability. Implicit operational accounts emphasized micro-level relational, embodied, and pedagogical processes through which these commitments may be pursued, including process-led participation, de-centering of authority, challenges to normative body ideals, non-clinical well-being, and, in a smaller subset, trauma-informed principles. The realization of democratic and inclusive aspirations varied by context, facilitation, participant experience, and institutional conditions. Across both strands, the lived body occurred as an interpretive link between embodied knowledge, participation, and psychosocial well-being. Community dance is provisionally conceptualized as an anti-elitist, leisure-based, process-led participatory practice that seeks to create democratic spaces where diverse bodies share creative agency and relational justice may be pursued in practice. This definition aims to clarify the field's conceptual identity, offering a cohesive epistemological foundation for future research, policy, and pedagogy.

Keywords: third space; relational justice; embodied knowledge; leisure ecology; lived body; trauma-informed practice; sustainable communities; social inclusion; recreational practice; democratic dialogue; leisure-based participation



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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, community dance has received increasing international attention as a socio-artistic practice and has been framed as a potential vehicle for democratic engagement and community bonding [1,2]. These conceptualizations are reflected in foundational literature that identifies diversity, collaborative relationships, and inclusivity as central principles of the practice [3]. Building on this foundational ethos, community dance is

frequently conceptualized not merely as a form of physical exercise, but as an embodied, participatory form of “democratic dialogue” that seeks to support social inclusion, equity, and collective agency [2]. It is commonly situated at the intersection of artistic expression, social action, and community recreation, offering a context in which democratic participation may be pursued through non-hierarchical engagement and shared experience. Community dance has also been applied across diverse social and health-related contexts, including programs concerned with mental well-being and the social participation of marginalized groups [4,5]. These values should be understood as normative aspirations within the field rather than as outcomes that are inherent to, or uniformly achieved through, community dance practice.

Despite growing scholarly and applied interest, the field remains characterized by evolving conceptual boundaries and varied definitions that complicate its recognition as a distinct field of scholarship and practice [6,7]. In much of the current literature, community dance is frequently conflated or blurred with adjacent disciplines such as dance movement therapy, clinically oriented dance science, and purely commercial or recreational dance classes [4,8,9]. This lack of a unified definition is often exacerbated by “audit cultures” and political agendas that prioritize instrumental, generalizable outcomes over the inherent subjective and idiographic value of the practice [4,9]. Consequently, the inability to clearly distinguish community dance as a distinct philosophical and operational entity hinders the standardization of pedagogical models and the development of field-specific epistemological frameworks [6,10,11].

While there has been a growing body of applied programs targeting specific populations, including older adults, refugees, and individuals with chronic illnesses, there are few structured syntheses that separate conceptual and philosophical definitions from applied and operational dimensions [12–15]. Existing research and reviews have often prioritized individual health or therapeutic outcomes, with less systematic attention to broader community, pedagogical, relational, and theoretical dimensions [13,15]. A systematic mapping of this terrain is therefore needed to examine the relationship between broad claims of artistic and social transformation and the practices reported in applied settings [4]. To address this ambiguity, it is necessary to examine how the field’s core values and guiding principles are reported as being operationalized, negotiated, or constrained across different geographical and social contexts, and how these practice-based accounts relate to the conceptual claims identified in the literature [1,5,6,16,17].

The present review contributes to the literature by bringing these two dimensions into a dual-perspective comparative framework: explicit conceptualizations and implicit operational realities. Rather than treating conceptual definitions and applied studies as equivalent forms of evidence, the review considers them as related but analytically distinct domains. The explicit stream examines how community dance is theoretically, philosophically, and normatively defined, whereas the implicit stream examines how it is operationalized, facilitated, experienced, and reported within particular contexts. Examining these dimensions together may support a more systematic consideration of the relationships, convergences, divergences, and tensions between the field’s conceptual propositions and its practical expressions. In this review, “rhetoric” refers to the field’s explicit normative and theoretical propositions, whereas “reality” refers to reported operational and practice-based accounts rather than to a methodologically superior form of evidence.

The primary objective of this systematic review is to systematically map and critically analyze the international literature published between 2000 and 2026 on community dance, using a dual-perspective analytical framework. To achieve this, the review isolates and synthesizes explicit definitions, conceptual propositions, and theoretical framings providing direct definitions, while examining empirical, pedagogical, and applied studies in which

community dance is implicitly characterized through facilitation practices, methodological designs, participant experiences, and reported operational outcomes. By juxtaposing macro-level conceptual and philosophical frameworks with micro-level operational and practice-based accounts, this paper aims to identify potential theory-practice gaps and understand how the core values, conceptual pillars, and driving principles of the practice shift from theoretical ideals to operational realities across diverse global settings and varied participant demographics. Building on this dual synthesis, a further aim is to propose an integrative, review-derived, and evidence-informed definition of community dance that accounts for both explicit conceptual claims and implicit operational realities. Consequently, this systematic review is structured to address the following three interconnected research questions:

RQ1 (The Rhetoric): How is community dance explicitly defined in current scholarship, and what are its core theoretical, philosophical, and socio-political foundations?

RQ2 (The Reality): How is community dance implicitly conceptualized through its operational, relational, and pedagogical characteristics, including the practices, hierarchies, and normative assumptions it seeks to resist?

RQ3 (The Synthesis): What convergences, divergences, and cross-cutting conceptual links emerge between explicit conceptualizations and implicit operational realities across research methodologies, geographic contexts, and participant demographics?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This systematic review employed a dual-perspective qualitative evidence-synthesis design. Eligibility criteria and search concepts were informed by the SPIDER framework [18], and the review was reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 [19,20]. The protocol was prospectively registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) (doi:10.17605/OSF.IO/QZB7E).

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility criteria were prespecified using the SPIDER framework and adapted to the conceptual and applied literature on community dance. The inclusion criteria were prespecified to ensure that only conceptually and methodologically relevant studies informing the field of community dance were retained in this systematic review, and studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles published in English; studies published between 2000 and 2026 (including online-first and ahead-of-print articles); studies providing either a direct conceptual definition or theoretical framing of community dance, or an empirical examination of community dance practices, interventions, or programs; and studies conducted in community, educational, cultural, or other non-elite settings. A broad range of study designs was considered, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, arts-based, case study, action research, and conceptual or theoretical papers, provided that they explicitly addressed community dance or clearly participatory dance contexts. This breadth of study types was intentional because the review aimed to map both conceptual definitions and practice-based operational realities rather than to estimate a common intervention effect. Adjacent dance-education or participatory-arts studies were eligible only when they provided a direct and analytically necessary contribution to defining the conceptual boundaries of community dance or the practices from which it differentiates itself.

Studies were excluded if they were book chapters, dissertations, conference proceedings, reports, or other non-peer-reviewed sources; if they focused exclusively on competitive, elite, or conservatory dance; if they examined clinical Dance Movement Therapy or

other therapeutic interventions without a broader community or participatory frame; if they addressed general arts or specific dance styles or physical activity without a clear community-based, participatory, dance-centred focus; or if they did not provide sufficient methodological or conceptual detail for inclusion in the review. Studies were also excluded when full text was unavailable or when the publication was not in English. Clinical status of the participant group was not itself an exclusion criterion. Eligibility was determined by the nature and framing of the dance practice: studies involving clinical populations were retained when the activity was community-based, participatory, recreational, educational, or arts-led, whereas Dance Movement Therapy and explicitly therapeutic interventions were excluded when they lacked a broader community or participatory frame.

2.3. Search Strategy

Studies were identified through searches of five bibliographic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, and ERIC, supplemented by Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they cover the main disciplinary areas relevant to community dance, including education, psychology, health, social sciences, and the arts. The search strategy was informed by the SPIDER framework (Table 1) and employed Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncation (*) to maximize sensitivity and capture the conceptual, pedagogical, and applied breadth of the field. A common pool of core search concepts (community dance, participatory dance, participatory arts, pedagogy, education, inclusion, theory, definition, and framework) informed the searches, while terms were selectively combined and adapted to the syntax and indexing requirements of each database. The database-specific search strings and retrieval counts are reported in Table 2. Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source. The first 100 records ranked by relevance at the time of the search were screened. All searches were last updated on 10 June 2026.

Table 1. Application of the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) framework in the present systematic review.

SPIDER Component	Specific Application in This Review
S-Sample	Participants and stakeholders involved in community-based, educational, cultural, recreational, or other non-elite participatory dance settings; conceptual and theoretical articles without participant samples were also eligible.
PI-Phenomenon of Interest	The conceptualization, organization, facilitation, and application of community dance and closely related participatory dance practices.
D-Design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, action research, arts-based research, case studies, and theoretical/philosophical analyses.
E-Evaluation	Conceptual definitions, theoretical framings, participant experiences, facilitation and pedagogical processes, social and relational outcomes, embodied experiences, and reported non-clinical well-being outcomes.
R-Research type	Primary empirical studies, secondary review studies, and conceptual/theoretical papers.

Table 2. Search strategy results across databases.

Database	Search String	Initial Records Retrieved
Scopus	"community dance" AND (concept* OR theor* OR definition* OR framework*)	88
Web of Science	"community dance" AND (concept* OR theor* OR definition* OR framework*)	16
PsycINFO	("community dance" OR "participatory arts") AND (pedagog* OR curriculum OR education OR learning OR teaching OR framework* OR inclusion) (133 results)	133
SportDiscus	("community dance" OR "participatory dance") AND (concept* OR theor* OR definition* OR framework*)	64
ERIC	("community dance" OR "participatory dance") AND (concept* OR theor* OR definition* OR framework* OR pedagog* OR education*)	22
Google Scholar	"community dance" AND ("conceptual framework" OR theory OR definition)	100 screened from the first 10 pages of 1870 results

2.4. Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines [20]. A total of 423 records were identified through database searches. After removing 237 duplicates, 186 records remained for screening. Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts and subsequently assessed the retrieved full texts against the prespecified eligibility criteria; disagreements at either stage were resolved by a third reviewer. No automation tools were used in the selection process. During title and abstract screening, 105 records were excluded. The remaining 81 reports were sought for full-text retrieval; however, 4 could not be obtained because they were unavailable or inaccessible due to institutional access restrictions, and 1 was a conference abstract without proceedings. In total, 76 full-text reports were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text evaluation, 46 reports were excluded for the following reasons: examined clinical Dance Movement Therapy or other therapeutic interventions without a broader community or participatory frame ($n = 24$), addressed general arts or physical activity/fitness ($n = 11$), addressed specific dance styles ($n = 8$), focused exclusively on competitive, elite dance ($n = 2$), or did not provide sufficient methodological or conceptual detail ($n = 1$). Finally, 30 peer-reviewed articles were included in the final synthesis. A visual representation of the study selection process is provided in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

2.5. Data Extraction and Critical Appraisal

Following study selection, data were extracted using a structured extraction process designed to support the dual-perspective synthesis. A structured review-specific extraction form was used to capture key study characteristics and map the conceptual and operational dimensions of the field. For each included article, the following information was extracted, where applicable: author and publication details; geographical context; participant or stakeholder characteristics; study design and methodology; explicit definitions or reported operational characteristics; theoretical frameworks; fields of application; and reported contextual conditions, limitations, tensions, or contradictory findings. To directly address the research questions, the extracted data were purposefully categorized into two distinct streams: studies providing explicit theoretical conceptualizations (Table 3) and those revealing implicit operational realities (Table 4). Each article was assigned to a primary synthesis stream according to the dominant nature of its contribution: direct definitions and

theoretical framings informed the explicit stream, whereas practice descriptions, facilitation processes, pedagogical applications, and reported operational outcomes informed the implicit stream. Where an article contained material relevant to both streams, this secondary contribution was retained in the cross-cutting synthesis.

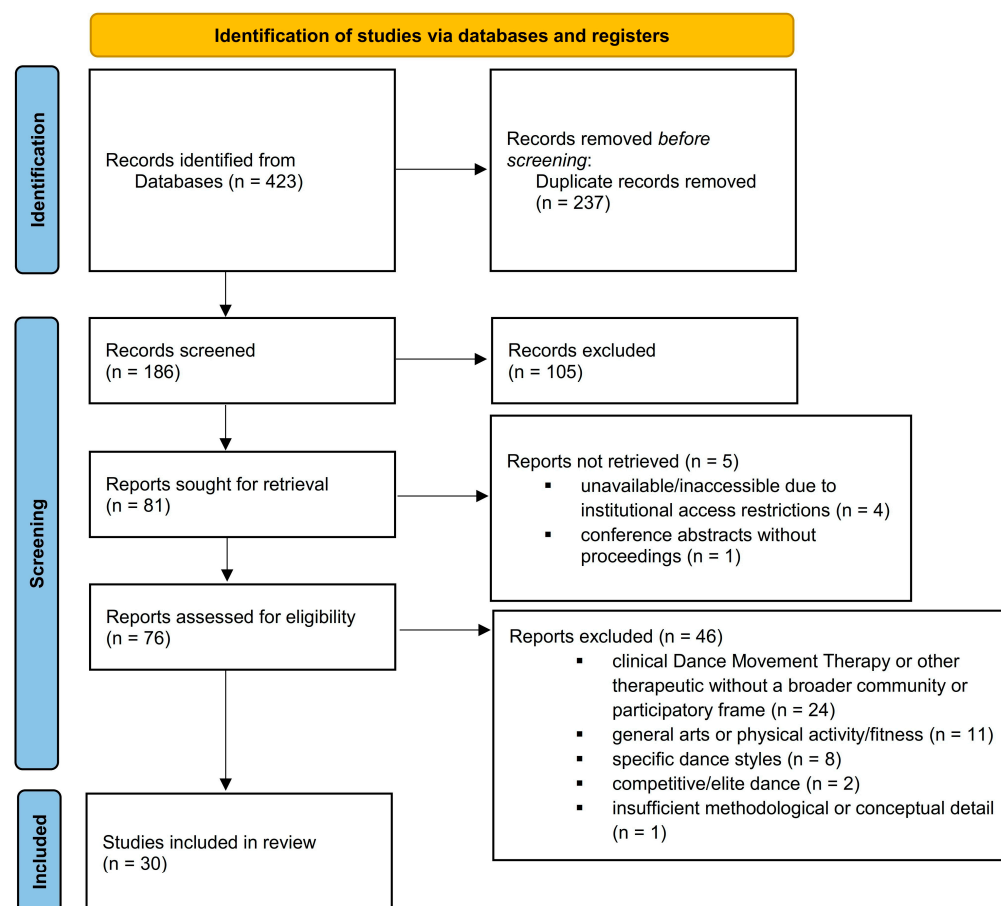


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow chart.

Table 3. Articles Contributing Primarily to the Explicit Conceptual Stream: Definitions, Theoretical Frameworks, and Normative Foundations of Community Dance.

Author(s)	Country & Participant Demographics	Research Design & Methodology	Definition & Core Conceptual Characteristics	Theoretical Framework, Epistemology, or Values
Anttila et al. [1]	Finland (implied) and multi-site project context. Participants are young people.	Research essay utilizing literature from several fields and internal team negotiations to establish theoretical terrain.	Defined as a practice facilitating “democratic life within diverse and sustainable communities” that creates “dialogical, or third spaces” as a “condition for pedagogical encounters”. It moves away from modernist ideas of “self-expressivity”.	“Democratic life,” “cultural sensitivity,” and the “third space”; values “embodied practice” and “living together”.
Assaf & Henley [21]	Byblos, Lebanon. Participants are students (ages 4–16) of the Al-Sarab Alternative Dance School.	Narrative inquiry that “restories” the institution’s creation through semi-structured interviews, journal writing, and archival artifacts.	Defined as “civic interaction,” a group learning activity where “learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information” and the goal is “teaching them citizenship” alongside dance.	“Educational ethos” based on a “communal” journey; values include “ethics, morals, and attitudes,” “love and passion”.

Table 3. Cont.

Author(s)	Country & Participant Demographics	Research Design & Methodology	Definition & Core Conceptual Characteristics	Theoretical Framework, Epistemology, or Values
Bailes et al. [22]	Orocué, Colombia (rural municipality). Participants are vulnerable children (ages 4–18) of Mestizo, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian heritage and their caregivers.	Qualitative study with a phenomenological approach using seven focus groups with a semi-structured script.	A working model of “community-led local dance programs” whereby “community leaders teach youth traditional Colombian dance forms” to promote health and well-being.	“WHO’s definition of health” (physical, mental, social well-being) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB).
Clements [23]	United Kingdom. Participants are the general public, particularly those who fail to engage with more traditional forms of adult or lifelong education.	Qualitative critique of participatory arts practices through high-profile London case studies.	Characterized as a practice that “bridges the gap between cultural production and its consumption,” emphasizing “collective working, transformation and emancipation”.	“Cultural democracy,” “emancipatory practices,” and the “radical community arts mantra”.
Davis et al. [15]	Orkney Islands, Scotland (rural/remote). Participants are stakeholders (partners, practitioners, volunteers) and dancers with Multiple Sclerosis (MS).	Longitudinal qualitative interview study with reflexive thematic analysis and an interpretivist paradigm.	Defined as “community-based dance for health initiatives” requiring “engagement from diverse stakeholders” to generate “community-level health impacts”.	Social capital theory (bonding, bridging, and linking); “health promotion perspective” and “interpretivist paradigm”.
Ferro & Watts [24]	Milwaukee, WI, USA. Participants are university student dancers and community storytellers (elders aged 50 to 100+).	University-community partnership using oral history and ethnography to produce material for choreographic narrative.	Framed as a “form of narrative representation” providing an “artistic voice for community members”. It is defined by whether performance is “for,” “about,” or “from” the community.	“Service-learning,” “dance ethnography,” and “cultural memory as performance”; values “faith,” “family commitment,” and “hard work”.
Foster & Turkki [17]	Finland (and Germany). Participants are diverse groups and cross-generational groups.	Theoretical study based on the EcoJustice education framework drawing from the authors’ practices as dance educators.	Defined as “dialogical and creative movement-based practices” that aim for a “transformation of people’s values and worldviews toward ecosocially sustainable life orientation”.	“EcoJustice Approach,” “sustainability,” “lived body,” and “co-creation”.
Houston [4]	United Kingdom. Participants are disenfranchised communities, residents of sheltered housing, and adult male maximum security prison inmates.	Critical examination of dance social-inclusion projects and their claims of empowerment.	Characterized by a “set of principles founded on the idea that dance is for everyone,” serving as a road to “social inclusion” and the “transformation of the individual”	“Social inclusion policy,” “empowerment,” and “transformation”.
Huang et al. [25]	China. Target populations are students, minority communities, and older women.	Literature review/synthesis exploring the historical evolution and modernization of dance education in China.	Conceptualized as a “universal expression deeply ingrained in cultural heritage” that acts as a “vehicle for emotional well-being, physical fitness, and social cohesion”.	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), “cultural preservation,” and “Aesthetic Education”.
Ifill [26]	Philadelphia, PA, USA. Participants are citizens and neighbors and students from local middle schools.	In practice article applying frameworks from Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) to traditional dance education.	Defined as “mutually beneficial, culturally sustaining” work that is driven by values rather than form or style.	“Community-Engaged Learning (CEL),” “critical reflection,” “redistributing power,” and “authentic relationship-building”.
Kuppers [27]	Not strictly specified (UK/USA contexts). Participants are disabled people.	Theoretical and pedagogical critique of accessible education and the aesthetics of disability within the current cultural landscape.	Defined through “accessible dance culture”, “the body as core carrier of meaning” where the lived body is the primary site of radical meaning-making and identity is a “negotiated issue in the social realm”.	“Power dynamics of patriarchy”, Feminist theory, social model of disability, and post-modern inquiry.
Lindor et al. [28]	Australia. Participants are autistic children and “buddy dancers”	Pilot randomised waitlist-controlled trial of the AllPlay Dance program.	A recreational practice “delivered by dance teachers” (not therapists) in a group setting “without explicit therapeutic goals,” prioritizing “meaningful participation” and “agency”.	Challenging “ableist systems of value”; values “creativity, imagination and collaboration”.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Author(s)	Country & Participant Demographics	Research Design & Methodology	Definition & Core Conceptual Characteristics	Theoretical Framework, Epistemology, or Values
Palfrey [29]	United Kingdom. Participants are adults experiencing loneliness.	Conceptual/literature foundation article based on analysis of current literature.	Characterized as a “catalyst for fostering meaningful social connections” and a “democratic space” where participants are “viewed as equals” and the focus is on “process over product”.	“Post-pandemic social reintegration” and playfulness as a tool for relationship maintenance.
Pritchard et al. [30]	Leicester, United Kingdom. Participants are South Asian women.	Action research model implemented over seven cycles of iterative development.	Defined as a “dance based community engagement project” used as a tool for “relationship building” and “relational justice” in marginalised communities.	“Relational justice,” “social capital” (Bourdieu), and “action research” (Sagor).
Toohey et al. [31]	East coast of Australia. Participants are older adults (women) (age range 79–97) in a Residential Care Home (RCH).	Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) utilizing an idiographic approach to individual subjective experiences.	Defined as a “meaningful mode of self-expression and continuity” that allows access to “embodied knowledge” through “synchronised seated dance”.	“Embodied musicality,” “lifeworld” connections, and “embodied knowledge”.
Williams et al. [16]	West Cornwall, United Kingdom. Participants are youth (mean age 11 years) in an economically disadvantaged town.	Complexity-informed in-depth case study using mixed-methods (observations, interviews, accelerometry).	Defined as a “peer-led dance group” forming an “inclusive environment” where the focus is on “supportive, inclusive relationships. . . rather than dance as an end in itself”.	“Complexity science,” “Culture of Health,” and Meadows’ “12 complex systems’ leverage points”.
Zhang [32]	Beijing, China. Participants are community residents.	Conceptual/Interdisciplinary analysis from the perspective of psychology and dance art.	Defined as a “combination of art popularization and community services” that enhances belonging through a “body-psychology-culture collaborative model”.	“Body-psychology-culture” collaborative model; “embodied cognition,” and “cultural identity”.
van Heerden [12]	South Africa. Participants are culturally and socio-economically diverse pre-service student teachers.	Qualitative case study of dance-at-home experiences via questionnaires, reflective essays, and semi-structured interviews.	Implicitly defined as an engagement with “dance knowledges of the Other as valid, living and evolving,” recognizing “Indigenous knowledge” over “Western notions”.	“Symbolic interactionism,” “positive psychology,” and “decolonization”.

Table 4. Articles Contributing Primarily to the Implicit Operational Stream: Practice Characteristics, Research Designs, and Review-Derived Conceptual Formulations.

Author(s)	Country & Target Population	Research Design & Methodology	Operational Outcomes & Practice Description	Core Field of Application	Implicit Conceptualization and Core Characteristics
Barr & Oliver [33]	USA; Western concert dance; university/studio dance teachers and students; technique-class contexts.	Conceptual/theoretical paper; literature synthesis; historical discussion; feminist pedagogy & somatics & dance education; non-empirical.	Dialogue; peer work; improvisation; reflection; collaborative learning; sharing experiences; reduced authoritarianism; critique of the “perfect body.”	Dance pedagogy; feminist pedagogy; somatics; higher education/studio training; body image; identity.	Implied as participatory, democratic dance practice via feminist pedagogy; marked by “individual voices,” “collaborative learning,” “critical reflection,” “creating community,” de-centered authority.
Bilitza [34]	Germany; 7 expert choreographers/dance facilitators; heterogeneous groups; community/inclusive dance settings in Europe.	Brief research report; qualitative case study; 7 semi-structured expert interviews; inductive coding; Grounded Theory.	Facilitation of heterogeneous groups; artistic, social-change, personal motivations; projects aim at “inclusion,” “belonging,” “respect,” “exchange,” “empathy”; dance as transformative medium.	Inclusive dance; community dance facilitation; movement science; disability/pedagogy; cultural education.	Implied as a facilitator-led, inclusive “means to achieve inclusion”; characterized by “non-elitist” access, “meaningful interactions,” “belonging,” “respect,” and “bring people together” across difference.

Table 4. Cont.

Author(s)	Country & Target Population	Research Design & Methodology	Operational Outcomes & Practice Description	Core Field of Application	Implicit Conceptualization and Core Characteristics
Buck & Snook [8]	New Zealand; 2 community groups: adolescents with special needs; older adults with moderate–severe dementia; plus university dance students and caregivers/teachers.	Small qualitative/narrative study; constructivist framing; mixed community sessions; interviews with teachers/caregivers; observation; creative tasks; no hypothesis-testing trial.	Mixed groups; “creative movement”; “not teaching participants steps”; “doing, making, sharing, watching, reflecting”; peer support; memory elicitation; enjoyment; confidence; resilience.	Community dance; resilience; dance education; inclusive/creative movement; aging, disability, psychosocial well-being.	Implied as participatory, non-competitive, “for everyone” movement practice; marked by “enjoyment,” “connection with others,” collaboration, adaptability to ability, and resilience-building through creative social exchange.
Conrad [35]	Denmark; 11 women, 60–74; 60+ Modern/Hip Hop dancers; 2 instructors; 1 administrator; Dansekapellet, Copenhagen.	3-month case study; phenomenology-based; observation, focus groups, formal/informal interviews, fieldnotes; thematic coding; reflexivity, member checking.	“Positive, expressive experience”; “take up space”; “grounded”; “seeing and being seen”; “flexibility and improvisation”; music/mirroring; “affective niche.”	Community dance; phenomenology; affectivity; 4E cognition; older-adult dance; expressive movement.	Implied as a “welcoming space where everyone can dance”; group-based expressive practice via “interplay between material and interpersonal elements”; characterized by belonging, co-participation, and mood-shifting “affective niche.”
Huddy [36]	Australia; 26 first-year BFA Dance students (female, 17–22); QUT; university transition cohort.	Interpretive; bifocal viewpoint; mixed methods; questionnaires, focus group, ongoing reflection; constructivist framing; case of expanded TTP.	“physical training in transition”; “learning in transition”; “teaching for transition”; “community of practice”; “belonging”; reflective practice; technique labs; career guidance.	First-year experience; tertiary dance training; student transition; well-being; pedagogy; performance psychology.	Implied as transitional, student-centred collective practice within tertiary dance; characterized by “community of practice,” belonging, autonomy, shared reflection, and holistic support for “successful transition” and well-being.
Markula [37]	Canada; leisure-based dance contexts across UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, China; mixed recreational dancers, seniors, women, youth.	Editorial/theoretical synthesis; special-issue overview; comparative literature framing; no primary dataset.	Reviews “community dance,” social dance, ballroom, street dance, dance fitness, “dance as exercise”; contrasts with commercial/competitive forms.	Leisure studies; recreational dance; gender; health; commercialisation; social inclusion.	Implied as non-competitive leisure practice outside the commercial industry; defined by “participation, belonging, and ownership of the artistic process”; often public, inclusive, empowerment-oriented, and community-targeted.
Merom et al. [38]	Australia; community-dwelling adults aged 60+; Sydney suburbs; cognitively healthy, physically able; <i>n</i> = 115 randomized.	Pragmatic two-arm RCT; ballroom dance vs. walking; delayed baseline; ITT & completer analyses; mixed-effects models.	Dance: “ballroom dancing” twice weekly, 8 months; local “community dance studios”; walking: home program & “community park” socialization.	Aging neuroscience; cognitive intervention; physical activity; social engagement; late-life health.	Implied as a socially embedded leisure intervention in community venues; prioritizes “social dancing” and accessibility; complex, multidimensional motor practice with cognitive/social dimensions, not professional performance.
Pethybridge & Smith [10]	UK; young people with ACEs/trauma histories; community dance spaces; ATTUNE project.	Interdisciplinary critical appraisal; literature-based; trauma-informed care (TIC) lens; no primary trial.	Community Dance as “participatory, creative dance facilitated by professional practitioners”; relational approaches; “co-ownership”; “inclusivity, participation, play and equality”.	Community dance; youth mental health; trauma-informed practice; arts-in-health; social inclusion.	Implied as non-clinical, values-led participatory dance ecology; process-first; relational, responsive, co-owned; prioritises “embodiment,” “safety,” “choice,” and anti-stigmatizing language over technique/perfection.
Petts & McGill [9]	UK; Dance for Health/Dance for Parkinson’s contexts; participants, researchers, stakeholders, funders, artists, volunteers.	Methodological/theoretical critique; literature-based; epistemological/ontological discussion; no primary sample.	“person-centered,” “collaborative mixed methods”; “participate and experience the dancing with others”; “co-researcher”; “non-hierarchical”; arts-based dissemination.	Dance medicine & science; Dance for Health; community outreach; embodiment; health/well-being research.	Implied as embodied, participatory health practice; process-centered; co-created, inclusive, and non-hierarchical; defined by lived experience, tacit knowledge, and mutual participation rather than measurable outcomes.
Snook et al. [6]	New Zealand/USA; marginalized communities; older adults; youth; women; prisoners; school students; mixed community groups.	Meta-analysis; 24 case studies; 11 countries; bricolage; quantitative synthesis & qualitative constructivist reading.	“inclusive practice”; “positive participation and learning”; “celebration of diversity”; “safe space”; “social engagement”; “co-create”; “teach the learners in the room”.	Community dance; dance education; inclusive pedagogy; well-being; social inclusion; culturally responsive teaching.	Implied as a process-led, participant-centered social pedagogy; community dance = accessible, non-competitive, inclusive, relational practice; values belonging, agency, co-creation, and diversity; success measured through interaction, empowerment, and safe participation.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Author(s)	Country & Target Population	Research Design & Methodology	Operational Outcomes & Practice Description	Core Field of Application	Implicit Conceptualization and Core Characteristics
Theodotou [39]	UK; 18 early childhood practitioners; 4 preschool classrooms; 88 children; South-East London.	Qualitative intervention; weekly implementation; training workshop; weekly consultations; short questionnaire & semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis	“collaborative process with children”; “all the voices are heard”; “co-creating their choreography”; “child-led methodology”; “democratic environment”; “supporting the community.”	Early childhood education; dance pedagogy; practitioner confidence; child agency; classroom climate.	Implied as child-centered participatory pedagogy; dance functions as co-created classroom practice; non-technical, flexible, voice-giving, and democratic; emphasizes agency, mutual support, and sustained community spillover.]
Wise et al. [2]	New Zealand; China; Finland; Sweden; UK; Morocco; community dancers/researchers/teachers/conference participants/retreat attendees.	Auto-narrative; narrative inquiry; qualitative reflection; literature comparison; thematic extraction from lived stories.	“democratic dialogue”; “inclusion, participation, and empowerment”; “learning space”; “voluntary participation”; “supporting others’ participation”; share agency.	Community dance; dance education policy; democracy; social justice; cultural difference; arts education.	Implied as a socially fluid, learning-centered democratic practice; values process, equal voice, and shared agency; community dance—participatory space for inclusion, empowerment, and civic modelling rather than performance outcome.

The following abbreviations are used in this table: 4E: Embodied, Embedded, Enacted, and Extended; BFA: Bachelor of Fine Arts; f2f: Face-to-face; ITT: Intention-To-Treat; QUT: Queensland University of Technology; RCT: Randomized Controlled Trial; TTP: Transition Training Program; UK: United Kingdom; US/USA: United States of America. Data extraction and the initial critical appraisal were conducted by one reviewer and subsequently checked by a second reviewer against the full texts and the predefined criteria. Differences in extraction or appraisal judgements were discussed until consensus was reached. Because the included literature comprised methodologically distinct empirical, conceptual, theoretical, and review articles, appraisal judgements were not converted into numerical scores, and articles of different designs were neither ranked nor treated as methodologically equivalent. The appraisal was used to identify design-specific limitations and to qualify the interpretation of each article’s contribution to the synthesis rather than to generate an overall quality rating.

According to the methodological and conceptual heterogeneity of the included literature, which encompassed theoretical essays, qualitative and phenomenological inquiries, mixed-methods studies, and randomized controlled trials, a single standardized risk-of-bias instrument was not applied across all study types. Instead, a structured, review-specific critical appraisal was undertaken using design-sensitive criteria. For empirical studies, the appraisal considered: (a) the clarity and relevance of the study aims; (b) the appropriateness and transparency of the research design and methods; (c) the adequacy of the data supporting the reported findings; (d) the correspondence between the evidence presented and the conclusions drawn; and (e) the reporting of methodological limitations and contextual conditions. For conceptual and theoretical papers, the appraisal considered the clarity and coherence of the theoretical argument, the adequacy of the supporting literature or sources, the correspondence between the cited evidence and the claims advanced, and the acknowledgement of conceptual or contextual limitations. Alignment with the SPIDER framework and the community-based or participatory focus of the review was considered separately as a criterion of relevance and eligibility rather than as an indicator of methodological quality.

2.6. Data Synthesis

Due to the substantial methodological and conceptual heterogeneity of the included literature, a quantitative meta-analysis was not feasible. Instead, data were analyzed using review-specific thematic synthesis approach to address the research questions. The synthesis was conducted iteratively and structured strictly around the review’s dual-perspective framework. In the first phase, data extracted from explicit conceptualizations stream (Table 3) were inductively coded and categorized to identify recurrent macro-level conceptual and normative themes underpinning the field (RQ1). In the parallel second phase, the methodologies, pedagogical applications, and operational outcomes reported in the practice-based literature (Table 4) were systematically synthesized to identify

recurrent micro-level processes, practice-based characteristics, and context-dependent variations (RQ2).

Initial coding was conducted by one reviewer using the definitions, theoretical framings, methodological descriptions, pedagogical applications, and operational outcomes recorded in the extraction tables. The resulting descriptive codes were checked by a second reviewer against the extracted material and, where clarification was required, against the full texts of the contributing studies. Related codes were grouped into provisional analytical categories and iteratively refined into the final themes through repeated comparison with the source material. Differences in coding, category boundaries, or interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. Divergent, contradictory, and context-dependent findings were retained as qualifying evidence rather than excluded during theme development. The credibility and consistency of the analysis were supported through second-reviewer checking, consensus-based resolution of differences, and explicit links between the final themes and the studies contributing to each theme, as documented in the extraction tables and the thematic synthesis.

Study designs were not treated as methodologically equivalent or pooled across a common outcome. Assignment to the two synthesis streams was based on the nature of each study's contribution rather than on design alone: direct definitions and theoretical framings informed the explicit stream, whereas practice-based descriptions, methodologies, and reported operational outcomes informed the implicit stream. Each stream was synthesized separately, and comparison occurred only through the final cross-cutting narrative synthesis. This approach preserved the distinct evidential roles of conceptual, empirical, and review-based contributions while avoiding assumptions of direct comparability.

Finally, a cross-cutting narrative synthesis was performed to juxtapose these two streams. The final comparative stage examined where themes from the explicit and implicit streams converged, diverged, or qualified one another, with attention to study design, geographical context, participant group, facilitation practices, and reported contextual constraints. Convergent findings were considered alongside divergent, contradictory, and context-dependent accounts, so that the synthesis did not assume that the normative commitments associated with community dance were uniformly realized across settings. This comparative synthesis informed the integrated, evidence-informed definition developed in response to RQ3.

During the final cross-cutting synthesis, a distinction was maintained between concepts explicitly used in the included studies and higher-order interpretive terms developed by the authors to describe recurring patterns across the two literature streams. Specifically, "conceptual chameleon" is used as an author-derived metaphor to capture the multiplicity of meanings and the contextual variability of community dance identified in the reviewed literature [1,6]. "Leisure ecology," together with the related ecological formulations used throughout the review, is a review-derived synthesis of descriptions of community dance as a values-led "participatory dance ecology" [10], a "socially embedded leisure intervention" [38], and a "non-competitive leisure practice" situated outside the commercial and competitive dance industry [37]. Similarly, "somatic micro-politics of care" is used as an interpretive label connecting reported practices involving trauma-informed safety and choice [10], the cultivation of an "affective niche" [35], reduced reliance on prescribed steps [8], and challenges to the "perfect body" and traditional hierarchical authority [33]. These terms are therefore not presented as concepts uniformly employed across the included studies, but as analytical constructs developed through the present synthesis. The thematic headings presented in Sections 3.1.2 and 3.2.2 were likewise developed through the inductive synthesis as analytical categories.

“Relational justice,” by contrast, is a source-derived concept used by Pritchard et al. [30] in relation to relationship building within marginalised communities and is treated in this review as a context-dependent framework and aspiration rather than as a universal or consistently demonstrated outcome of community dance. The “lived body” is also a source-derived concept appearing in the theoretical and phenomenological accounts of Foster and Turkki [17], Kuppers [27], and Toohey et al. [31]; however, its identification as the cross-cutting conceptual link between the explicit and implicit literature streams represents an interpretation developed through the present synthesis. Accordingly, the integrated definition and the conceptual model presented in 4.8 subsection are products of the authors’ cross-cutting synthesis and are not attributed to any single included study.

3. Results

Thirty peer-reviewed articles were included in the final synthesis. Following classification according to their primary contribution, 18 articles contributed primarily to the explicit conceptual stream (Table 3) and 12 to the implicit operational stream (Table 4). Articles were assigned according to the nature of their contribution rather than study design alone. The methodological, conceptual, and reporting limitations identified through the appraisal were used to qualify the interpretation of each article’s contribution.

3.1. *Explicit Conceptualizations and Ideological Foundations*

3.1.1. Descriptive and Demographic Mapping for Explicit Definitions

The studies included in this systematic review are presented in Table 3, where the direct, partial, and working conceptual definitions of community dance are synthesized alongside their core theoretical frameworks and ideological foundations. The literature providing definitions spans a broad geographical and demographic spectrum, indicating geographical diversity alongside substantial variation in the populations and contexts represented.

The literature is concentrated in Western Anglo-centric contexts, with the largest cluster of conceptual studies originating from the United Kingdom [4,16,23,29,30] and Scotland [15], followed by the United States [24,26] and Australia [28,31]. A smaller number of studies represent non-Anglo-centric contexts, including China [25], Lebanon [21], Colombia [22], South Africa [12] and Northern Europe/Finland [1,17].

The demographics targeted within these explicit frameworks are highly diverse, indicating that explicit community dance definitions are rarely built around a singular standardized population. Authors conceptualize the practice through cohorts ranging from vulnerable children and youth in marginalized or disadvantaged areas [16,21,22] to disenfranchised adults, including male prison inmates [4] and isolated South Asian women [30]. Furthermore, a significant cluster of literature explicitly defines community dance around aging populations and clinical cohorts, such as institutionalized older adults [31] and individuals with multiple sclerosis [15] or autism [28].

3.1.2. Epistemological and Theoretical Themes

In relation to the first research question (RQ1), the inductive synthesis of the explicit definitions and theoretical frameworks presented in Table 3 identified three recurrent conceptual themes (Figure 2). Across these themes, the lived body emerged as a recurring conceptual link, although its role and emphasis varied among the included studies.

Theme A: Democratic Spaces and Socio-Political Emancipation

A prominent cluster of literature, representing approximately one-third of the explicit conceptualizations, frames community dance not primarily through formal kinetic constraints or physical configurations, but through aspirations toward equity, collective citizenship, and the redistribution of power. Within this perspective, the lived body is

conceptualized as a potential site for questioning normative and institutionalized forms of choreographic control. To this end, democratic dialogue is central; Anttila et al. [1] explicitly frame the practice as a generator of “dialogical, or third spaces” that facilitates “democratic life within diverse and sustainable communities,” intentionally shifting away from modernist, individualistic paradigms of pure self-expressivity. Similarly, Palfrey [29] conceptualizes the moving environment as a “democratic space” in which participants are positioned as equals, with the intention of supporting post-pandemic social reintegration. This democratic orientation is also linked to citizenship and agency in the work of Assaf and Henley [21] who frame the practice through the lens of “civic interaction” and as a communal learning activity in which the pedagogical aim includes “teaching citizenship” alongside dance. These formulations associate community dance with emancipatory aims and the redistribution of power. Drawing on “cultural democracy” and the “radical community arts mantra,” Clements [23] describes the practice as a mechanism that “bridges the gap between cultural production and its consumption,” prioritizing “collective working, transformation and emancipation.” A related emphasis is evident in Ifill’s [26], Community-Engaged Learning framework, which presents community dance as a “mutually beneficial, culturally sustaining” practice oriented toward “redistributing power.” Houston [4] similarly identifies a value-driven commitment to the principle that “dance is for everyone” and to the pursuit of social inclusion. These studies articulate democratic and emancipatory orientations; they do not, by themselves, establish that equality, agency, or power redistribution is consistently achieved in practice.

Explicit Themes in Community Dance Literature

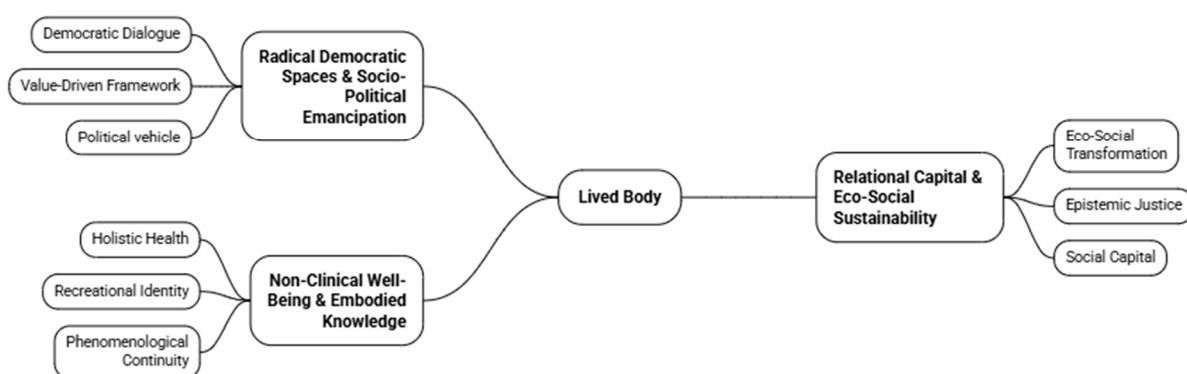


Figure 2. Thematic Analysis of Explicit Conceptualizations and Ideological Foundations in Community Dance Literature (2000–2026).

Theme B: Relational Capital, Social Cohesion, and Eco-Social Sustainability

A second recurrent theme conceptualizes community dance through relationality, social cohesion, and eco-social responsibility. Within this macro-level framework, eco-social sustainability, epistemic justice, and the recognition of diverse movement knowledge emerge as related areas of concern. Foster and Turkki [17] deploy an EcoJustice education framework to define community dance as “dialogical and creative movement-based practices” targeting a fundamental “transformation of people’s values and worldviews toward ecosocially sustainable life orientation”. Crucially, an emerging sub-thematic dimension links this sustainability to the tenets of Epistemic Justice and Decolonization. Several studies link community resilience to respect for local cultural heritage and to efforts to decolonize arts curricula by recognizing Indigenous forms of movement knowledge alongside Western models [12]. To analyze how these spaces function, the literature introduces

complexity science and self-organization as an analytical paradigm. Within this framework, applying complexity science, Williams et al. [16] explicitly define community dance as a peer-led dance group forming an inclusive environment where the focus is firmly on “supportive, inclusive relationships... rather than dance as an end in itself”. This form of self-organization is presented as supporting social capital and interpersonal connection. Using Bourdieu’s social capital and relational justice theories, Pritchard et al. [30] define the practice as an action-oriented tool for “relationship building” within historically marginalized communities. This relational aspect is strongly echoed by Palfrey [29], who terms it a “catalyst for fostering meaningful social connections”, and Huang et al. [25], who conceptualize it as a “universal expression” acting as a vehicle for “social cohesion”. From an interpretive perspective, these accounts position the “lived body” as a possible embodied medium for ecological and relational connection with the wider community and as a link to these macro-level social concerns.

Theme C: Non-Clinical Well-Being, Recreational Identity, and Embodied Knowledge

The third theme distinguishes conceptualizations of community dance from explicitly clinical or therapeutic interventions and frames well-being as subjective, holistic, and phenomenologically connected to the “lived body.” Within these accounts, the emphasis is placed on holistic health and subjective well-being rather than on predetermined clinical outcomes. Grounded in the World Health Organization’s multidimensional definition of health, Bailes et al. [22] frame community-led programs as grass-roots interventions to optimize Subjective Well-Being (SWB). Similarly, Davis et al. [15] use social capital theory to define the practice as “community-based dance for health initiatives” generating “community-level health impacts”. A defining feature of this non-clinical framing is its recreational identity and artistic popularization. Lindor et al. [28] explicitly define the practice as a recreational group activity delivered specifically by dance teachers-not therapists-prioritizing meaningful participation. This identity is reinforced by Zhang [32], who conceptualizes community dance as a “combination of art popularization and community services” through a “body-psychology-culture collaborative model”. A cross-cutting feature of this non-clinical framing is the prioritization of process over product. Several studies associate an emphasis on the moving process, rather than on a finalized performance product, with reduced performance pressure and with conditions that may support individual expression and playfulness [4,29]. Within these accounts, this orientation is also connected to challenges to ableist norms and to the recognition of diverse movement knowledges. Lindor et al. [28] for example, challenge “ableist systems of value” by prioritizing participant “agency,” while van Heerden [12] emphasizes engagement with the “dance knowledges of the Other as valid, living and evolving” and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in relation to dominant Western frameworks. A further strand concerns phenomenological continuity and embodied knowledge. Toohey et al. [31] and Kupperts [27] draw on interpretivist and phenomenological perspectives. Kupperts [27] positions the lived body as the “primary site of radical meaning-making”, while Toohey et al. [31] describe embodied knowledge as a meaningful mode of self-expression and continuity across the lifeworld.

3.2. *Implicit Conceptualizations and Operational Realities*

3.2.1. Descriptive and Demographic Mapping for Implicit Definitions

This section synthesizes the literature that examines the field through indirect approaches, as detailed in Table 4. Rather than providing an explicit definition upfront, these studies provide material from which the implicit formulations and operational characteristics of community dance can be inferred. By analyzing their theoretical structures, empirical research designs, pedagogical applications, and practice descriptions, this review identifies

recurrent parameters of the field across its diverse settings and practical applications. This analysis addresses the operational realities of the field according to the second research question (RQ2) and maps the demographic and geographic landscapes of these implicit studies (RQ3).

The literature approaching community dance from an implicit standpoint reveals a distinct structural configuration regarding where and with whom these practices are examined. Similar to the explicit literature, Anglo-centric territories remain highly represented, with major contributions from the United Kingdom [9,10,39], Australia [36,38], and New Zealand [6,8]. However, the implicit data pool also draws from broader international perspectives, capturing frameworks across Germany [34], Denmark [35], and the United States [6,33]. Furthermore, cross-comparative and multi-sited qualitative reviews significantly expand this map to include Canada, China, Finland, Sweden, and Morocco [2,37].

The implicit literature shifts toward highly specialized, heterogenous, and vulnerable demographics. Rather than discussing general public engagement, these papers evaluate community dances through specific lenses: older adults ranging from cognitively healthy and physically active individuals [35,38] to those facing moderate-to-severe dementia or Parkinson's disease [8,9], young people navigating Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or trauma histories [10], preschool children [39], prisoners, and marginalized community groups [6]. Crucially, a distinct demographic loop exists within tertiary education, where the practice is operationalized through university dance students transitioning into the professional world or acting as facilitators [8,33,36].

3.2.2. Epistemological and Operational Themes

Through an inductive synthesis of the practices, methodologies, and reported outcomes outlined in Table 4, three major themes were identified regarding how community dance is implicitly understood through what it prioritizes and what it intentionally rejects (Figure 3).

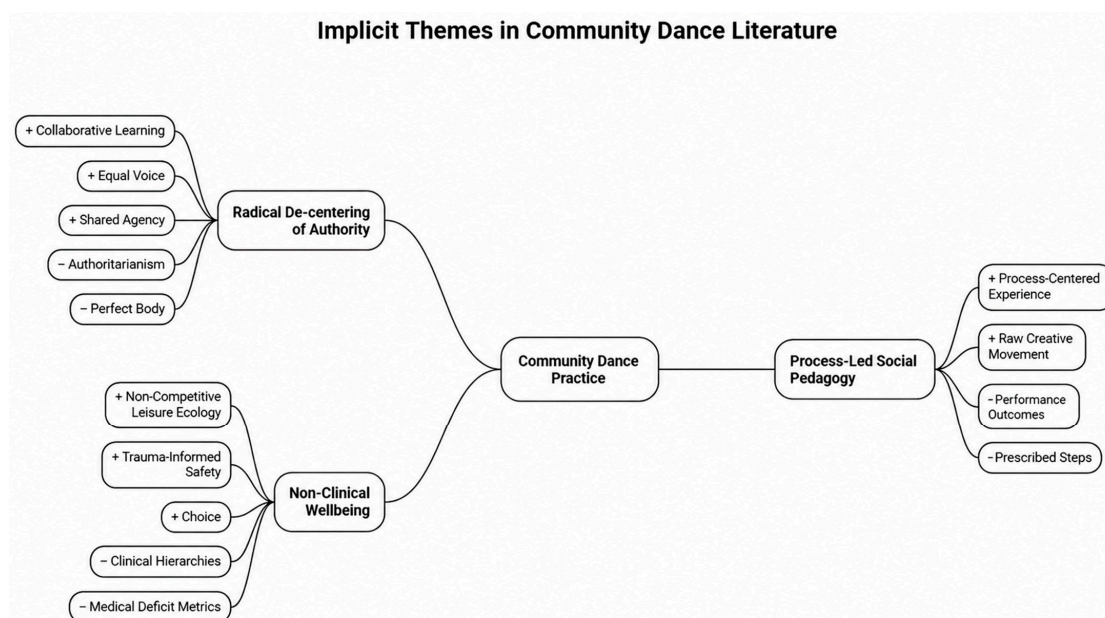


Figure 3. Thematic Analysis of Implicit Conceptualizations and Operational Realities in Community Dance Literature (2000–2026).

Theme A: De-centering of Authority and Critique of Normative Body Ideals

Across a specific subset of studies focused on educational and studio settings, community dance is implicitly operationalized as an act of resistance against rigid, hierarchical

Western concert dance traditions. To achieve a decentered authority, Barr and Oliver [33] frame the practice through feminist pedagogy and somatics, defining it by an intentional reduction in authoritarianism. In this context, community dance is described as a collaborative learning experience in which “individual voices” are elevated. This democratic orientation recurs across several studies in the implicit literature; Wise et al. [2] emphasize a learning space rooted in “equal voice” and “shared agency,” while Theodotou [39] highlights the necessity of a “democratic environment” where “all the voices are heard”. These accounts describe an intentional de-centering of the traditional choreographer-led hierarchy. This structural shift is presented as contributing to the critique of elitism. Petts and McGill [9] explicitly conceptualize this dynamic as a “nonhierarchical” practice, which aligns with Bilitza [34], who views the field as a facilitator-led medium offering “nonelitist” access to heterogeneous groups. Operationally, this model is defined by a rigorous critique of perfection and what it rejects: it actively dismisses the pursuit of the “perfect body” [33] and structural competitiveness. As Markula [37] emphasizes, it positions itself outside the commercial industry, prioritizing participant “ownership of the artistic process” rather than compliance with elite aesthetic forms.

Theme B: Process-Led Social Pedagogy and Kinesthetic Inclusion

Forming the most prevalent operational characteristic across the applied literature, most of the implicit studies emphasize the moving experience over a final performance product, a dynamic explicitly conceptualized as “process-centered” [9] and consistently valued “rather than performance outcome” [2]. In several studies, this orientation is enacted through reduced reliance on prescribed technique; in sessions designed for diverse groups, the practice is characterized by “not teaching participants steps” [8], a stance echoed by Theodotou [39], who describes the pedagogy as inherently “non-technical.” Instead, it is operationalized through creative movement, improvisation, and tasks centered on “doing, making, sharing, watching, reflecting.” This kinetic freedom forms the backbone of a relational pedagogy, which Snook et al. [6] synthesize as a participant-centered “social pedagogy.” Success within this framework is not evaluated via technical excellence or “professional performance” [38]—often actively prioritizing safe participation “over technique/perfection” [10]—but through “positive participation and learning,” “celebration of diversity,” and “teach the learners in the room” [6]. Within these studies, this relational space is described as providing affective scaffolding through a welcoming “affective niche” [35] or a “community of practice” [36], in which interpersonal elements are associated with shifts in participant mood, experiences of belonging, and support during life transitions.

Theme C: Non-Clinical Well-being and Leisure-Based Participation

When deployed within the fields of health, aging, and social care, the implicitly analyzed studies commonly frame community dance as a values-driven, leisure-based ecology that operates outside clinical hierarchies [10]. Within the leisure ecology, a defining operational characteristic is the framing of the practice as a “socially embedded leisure intervention” [38]. Here, the primary driver is not the correction of a medical deficit, but the engagement in a “non-competitive leisure practice” that exists outside the commercial and competitive dance industry [37]. Within this framing, emphasis is placed on “participation, belonging, and ownership of the artistic process” rather than elite performance [37]. This structural positioning is associated with recreational resilience, while psychosocial well-being and resilience are described in relation to “creative social exchange” and enjoyment within a recreational setting, rather than as predetermined clinical outcomes [8]. Consequently, this prioritizes lived experience over metrics, positioning the practice as an embodied health endeavor driven by “lived experience” and “tacit knowledge” [9].

By prioritizing a “person-centered” [9] approach and mutual participation over measurable medical outcomes, community dance is described within these studies as a welcoming and non-hierarchical space. This aligns with the creation of an “affective niche” where interpersonal elements combine to shift participant mood and foster belonging [35], an environment that Bilitza [34] further characterizes by its active cultivation of “empathy” and “respect.” This entire framework culminates in trauma-informed safety, an approach further operationalized by Pethybridge and Smith [10] through a trauma-informed care (TIC) lens. They conceptualize the practice as a non-clinical, values-led “participatory dance ecology” that prioritizes “safety,” “choice,” “play and equality,” and anti-stigmatizing language over standard perfection or rigid technique. Reported indicators include “positive participation and learning” and the “celebration of diversity,” alongside efforts to establish democratic environments in which different voices can be heard [2,6,39].

3.3. Cross-Cutting Synthesis of Explicit and Implicit Streams

In response to RQ3, the cross-cutting comparison identified convergences around participation, relationality, embodied knowledge, shared creative agency, and non-clinical well-being. The explicit stream articulated these features primarily as macro-level democratic, social, and eco-social aspirations, whereas the implicit stream described micro-level practices through which such aspirations may be pursued, including process-led facilitation, reduced emphasis on prescribed technique, shared decision-making, and attention to safety and belonging. Divergences emerged where participatory and democratic rhetoric was not accompanied by evidence of equal agency, or where artistic, institutional, and pedagogical hierarchies remained present. Trauma-informed principles were identified in a smaller subset and were therefore not treated as a universal feature of community dance. Across the two streams, the lived body emerged as a review-derived interpretive link between embodied knowledge, participation, and psychosocial well-being, rather than as a concept used consistently across all included articles. These cross-cutting findings informed the integrated definition developed in the Discussion.

The identified democratic, inclusive, and participatory orientations were not uniformly reported as achieved outcomes. Houston [4] questioned whether participation necessarily produced empowerment, while Clements [23] identified tensions between cultural democracy and institutionally managed participation. Bilitza [34] described tensions between artistic expertise and non-elitist facilitation, and Barr and Oliver [33] indicated that hierarchical authority and normative body ideals could persist within pedagogical settings. These accounts were retained as qualifying evidence, indicating that the themes represent reported aspirations and practices.

4. Discussion

This systematic review examined the relationship between explicit conceptualizations of community dance and implicit accounts of its operational and pedagogical characteristics. The synthesis suggests that community dance is commonly understood not solely as a dance genre, but as a values-led and context-dependent socio-artistic practice. The explicit stream articulated macro-level aspirations toward cultural democracy, equity, social connection, and eco-social sustainability, whereas the implicit stream described micro-level relational, embodied, and pedagogical processes through which these aspirations may be pursued. These included process-led participation, reduced emphasis on prescribed technique, shared creative agency, and attention to safety and belonging; trauma-informed principles were evident in a smaller subset. The extent to which democratic and inclusive aspirations were realized remained dependent on facilitation, participant experience, institutional conditions, and cultural context. Across the two streams, the lived body emerged

as a review-derived interpretive link between embodied knowledge, participation, and psychosocial well-being.

4.1. Conceptual Ambiguities in Defining the Field of Community Dance

The conceptual terrain of community dance is characterized by a deliberate resistance to standardization, with scholars frequently noting that it is “difficult to define all that community dance is and can be” [6] and encompasses a “multiplicity of meanings” [1,6]. This ambiguity is fundamentally rooted in the slippery nature of community itself, which is defined not as a static demographic or geographic entity, but as a “shapeshifting, temporal, socially constructed, and a multi-faceted state and/or process” [6]. Consequently, a primary contradiction exists between defining the field by the targeted group, such as those unified by medical conditions or age, and defining it by the dialogical “third space” [1] produced “in-between” [1] fixed identities. These competing frameworks leave a significant gap in determining whether community dance is a site for “performing difference” or a mechanism that risks the “erasure of difference” to achieve social cohesion [1].

A persistent conceptual overlap exists between community dance and Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). While authors such as Buck and Snook [8] and Conrad [35] identify a clear “crossover” [8] in their focus on creative movement and affectivity [8,35], they highlight a persistent ambiguity regarding intentionality. There is no consensus on whether a practice remains community dance when it adopts targeted therapeutic intentions under professional guidance, or if the mere fact that facilitators are “not considered to be offering ‘therapy’” [8] is the only distinguishing factor in an otherwise therapeutic experience. This tension is further complicated by the “audit culture” [9] of the medical humanities, which pressures practitioners to adopt clinical language such as healing, trauma recovery or intervention [10], while theoretically claiming to prioritize subjective meaningfulness and the “lived body” [17].

Further friction is evident in the interpretation of artistic quality and participation. Clements [23] identifies a critical tension between “democratising culture” and “cultural democracy” [23]. This highlights a recuperation of the field where participation risks fostering pseudo-participation, even spectacle, to express their own artistic vision, rather than serving as a site of genuine participant agency. Ambiguity remains regarding the role of the practitioner [23]: Bilitza [34] suggests a dualistic requirement for facilitators to maintain high artistic expertise while simultaneously delivering non-elitist practices. This contradicts traditional pedagogical models in regions like China, where instructional methods often “lean towards indoctrination” [25] and the pressure for technical perfectionism remains dominant, clashing with Western ideals that value “fluid and positive student- teacher relationships that encouraged collaboration” [6].

Finally, terminology surrounding inclusivity remains vaguely operationalized across definitions. While it is touted as a core value, researchers note a conflict between the rhetoric of social advocacy and the reality of many schemes being offered merely as a leisure pursuit [4,37] that prioritizes individual well-being over systemic change. The field struggles to reconcile whether the “radical value” [4] of community dance lies in the “body as site” [4], as an internal, subjective liberation, or in the instrumental value of dance in the community as a tool for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These unresolved debates suggest that the field’s strength lies in an “epistemological untethering” [9], though this fluidity continues to present challenges for researchers seeking a unified conceptual foundation. These tensions also indicate that participatory structures do not automatically eliminate hierarchy or ensure equal agency, since democratic and inclusive aims remain dependent on how authority, access, difference, and artistic decision-making are negotiated within each setting.

Building on these ambiguities, while community dance is frequently theorized as a democratic space, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent tensions and power relations that can undermine these aspirations. As Houston notes, there is a danger in assuming that participation automatically equates to empowerment, emphasizing that change is not always guaranteed or even welcomed by participants [4]. Furthermore, power imbalances can be inadvertently reproduced within the pedagogical space itself. The legacy of authoritarian teaching methods and the lingering myth of the “perfect body” often create inequalities that contradict the field’s inclusive rhetoric [33]. These tensions are particularly pronounced in university-community partnerships, where differences in socioeconomic privilege and institutional resources necessitate continuous critical reflection to ensure the intervention does not inadvertently inflict harm [26]. This synthesis highlights that achieving the field’s intended democratic aims may require a constant, reflexive dismantling of these hierarchical structures, rather than assuming equality naturally emerges simply by dancing together.

4.2. *The Convergence of Rhetoric and Reality in the “Third Space”*

The dual analysis of explicit and implicit scholarship suggests that community dance operates as a conceptual chameleon, characterized by a recurring relationship between ideological rhetoric and operational reality [1,4,23,30]. While the explicit literature positions the field through macro-level commitments to cultural democracy, equity, and social transformation, the implicit literature describes their practice-based expression through a micro-politics of care prioritizing “safety,” “choice,” and the “affective niche” [6,10,35]. This intersection manifests as a dialogical “Third Space”, a particular “condition for pedagogical encounters” where diverse populations can foster a “democratic life within diverse and sustainable communities” and enact the core value of “living together” [1]. Lastly, the synthesis suggests that the democratic aspirations articulated in theory are pursued in practice through efforts to de-center hierarchical authority and question the pursuit of the “perfect body” within studio environments [23,33].

4.3. *Community and Recreational Dance: Porous Boundaries Within a Leisure Context*

Community dance is ontologically situated as a leisure practice [37], however its relationship with the broader recreational dance industry is fluid rather than strictly polarized. While commercial or competitive recreational forms [37] often prioritize spectator appeal, recreational dance may converge with community dance when it embraces a process-led, participatory philosophy operating outside market hierarchies. Within the reviewed literature, community dance is commonly framed as an anti-elitist, process-led practice that shifts focus toward participation, belonging, and ownership of the artistic process [37] and a radical focus on belonging and agency [6]. Within this framework, the recreational space may be reframed from passive entertainment as a site for “teaching them citizenship” [21] and a platform for “democratic dialogue” [2].

This synthesis suggests that community dance does not necessarily require the complete abandonment of structured genres; rather, improvisation can be dynamically embedded within the movement vocabulary of a specific dance style. When a specific technique is stripped of its competitive pressures and used as a shared creative language for structured improvisation, the recreational setting may develop characteristics associated with a community dance ecology. This process can be interpreted in relation to the Serious Leisure Perspective [40] and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [41]. As Stebbins conceptualizes, leisure activity serves as a “vital linchpin” that links individual psychological experience with meso- and macro-level social outcomes. Concurrently, SDT provides the precise psychological framework for how this linchpin operates: by actively resisting traditional

motivational models, controlling mandates, and institutional pressures that undermine wellness. From an SDT perspective, community dance practices may support environments that are conducive to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The experiential component may therefore represent one possible pathway through which individual psychological experiences are connected with broader participatory and social aims.

This leisure ecology may provide a supportive context for psychosocial resilience and mental well-being [6,8], particularly in contrast to strongly product-driven educational settings. Indeed, recent quantitative evidence in Greek recreational dance populations highlights that perceived isolation operates as a strong negative predictor of life satisfaction, while self-judgment heavily undermines well-being [42,43]. These findings underscore that educational policies and practices anchored in performance pressure can exacerbate alienation and fail to support learners' needs. Transitioning toward trauma-informed community designs, in which techniques can serve as a basis for collective improvisation and self-kindness, may support communal connection and shared experiences of common humanity. The reviewed studies associate this form of practice with confidence and resilience through enjoyment [8] because it operates as a non-competitive [8], trauma-informed space [10] anchored in relational justice [30]. By removing performance pressures [38] and reframing stylized technique as a tool for personal and shared agency, this approach may reposition the lived body as a site of personal and social agency and may help address aspects of the gap between knowledge and policy in dance education.

4.4. *The Rhetoric vs. Reality Paradigm—From Theory to Relational Justice*

The explicit discourse surrounding community dance frequently articulates a macro-political mandate, framing the practice through high-level ideals such as cultural democracy [23], the EcoJustice Approach [17], and the transformation of the individual [4]. Conversely, the implicit reality of applied studies decodes these sweeping concepts through an intentional micro-politics of care, where success is defined by operationalizing safety and adopting trauma-informed care (TIC) principles [10], prioritizing an affective niche [35], and rejecting the practice of teaching participants steps [8]. This movement from theoretical rhetoric to operational reality points toward the cultivation of relational justice [30]. As Pritchard et al. [30] assert, relational justice functions as an action-oriented tool for relationship building within marginalised communities, thereby offering a framework through which more equitable relationships may be supported. These democratic ideals are physically grounded through somatic resistance, as practitioners seek to challenge the pursuit of the "perfect body" and traditional hierarchical authority, potentially enabling empowerment to be experienced in embodied as well as conceptual terms [33].

4.5. *Community Dance as a Non-Clinical Well-Being Ecology*

Operating within this leisure framework, community dance is framed as a non-clinical well-being ecology that may provide a non-clinical context in which embodied and relational experiences are not interpreted exclusively through medical or therapeutic frameworks. Despite frequently engaging populations with adverse childhood experiences or trauma histories, the reviewed approaches commonly avoid exclusively clinical terminology, actively prioritizing safety, choice, and "anti-stigmatizing language" [10]. Instead of adopting rigid clinical hierarchies, it seeks to support a non-discriminatory environment informed by trauma-informed care (TIC), defined as a values-led "participatory dance ecology" [10]. Consequently, the field challenges an exclusive reliance on standardized medical metrics. Instead, it elevates the participant's lived experience and tacit knowledge as the primary sites of meaning, prioritizing mutual participation over measurable outcomes [9].

This ontological orientation may support the co-creation of an affective niche [35], where interpersonal relations and expressive movement provide a supportive relational context. Within this niche, the dance group frequently transcends a standard class dynamic to operate as community-led local dance programs [22], where the focus is firmly on forming supportive, inclusive relationships rather than dance as an end in itself [16]. This dynamic may offer participants opportunities to negotiate experiences of vulnerability outside rigid clinical hierarchies and to develop social connection through civic interaction and socially structured exchanges [21].

4.6. Global Synthesis and the Decolonization of Knowledge

According to the third research question (RQ3), the global mapping of the literature suggests increasing attention to the decolonization of knowledge and epistemic justice across parts of the field. In a critical response to the dominance of Western Eurocentric models, community dance was conceptualized as a platform to engage with the “dance knowledges of the Other as valid, living and evolving,” explicitly recognizing “Indigenous knowledge” over Western notions [12]. These articles also illustrate the geographical and demographic diversity of the contexts in which community dance has been applied. Rather than serving a generic public, the field includes settings designed for heterogeneous and potentially vulnerable populations. This expansive reach is evidenced by applied interventions encompassing diverse populations, such as inmates in an adult male maximum security prison [4], students at the Al-Sarab Alternative Dance School in Lebanon [21], and vulnerable children of Mestizo, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian heritage learning traditional Colombian dance forms [22]. Crucially, the presence of community dance across these different contexts suggests that embodied forms of communication may support engagement across some cultural and linguistic differences [27]. In each of these diverse settings, the reviewed accounts describe attempts to establish dialogical, or third spaces [1] which may support the expression and negotiation of marginalized physical and cultural identities.

4.7. Methodological Implications of the Reviewed Literature

The reviewed literature employed predominantly qualitative, interpretive, arts-based, and mixed-method approaches, reflecting the difficulty of capturing embodied, relational, and context-dependent experiences through standardized outcomes alone. Petts and McGill [9] observe that traditional scientific paradigms relying heavily on measurable outcomes may not fully capture the subjective nuances of the practice. To counter this, they advocate for person-centered, collaborative mixed methods that elevate lived experience and tacit knowledge [9]. Similarly, scholars like Snook et al. [6] use a bricolage approach, intentionally combining quantitative synthesis with a qualitative constructivist reading to examine multiple dimensions of the field.

Several authors advocate for methodological and epistemological broadening in the study of the practice. It is recommended that the research team acts as a co-researcher who must “participate and experience the dancing with others” [9]. By embedding researchers into the practice, this approach may reduce conventional researcher-participant hierarchies and support more collaborative forms of communication [9].

Across these varied methodological frameworks, several recurring operational indicators are identifiable. Evaluating success transcends technical perfection; rather, it is anchored in positive participation and learning [6]. These recurring patterns emphasize process over product and frequently frame the practice as process-centered [9]. Furthermore, the creation of community is not evaluated through rigid metrics, but through indicators

such as social engagement [6] and the establishment of supportive, inclusive relationships rather than dance as an end in itself.

4.8. A New Holistic, Review-Derived and Evidence-Informed Definition of Community Dance

To contextualize the definition proposed in this review, it is necessary to acknowledge the porous but critical boundaries between community, recreational, and clinical dance. As highlighted in the literature, differentiating these domains requires a nuanced consideration of intention, context, facilitation, and participant experience [8]. Regarding intention, community dance prioritizes social inclusion, participation, and artistic exploration, whereas clinical dance movement therapy (DMT) is driven by explicit psychotherapeutic or rehabilitative goals [28,35], and commercial recreational dance often centers on technical mastery or competitive success [37]. In terms of context and facilitation, community dance is typically situated in public or non-clinical spaces and facilitated by professional dance artists, whereas clinical interventions occur under the guidance of licensed health professionals within medical frameworks [28]. Finally, the participant experience in community dance emphasizes co-ownership of the creative process and democratic dialogue rather than passive adherence to prescribed therapeutic treatments or commercial consumerism [37]. Therefore, the definition proposed below does not attempt to offer a definitive resolution to ongoing debates, but rather serves as a theoretically informed interpretation designed to map current operational and rhetorical intersections in the field.

The synthesis suggests that community dance is commonly configured as a values-led, non-competitive, and often leisure-based socio-artistic practice defined less by a fixed movement vocabulary than by its participatory processes, relational orientation, and attention to embodied forms of knowledge. Within this review-derived conceptualization, the lived body serves as an interpretive link between participation, meaning-making, and psychosocial well-being. Community dance is associated with aspirations toward accessibility, shared creative agency, democratic dialogue, relational justice, and recognition of diverse movement knowledges, although the realization of these aspirations remains context-dependent (Figure 4).

Community Dance: Holistic Conceptualization

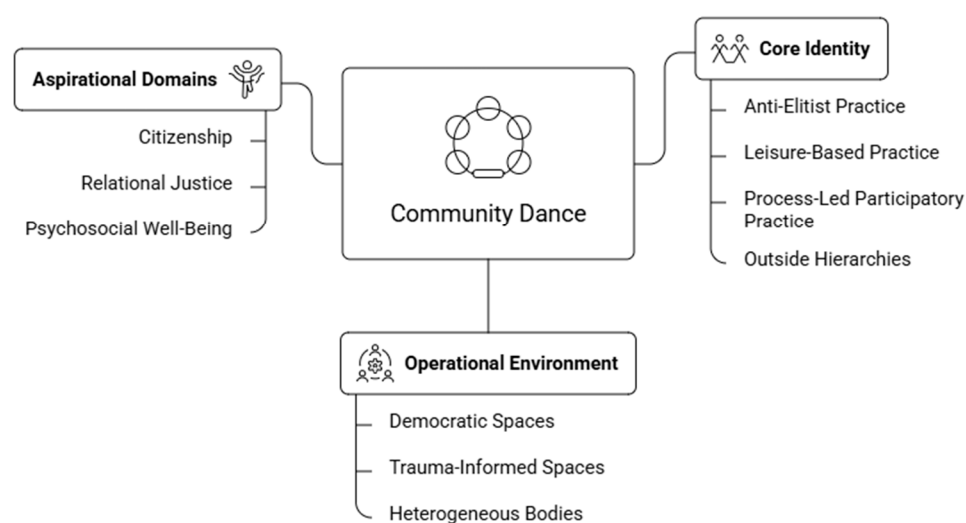


Figure 4. A Conceptual Model of the Review-Derived, Evidence-Informed Definition of Community Dance.

In summary, community dance is defined as an anti-elitist, leisure-based, process-led participatory dance practice that operates outside commercial, clinical and competitive hierarchies, seeking to create democratic, trauma-informed spaces in which heterogeneous bodies co-own the creative process and the lived body is positioned as a key site of citizenship, relational justice and psychosocial well-being.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of community dance programs, future designs may need to shift from the simple replication of “what” is taught (the kinetic form and technique) to a deeper understanding of “why” the group exists. According to Williams et al. [16], this approach is ideally framed through complexity science and Meadows’ framework of “12 leverage points to intervene in a system”. Based on this theoretical framework, the most radical and sustainable change within a system is not achieved by altering superficial rules or imposing top-down, predictable physical drills, but through an absolute commitment to its central paradigm, namely, the core values of the intervention. Future research and practice should focus on cultivating a broader “Culture of Health,” allowing the practice to organically self-organize as a dynamic, complex system that adapts to the emergent relational dynamics and needs of each community, without losing its ideological orientation.

As contemporary societies confront polarization, isolation, and fragmentation, the reviewed literature suggests that community dance may contribute to settings in which diverse populations engage in collective movement, learning, and social interaction. Its capacity to bring together heterogeneous and often marginalized groups indicates potential contributions to democratic coexistence, collective agency, and mutual resilience. These contributions, however, remain dependent on the accessibility, facilitation, cultural context, and relational conditions of individual programs.

4.9. Limitations and Future Directions

The current literature exhibits distinct methodological and geographic constraints that limit the universality of its findings. A primary challenge is the pervasive advocacy bias, where studies, frequently authored by practitioner-researchers, predominantly highlight positive psychosocial outcomes while under-reporting intervention failures, attrition rates, or interpersonal conflicts within groups. This imbalance limits the extent to which democratic, empowering, or socially transformative outcomes can be regarded as typical of community dance programs more broadly. Despite the overall heterogeneity of study designs, the empirical evidence base remains methodologically imbalanced, with a disproportionate reliance on short-term qualitative case studies and self-reported data rather than longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches combining lived experience with objective metrics. This is compounded by an Anglo-centric hegemony, which applies Western evaluation criteria and theoretical models to global practices, potentially marginalizing distinct cultural nuances and Indigenous forms of community-based movement found in non-Western contexts. The restriction to English-language publications may have further reinforced this geographic and epistemic imbalance by excluding relevant non-English scholarship.

To advance past this spirit of advocacy towards institutional validation, future research must prioritize empirical rigor, long-term sustainability, and economic viability. Investigators should adopt mixed-method frameworks that triangulate qualitative phenomenological insights of the lived body with quantitative psychological or physiological markers to provide robust evidence of impact. Longitudinal studies are critically needed to track the durability of psychosocial resilience and well-being outcomes months or years after an intervention concludes. Furthermore, future scholarship should explicitly explore the intersection of community dance with contemporary leisure and recreation frameworks. Investigating whether and under what conditions its positioning as a serious leisure pursuit supports political agency may help clarify its relationship with democratic participation

and lifelong well-being. Finally, expanding the geographic scope to decolonize knowledge production and incorporating cost-effectiveness analyses would help assess whether and under what conditions this values-led ecology may provide a sustainable and financially viable non-clinical contribution to public health.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review proposes a conceptual consolidation of community dance that seeks to clarify aspects of its historical ambiguity by framing it as a distinct, value-driven socio-artistic ecology. By juxtaposing high-level ideological rhetoric with on-the-ground operational realities, the synthesis suggests that community dance cannot be understood solely as a stylistic genre; rather, it is commonly framed as a pedagogical and political practice grounded in process-led engagement and the lived body and associated with aspirations toward relational justice.

The synthesis of the literature suggests a recurring process of translation within the field: the macro-political aspirations of cultural democracy, equity, and eco-social sustainability are pursued in practice through what this review interprets as a somatic micro-politics of care. Rather than relying primarily on rigid choreographic vocabularies or clinical protocols, the reviewed literature associates the de-centering of authoritarian hierarchies, the questioning of normative bodily ideals, and the cultivation of trauma-informed affective niches with social connection and phenomenological well-being.

To encapsulate this dual perspective, the review proposes an evidence-informed conceptualization: community dance is an anti-elitist, leisure-based, and process-led participatory dance practice operating outside commercial, clinical, and competitive hierarchies, which seeks to create democratic, trauma-informed spaces where heterogeneous bodies may co-own the creative process, positioning the lived body as a key site of citizenship, relational justice, and psychosocial well-being.

This synthesized definition may serve as an analytical reference point for the field. By helping to distinguish community dance from adjacent therapeutic or commercial interventions, the framework may support policymakers, educators, and researchers in developing field-sensitive curricula and assessment tools that consider embodied participation, democratic aspirations, and non-clinical well-being alongside, rather than exclusively through, clinical metrics.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
BFA	Bachelor of Fine Arts
CEL	Community-Engaged Learning
DMT	Dance Movement Therapy
IPA	Interpretative phenomenological analysis
ITT	Intention-To-Treat
MS	Multiple Sclerosis
OSF	Open Science Framework
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RCH	Residential Care Home
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SPIDER	Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type
SWB	Subjective Well-Being
TIC	Trauma-informed care
TTP	Transition to Practice/Transition Training Program
WHO	World Health Organization

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