

Sensi Model: An Inclusive, Multisensory Dance Education Innovation To Enhance The Engagement Of Students With Special Needs In Inclusive Elementary School Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Teaching dance in elementary school inclusion classes presents unique challenges when there are students with special needs whose learning characteristics differ from those of regular students. This study aims to develop and implement a dance instruction model called SENSI (Stimulus, Exploration, Reasoning, Art, Inclusion) as an innovative, inclusive, multisensory arts education approach. The model was developed using a design thinking approach with four stages: empathize, define, ideate, and prototype. It was then piloted in an elementary school inclusion class consisting of nine students, one of whom had special needs, using animal dance as the subject matter, with one session per week (2 class hours). Data were collected through participatory observation by the teacher, who also served as the researcher. The results showed that the student with special needs was able to follow the taught dance movements, especially when positioned in front of or alongside the teacher, although his focus was easily distracted and his mood tended to fluctuate. The SENSI model also encouraged typical students to be more open to interacting and collaborating with their peers with special needs. These findings indicate that an experience-based multisensory approach can serve as an alternative strategy for inclusive dance education in elementary schools.



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A. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education emphasizes the right of every student to participate in learning alongside their peers, regardless of individual abilities and learning needs (Heinz et al., 2025; Suharta et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Wolff et al., 2021; Ydo, 2020). However, differences in learning pace, participation, and modes of expression remain challenges for teachers. In arts education, approaches that prioritize rapid instruction and final outcomes may not adequately accommodate students who require additional guidance and time (Boswell et al., 2023; Fajrie et al., 2024). These challenges are particularly relevant to dance education, which involves motor coordination, rhythm, movement imitation, and interaction with classmates (Nakhwin et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2025; Ummah & Nadlir, 2024). Instruction based primarily on uniform demonstrations may therefore limit opportunities for students with diverse needs to participate meaningfully (Fortin et al., 2023; Millard et al., 2021; Ruin et al., 2023).

Previous studies have highlighted the relevance of multisensory learning and social support in inclusive dance education. Anggraeni & Sutini (2025) reviewed multisensory approaches to traditional dance instruction for students with special needs, emphasizing

the use of multiple sensory modalities. Boswell et al. (2023) identified peer support and accommodating program design as important factors in inclusive dance participation. Similarly, Villamil Matallana & Paredes-Velasco (2025) examined dance competencies and emotional states among children with special needs. Together, these studies highlight the relationship between sensory experiences, social interaction, and participation. However, further classroom-based research is needed to explore how these principles can be organized into a structured learning model for inclusive elementary dance education.

To address this need, the SENSI model (Stimulus, Exploration, Reasoning, Art, and Inclusion) was developed through classroom observations and discussions. Its conceptual foundation draws on multisensory learning (Cuturi et al., 2022; Dunn & Dunn, 1978; Gazioğlu & Karakuş, 2023), humanistic learning theory, which places students' self-acceptance and self-actualization at the core of the learning process (Maslow, 1943; Pramudyani et al., 2021; Rogers, 2008), the principles of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020; Wolff et al., 2021; Ydo, 2020), and the concept of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kang et al., 2022; Kolb & Kolb, 2022; Williams & Sembiante, 2022). Its distinguishing feature is the integration of five interconnected stages sensory stimulation, movement exploration, reflection on experiences, artistic creation, and appreciation through inclusive participation into a complete learning cycle repeated during each session. This structure connects individual movement engagement with creative expression and peer collaboration, positioning inclusion as an integral part of dance learning rather than a separate activity.

The SENSI model is intended to provide a practical framework for adapting dance activities to students' differing needs and learning paces. Its potential contribution is both practical, through structured multisensory activities and collaborative movement creation, and conceptual, through integrating individual engagement with social inclusion within one learning cycle. The study is also relevant to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, particularly in relation to equitable participation (Sain et al., 2024; United Nation, 2015). Nevertheless, the model's contribution requires further examination beyond the initial classroom implementation.

Accordingly, this study aims to describe the development of the SENSI model and explore its initial implementation in an inclusive elementary dance class. It focuses on the participation of one student with special educational needs and the social interactions observed between that student and classmates during five learning sessions. The findings are intended to provide an exploratory account of the model's classroom implementation and inform its further development and evaluation.

B. METHODS

This study is a research and development (R&D) project that employs a design thinking approach to develop a learning model (Gustiani, 2019; Komalasari et al., 2025; Ramot & Bialik, 2023). The SENSI model development process was carried out in four stages: (1) empathize, which involved observing the learning context and conducting interviews with students and classroom or supporting teachers to understand the learning needs and challenges of students with special educational needs; (2) define, formulating the core issues in arts education; (3) ideate, developing alternative solution ideas through brainstorming and selecting them based on feasibility, appeal, and meaningfulness; and (4) prototype, formulating the SENSI model along with its complete learning stage structure (Li & Zhan, 2022). During the development process, the initial model was discussed with the researcher's supervisor to consider its suitability for the

identified classroom needs and the planned learning activities. This discussion served as an informal review of the model before its classroom implementation and did not constitute formal expert validation using a standardized validation instrument.

The resulting model was then tested in a dance class with the theme “animal dance” in an inclusive elementary school classroom. The research subjects consisted of nine students: eight regular students and one student with special needs. The instruction took place over five sessions one session per week, each lasting two class periods (2 JP), so the entire intervention spanned five weeks. The researcher served directly as both the classroom teacher and the researcher (teacher-researcher), so data were collected through participatory observation during the learning process (Klette, 2023; Rodgers et al., 2022), an approach commonly used in classroom observation studies involving students with special needs. To protect student privacy, the identities of the research subjects were anonymized, and no visual documentation (photos or videos) that could identify the students was included. This study obtained informed consent from the students’ parents or guardians as well as the school administration prior to implementation.

The primary instrument used during the classroom implementation was an observation sheet or record focusing on five aspects: engagement, self-expression, collaboration, appreciation, and student autonomy. These aspects were selected based on the characteristics of dance learning, which involves active participation, exploration and self-expression, collaborative interaction, appreciation of artistic experiences, and student development (Gregory et al., 2026; Liu & Vorawattanachai, 2026; Palfrey, 2026; Silang et al., 2026). Engagement referred to students’ responses to questions, stimuli, and learning instructions; self-expression referred to their attempts to communicate ideas and demonstrate movements; collaboration concerned their participation in group activities and interactions with peers; appreciation involved their responses to and recognition of peers’ contributions; and student autonomy referred to their attempts to initiate or perform movements with reduced teacher assistance. These aspects served as descriptive observation indicators rather than a standardized rating scale.

The observational records were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively to examine student engagement and social interaction during the implementation of the SENSI model (Bowen, 2009; Luthfiyani & Murhayati, 2024). The analysis focused on organizing the available records according to the five observation aspects, identifying relevant evidence of students’ participation and responses, and interpreting these observations in relation to the learning activities and stages of the SENSI model. Particular attention was given to students’ participation, the guidance provided by the teacher, and interactions between students with and without special educational needs. The findings were presented as a contextual description of the implementation rather than as numerical measurements or evidence of causal effects. Given the limited scope of the classroom implementation and the availability of observational records, the analysis was exploratory in nature.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study indicate that the limitations traditionally associated with students with special needs in dance education are not a matter of “inability,” but rather a matter of how appropriate the stimuli and support provided are. Over the course of five sessions, the SENSI model successfully guided students with special needs through progressive stages of engagement from simply responding to questions, independently imitating movements, to performing a sequence of dance movements alongside their classmates. This section outlines these findings step by step, beginning with the model’s

structure, its implementation using the “animal dance” theme, student engagement at each stage of learning, and its impact on social interaction in the classroom.

1. The Five Stages of the SENSI Model as a Framework for Inclusive Multisensory Arts Education

The SENSI Model was developed to accommodate differences in student participation and learning needs in inclusive arts education. It comprises five interconnected stages: Stimulus, Exploration, Reasoning, Art, and Inclusion. These stages guide students from sensory engagement and movement exploration to reflection, artistic creation, and mutual appreciation. Rather than requiring students to achieve a final performance immediately, the model provides opportunities for participation according to individual learning needs. The focus and activities of each stage are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The Five Stages of the SENSI Model

Stage	Focus	Key Activities
S – Stimulus	Initial sensory stimulation	Providing multisensory stimuli (music, colors, and textures) to activate the senses and stimulate students’ curiosity.
E – Exploration	Exploring artistic materials and movements	Students freely explore movements, sounds, or artistic media according to their abilities.
N – Reasoning	Reflection and simple meaning-making	Engaging students in brief dialogues to develop aesthetic awareness and emotional recognition.
S – Art	Creating artwork or a mini performance	Students create movements or artworks based on their choices and abilities without pressure to achieve a particular final outcome.
I – Inclusion	Appreciation and collaboration	All students give appreciation and recognition to one another on an equal basis.

2. Repeated Application of the SENSI Model Cycle to the Theme of Animal Dances

The SENSI model was implemented as a recurring learning cycle rather than as one stage per week. During each session, students engaged in the five stages through sensory stimulation, movement exploration, reflection on movement preferences, group choreography, and mutual appreciation. Repeating this cycle provided opportunities for students to become familiar with the learning activities while allowing the teacher to adjust movement guidance and instructional pace according to students’ responses.

In the animal dance lessons, multisensory activities involved observing visual representations of animals, listening to music, and exploring animal movements through imitation and physical movement. Students then expressed their movement preferences and participated in group choreography. Table 2 summarizes the observed forms of engagement, teacher support, and inclusive collaboration during the implementation.

Table 2. Synthesis of Observed Student Engagement and Inclusive Collaboration

Observation Aspect	Observed Behaviors	Role of Teacher Support	Evidence of Participation
Cognitive engagement	Students responded to questions about the animals and their movements.	The teacher provided verbal prompts and sensory stimuli.	Verbal responses to questions about animal movements.
Motor engagement	The student with special educational needs demonstrated a bird movement after a brief	The teacher allowed additional processing time and provided movement guidance.	Independent imitation of a familiar movement and participation in a guided sequence.

	pause and followed a sequence of movements.		
Self-expression	The student expressed preferences for particular animal movements and demonstrated these movements.	The teacher invited students to identify preferred movements and explain their choices.	Verbal expression of preferences and physical demonstration of movements.
Collaboration	The student participated in group choreography by following peers' movement cues and, at certain moments, demonstrating a movement before a peer.	The teacher organized group activities and encouraged peer participation.	Participation in shared movement creation, including responsive and proactive contributions.
Inclusion and peer support	Peers encouraged the student to participate and offered support when the student was reluctant to join the activity.	The teacher initially encouraged peer involvement and gradually allowed students to take greater initiative.	Peer invitations, encouragement, and assistance during group activities.
Student autonomy	Peers arranged the dance formation independently beginning in the third session.	The teacher provided opportunities for students to organize the formation with decreasing assistance.	Independent arrangement of the group formation by peers.

As shown in Table 2, student engagement involved verbal responses, movement imitation, self-expression, collaboration, and peer support. Multisensory activities included observing visual representations of animals, listening to music, and exploring animal movements through imitation and physical movement. Combined with flexible teacher guidance and peer interaction, these activities provided opportunities for participation in inclusive dance learning. However, the findings remain descriptive and do not establish measurable improvement.

3. Cognitive and Motor Engagement During the Stimulus-Exploration Stage

The most notable observations during the stimulus and exploration stages concerned students' verbal responses and movement imitation. When the teacher asked, "What animals are we going to learn about?", all students, including the student with special educational needs, were able to respond, although the latter's articulation was less clear than that of the other students. This response indicated participation in the initial question-and-answer activity following the presentation of sensory stimuli, including music and visual representations of animal movements.

During movement exploration, the student with special educational needs briefly paused before independently demonstrating a bird movement when prompted by the teacher. The student was also able to follow a sequence of combined movements with teacher guidance. These observations highlight the importance of allowing sufficient processing time and providing graduated movement support rather than interpreting a delayed response as an inability to participate. This interpretation is consistent with research on students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms (Ediyanto et al., 2021).

Taken together, the observations illustrate three forms of engagement: verbal responses to questions, imitation of individual movements, and participation in a sequence of movements with guidance. This pattern provides a descriptive account of

how engagement was expressed during the observed learning activities. It also corresponds with Anggraeni & Sutini (2025) discussion of multisensory dance instruction, which emphasizes visual support, rhythmic music, and gradual modification of movement tasks. However, the present findings should be interpreted as contextual observations rather than evidence of a measurable developmental trajectory across all five sessions.

4. Engagement in the Reasoning, Art, and Inclusion Stages: The Role of Position and Learning Pace

During the reasoning stage, the student with special educational needs identified preferred animal movements and connected these preferences to physical actions. For example, the student demonstrated a bird's movement by flapping both hands and expressed a preference for monkey movements because of their dynamic actions, such as jumping and running. When asked to explain these preferences, the student responded, "Because I like birds, I like flying, I like everything." Although simple, this response illustrates the student's ability to relate movement preferences to personal interests.

During the art stage, which involved group choreography, the student generally followed peers' movement cues but also demonstrated initiative. On some occasions, the student performed a movement before the peer who had verbally suggested it. This behavior indicates that participation included both responding to others and initiating familiar movements. The student also appeared enthusiastic when positioned at the front of the group, where movement demonstrations could be observed more directly and teacher guidance was more accessible. This observation is consistent with the emphasis on environmental and perceptual preferences in the learning model proposed by Dunn and Dunn (1978), particularly the potential relevance of visual and kinesthetic experiences to learning.

The observations also indicated that the student needed repeated practice to perform movement sequences but could recall the movements after repetition. This suggests the importance of adapting the pace of instruction and providing opportunities for repeated practice, rather than assuming that initial delays reflect an inability to learn the movements. The student's attention and emotional state also varied during learning activities, and periods of distress sometimes required additional time and support before participation could resume. These observations highlight the importance of flexible instruction, appropriate positioning, and responsive teacher support when implementing the SENSI model in an inclusive dance classroom.

5. Social Interaction and Inclusive Collaboration

The implementation of the SENSI model was accompanied by changes in classroom interaction. During the early sessions, the teacher actively encouraged students to involve their classmate with special educational needs in shared activities. Subsequently, peers began initiating interactions with less direct prompting from the teacher. This pattern suggests that structured teacher guidance may create opportunities for more independent peer collaboration, although the available observations do not establish the extent to which these behaviors became sustained habits.

Peer support was also evident when the student with special educational needs became distressed and refused to dance. Rather than leaving the student isolated, classmates attempted to comfort and encourage the student to rejoin the activity. This incident illustrates how peer support could extend beyond routine classroom participation to moments of difficulty. However, it should be interpreted as an observed instance of inclusive interaction rather than definitive evidence of the overall success of the SENSI model.

The teacher also positioned the student with special educational needs in the center of the dance formation, with classmates on either side. This arrangement facilitated access to peer movement cues and teacher guidance. From the third session, classmates were able to organize the formation independently, providing a further example of student initiative during collaborative activities.

These observations are consistent with Boswell et al.(2023), who highlight the importance of social support for the participation of dancers with special educational needs in inclusive dance groups. Within the SENSI model, the inclusion stage explicitly emphasizes mutual appreciation and collaboration. The observed peer invitations, encouragement, and independent arrangement of the formation illustrate how these principles were enacted during classroom activities.

Overall, the findings suggest that participation in inclusive dance learning was shaped by the interaction of multisensory activities, flexible teacher support, and peer collaboration. This interpretation is consistent with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on learning through experience and with humanistic educational principles that recognize students' differing needs and learning paces. The SENSI model therefore shows potential as a framework for creating more inclusive dance learning experiences, in line with UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on education for all.

Nevertheless, the findings are based on five sessions in one classroom involving one student with special educational needs. The researcher's dual role as teacher and researcher may also have influenced the interpretation of observed behaviors. The findings should therefore be understood as context-specific descriptive evidence rather than proof of causal effects or generalizable outcomes. Further research involving more diverse classroom contexts and independent observers or additional data sources is needed to examine the model's applicability and strengthen the credibility of future findings. The study also relates to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 10 by addressing equitable participation in education and opportunities for inclusion, although the findings do not directly measure progress toward these goals.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study developed and explored the implementation of SENSI (Stimulus, Exploration, Reasoning, Art, Inclusion), a multisensory dance learning model designed through a design thinking approach for an inclusive elementary classroom. Its distinctive feature is the integration of sensory stimulation, movement exploration, reflection on movement preferences, collaborative choreography, and peer inclusion within a connected learning sequence. The model's potential contribution lies in linking individual movement engagement with social participation, positioning inclusion as an integral component of dance learning rather than a separate activity.

The exploratory findings indicate that the student with special educational needs participated through verbal responses, movement imitation, expression of movement preferences, and guided group choreography. Participation was supported by flexible instructional pacing, repeated movement practice, appropriate learning positions, and teacher guidance. Peer interactions also provided examples of inclusive participation, including classmates initiating encouragement and independently arranging group formations. These observations offer practical insights for adapting dance activities to students' differing needs and highlight the relevance of multisensory experiences and peer collaboration in inclusive arts education.

However, the findings are limited to five sessions in one classroom involving one student with special educational needs, and the researcher's dual role as teacher and

researcher may have influenced the interpretation of observations. The results should therefore be understood as exploratory evidence of the model's implementation, not as proof of its effectiveness or generalizability. Further studies involving diverse classroom contexts, independent observers, and additional data sources are needed to examine the model's applicability and refine its theoretical and practical contributions. The study aligns with the aims of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by exploring approaches to more inclusive participation in arts learning.

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