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DANCING WITH THE *BLEKOK*: CHOREOGRAPHING ECOLOGICAL RELATIONS IN A BANDUNG SCHOOL

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji proses koreografi sebuah tarian tentang blekok (*Ardeola speciosa*) yang dibuat untuk program konservasi di kolam retensi Rancabolang, Gedebage, Bandung. Koloni blekok di Bandung Timur sudah kehilangan banyak lahan basah karena pembangunan perumahan dan kawasan komersial, sehingga Yayasan Tunas Nusa mulai menanam pohon di kolam retensi tersebut dengan harapan burung ini suatu saat memiliki tempat istirahat kedua. Penanaman pohon dan pertunjukan tari pada 5 Juni 2025 adalah pembukaan yang bersifat simbolis, bukan hasil akhir. Artikel ini ditulis dari sudut pandang koreografer dengan pendekatan riset berbasis praktik. Analisis didasarkan pada dokumentasi foto dan rekaman video dari masa persiapan dan pertunjukan, yang dibaca bersama refleksi koreografer. Kontribusi utama artikel ini adalah menunjukkan bahwa keputusan koreografi dapat dibaca sebagai cara berpikir tentang persoalan ekologis: musik tanpa ketukan kuat meminta penari bergerak sebagai kawanan, motif berkumpul memindahkan perhatian dari satu burung ke satu koloni yang membutuhkan ruang, dan penerusan tarian melalui guru membuat tarian dapat diulang oleh sekolah. Artikel ini juga mencatat apa yang berubah dalam penerusan itu: struktur tarian bertahan, sedangkan kualitas gerak hilang lebih dahulu. Penelitian ini tidak mengukur perubahan pemahaman atau sikap peserta, sehingga tidak mengklaim adanya dampak pada murid maupun penonton. Yang ditawarkan adalah catatan proses yang dapat dipakai kembali oleh koreografer dan sekolah dalam program konservasi lain, dengan satu batas yang dinyatakan secara jelas: sebuah tarian tidak memulihkan lahan basah.

Kata kunci: *Koreografi, Blekok, Riset Berbasis Praktik, Pendidikan Lingkungan Berbasis Seni, Konservasi Perkotaan*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the choreographic process of a dance about the *blekok* (Javan pond-heron, *Ardeola speciosa*) made for a conservation programme at the Rancabolang retention pond in Gedebage, Bandung. The *blekok* colony in East Bandung has lost much of its wetland to housing and commercial development, and a foundation, Yayasan Tunas Nusa, began planting trees at the retention pond so that the birds might one day have a second place to rest. The tree planting and the dance performance on 5 June 2025 were a symbolic opening rather than a finished result. The article is written from the point of view of the choreographer, using a practice-as-research approach. The analysis is based on photographs and video recordings of the preparation and the performance, read together with the choreographer's own reflection. The main contribution of the article is to show that choreographic decisions can be read as a way of thinking about an ecological problem: music without a strong beat asks the dancers to move as a flock, the gathering motif moves attention from one bird to a colony that needs space, and passing the dance through schoolteachers makes it possible for the school to repeat it. The article also records what changed in that relay: the structure of the dance survived, while the

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quality of movement was lost first. The study did not measure changes in the participants' understanding or attitudes, so it makes no claim about effects on students or audience. What it offers is a documented process that choreographers and schools can use again in other conservation programmes, with one limit stated plainly: a dance does not restore a wetland.
Keywords: *Choreography, Blekok, Practice-As-Research, Art-Based Environmental Education, Urban Conservation*

INTRODUCTION

The wetlands of East Bandung are disappearing, and the water birds that depend on them are losing their place in the city. In Gedebage, rice fields and marshes have been turned into housing, roads, and commercial areas, and the best-known colony of the *blekok*, a small heron, now has less land on which to feed (Iskandar & Iskandar, 2020; Mardotillah et al., 2025). This loss is slow and quiet, so it rarely becomes news, but it is hard to reverse: once wet farmland is built over, it does not come back. Conservation programmes that respond to this problem often include art, yet the artistic work inside them is rarely examined, so it is still unclear what art can actually contribute. This article studies one such case: a dance made for the first day of a tree-planting programme for the *blekok* in Gedebage.

In the late afternoon, the *blekok* come back. They cross the open water in a way that is easy to recognise once you have seen it: the body drops a little, almost a dive, and then lifts again, as if the air had pushed it back up. On the ground, a bird stands still for a long time in shallow water with one leg lifted and folded. It does not look like waiting. It looks like a decision that has already been made and is simply being held.

I watched this before I made any movement. In 2024, I was invited by Dr. Ramalis Sobandi, the founder of Yayasan Tunas Nusa, to make a dance for a conservation programme at the Rancabolang retention pond in Gedebage, East Bandung. The programme had a practical aim: to plant trees around the pond so that, in the future, water birds might have another place to rest and breed. It also had a public event, a single day in which trees were planted and a dance was performed by students of SMPN 51 Bandung.

The birds in question are the *blekok*, or Javan pond-heron (*Ardeola speciosa*), together with other herons and egrets of the family Ardeidae. Their best-known colony in Bandung is in Kampung Rancabayawak, Cisaranten Kidul, a few kilometres from the retention pond. The birds rest and breed there in a bamboo grove, and a count during a single observation period recorded 566 individuals of three species (Iskandar & Iskandar, 2020). The *blekok* is a rice-field bird: it feeds in flooded fields and shallow water (Mardotillah et al., 2025), and it flies out in the morning to feed far from where it sleeps (Iskandar, 2017; Iskandar & Iskandar, 2020).

This is why the colony is fragile. Gedebage is a district whose place names still remember water. Many begin with *ranca*, the Sundanese word for swamp or marsh, as in Rancabayawak, Rancabolang and Rancakuntul, the marsh of the egret. Much of that wet farmland now lies under the housing, roads, and commercial land mentioned above, including the Summarecon Bandung project (BandungBergerak.id, 2024; Iskandar & Iskandar, 2020). Because the birds depend on a wide feeding area and not only on the bamboo, the colony can remain in place and still lose its food. Residents now hear the birds less often in the afternoon (Mardotillah et al., 2025). Research on urban birds in other cities shows the same pattern: urbanisation changes which kinds of birds can stay, depending on what they eat and where they can find it (Pena et al., 2023).

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The Rancabolang retention pond was built for water, not for birds. The city built it to hold surface water during heavy rain in an area that floods often, and it was inaugurated at the end of 2022 as both flood infrastructure and green public space (Pemerintah Kota Bandung, 2022). Yayasan Tunas Nusa, working with DSDABM, began planting trees there with the hope that the pond could become an additional resting area for the *blekok* and other water birds. It is important to say clearly what this can and cannot mean. Colonial water birds return to sites they know, and a new site becomes usable only when the vegetation is tall and dense enough, the water is stable, and there is food within flying distance. This takes years, and it may not happen at all. Everyone involved understood the planting day as a first, symbolic act rather than a solution.

These three things are connected. The ecological problem in Gedebage is slow and hard to see: the land changes plot by plot, and the birds become fewer without one dramatic event. For this reason, the programme also included a school. SMPN 51 Bandung took part as nature learning (*pembelajaran alam*), so that students would meet a species that lives a few kilometres from their school. Choreography was chosen as the approach because the *blekok* is recognised first through how it moves: how it flies, feeds and gathers. A dance asks students to look at these behaviours closely enough to do them with their own bodies, and it gives a slow programme a form that a school can repeat. Whether this changes what students know or feel was not measured in this study. The point here is only why choreography was a reasonable choice for this problem.

The idea of a bird dance did not begin in Bandung. It began with *sagimai*, the heron dance performed in Tsuwano, in Shimane Prefecture, Japan. *Sagimai* came from the Gion Festival in Kyoto and has been performed in Tsuwano since 1542; two dancers wear large white heron costumes with wooden wings and move to flutes, drums, bells, and singers. In 2022, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as one of the *Furyu-odori* ritual dances (Japan Heritage Tsuwano, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Two things in *sagimai* stayed with me. The first is that a bird can be held inside a community's calendar for centuries through movement alone. The second is smaller and more practical: since the 1950s, Tsuwano has also had a children's heron dance, performed by elementary school students alongside the adult ritual. The bird is not only an image for adults to preserve; it is something children put on their bodies.

I want to be precise about the relationship. We did not adapt *sagimai*, and the dance I made is not a version of it. *Sagimai* is a religious ritual with its own history, and borrowing its form would have meant taking something that does not belong to this place. What I took was a question: what would it mean for children in Gedebage to have a bird of their own place in their bodies, in the same way that children in Tsuwano have theirs?

Earlier studies show that dance and other embodied arts can support environmental learning. Pollitt et al. (2021) used dance improvisation with young children to help them understand weather through their own bodies, not only as something that happens outside. Bentz et al. (2022) found that creative, embodied practices in a community arts project in Lisbon helped people make meaning about climate change, especially when the project used metaphors and was embedded in a local place. In Indonesia, Laras and Komalasari (2024) reported that dance learning based on the Sustainable Development Goals increased environmental care among junior high school students, while Rosala and Budiman (2020) showed that dance learning based on local wisdom can teach character to children through movement. Closer to this case, Nugroho et al. (2025) described participatory choreography in

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Kampung Braga, Bandung, as a practice of ecological recovery after the 2024 Cikapundung River flood, and Murda et al. (2026) found ecological and material education among the values produced by a participatory choreography based on the Bakar Batu ritual in Papua.

However, these studies mostly look at the effect of dance on learners or at the finished performance. Three parts of the choreographic process are still rarely described. The first is selection: how a choreographer decides which behaviours of one specific local species become movement, and which are left out. The second is order: what happens to a dance when the music is made before the movement. The third is transmission: what is kept and what is lost when a dance passes from the choreographer through teachers to students. Nugroho et al. (2025) and Murda et al. (2026) describe participatory choreography made with communities, but not a dance about a single species that is passed through schoolteachers inside a conservation programme. In Indonesia, art appears very often in environmental programmes, but usually at the end: a performance to open a ceremony, a mural to mark a site, a song to close a workshop. The artistic process itself is rarely written down, so the knowledge stays with the artist and disappears when the event is over.

This article therefore asks two questions. First, how were observations of the *blekok* turned into choreographic decisions about music, movement, transmission and costume? Second, what do these decisions show about what a dance can and cannot contribute to the beginning of a conservation programme? The main contribution of the article is not the list of stages in making the dance. It is a reading of the choreographic decisions as a way of thinking about an ecological problem, together with a record of what changed when the dance was passed on.

I also want to be honest about scale. The *blekok* already have a place in Rancabayawak. Moving or extending a habitat is slow, uncertain work that depends on trees growing, water staying, and people around the pond accepting the birds. One day of planting and dancing does not achieve any of that. It marks a beginning, and the two questions above are asked about a beginning of this kind.

METHODS

This study uses practice-as-research: the making of the dance is treated as the research process, and the evidence is the process itself, together with its documentation. In this approach, knowledge is produced by speaking from inside the practice rather than only about it (Bacon & Midgelow, 2011; Whatley, 2023). A similar approach, combining practice-based research with choreographic autoethnography, has been used to study participatory choreography in Indonesia (Murda et al., 2026), and choreography itself can be understood as an autoethnographic act (Loots, 2016). I write here as the choreographer of the work. The advantage of this position is access: I know why each movement is in the dance and what was rejected before it. The disadvantage is distance: I cannot claim to be neutral about the value of the work. Because knowledge from creative practice is often difficult to assess in academic research (Stewart, 2024), I have tried to describe each decision clearly and, in the Discussion, to be strict with myself about what the dance did not do.

The programme was initiated by Dr. Ramalis Sobandi of Yayasan Tunas Nusa. This matters for how the artistic decisions should be read: the frame, the site, the partners and the purpose were already set when I entered, and my task was choreographic, not curatorial. The process lasted around one year, from the invitation in 2024 to the performance on 5 June 2025, and my first discussion with Dr. Ramalis Sobandi and Tenessa, the costume designer, took

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place at the end of 2024. The work moved through nine stages: (1) an invitation and briefing on the aim of the tree planting at Rancabolang; (2) a reference study, including the *sagimai* material described above; (3) direct observation of the birds, focusing on behaviour that a human body can carry; (4) composing the music in my own studio before the movement was fixed; (5) developing movement motifs from the observed behaviour; (6) a workshop for the teachers of SMPN 51 Bandung; (7) teaching by the teachers, followed by my visits to the school for detailing and joint rehearsal; (8) costume making by the students from used materials; and (9) the performance at the tree-planting event at the Rancabolang retention pond. In total, there was one workshop with the teachers and five workshops with the students.

The data come from two kinds of sources: photographs and video recordings of the preparation (including the rehearsals and the costume making) and of the performance, and my own reflection as the choreographer, written after the event while preparing this article. Images of the students are used with permission from the school. The analysis followed three steps. First, I arranged all the material in the order of the nine stages. Second, I selected only the material that shows a choreographic decision, meaning a moment where one option was chosen and another was left out; for example, which behaviours of the bird became motifs. Material that only shows the event was not analysed further. Third, for each decision I separated what can be seen in the photographs or video, what I remember deciding and why, and how I now interpret it. In the Results, the first two are reported as description, and the third is marked as my interpretation, which is then developed in the Discussion.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the documentation and publication process. Permission to conduct the activities and document the students' participation was obtained from SMPN 51 Bandung. In addition, informed consent was obtained from the students' parents or legal guardians for the use of photographs and video recordings containing identifiable images of the students in this research and its academic publication. The students were also informed about the use of the documentation and their participation was based on their willingness to take part. The documentation was used solely for research and publication purposes.

The nine stages are used as categories of analysis because they follow the real working order of the programme and are the points at which decisions were made. In the Results, they are grouped into seven parts: observation (stages 1 to 3), music (stage 4), movement motifs (stage 5), transmission through the teachers (stages 6 and 7), costume (stage 8), the limits of translation (across stages 3 to 7), and the performance (stage 9). The first five parts answer the first research question, about how observation became choreographic decisions, and the last two answer the second, about what the dance can and cannot contribute. Because I am both the choreographer and the researcher, three steps were taken to keep the interpretation credible. Statements about what happened are checked against the photographs and video where possible, and a statement that rests only on my memory is presented as such. The account was also read and checked by the second author, who initiated the programme and was present at the first discussion and the first bird observation. Finally, I make no claims about what the students, teachers or audience learned or felt, because no interviews or questionnaires were used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The results are presented as the main decisions in the making of the dance: what I looked at, why the music came first, which three movements were chosen, how the dance was passed

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on through the teachers, how the costumes were made, what could not be translated into movement, and how the dance was performed. Each part first reports what was done. Where a sentence is my interpretation as the choreographer, it is stated as such.

Looking First

The observation stage had a choreographic purpose, not a scientific one. I was looking for what a body can hold, not only looking at the birds. The question I kept asking was simple: which part of this movement could a thirteen-year-old student do with the arms, the legs and the breath? For the biology of the species, this article therefore relies on published studies rather than on my own observation. Dr. Ramalis Sobandi accompanied me during the first observation in Rancabayawak on 23 January 2025.

Two behaviours stood out immediately. The first is the way the *blekok* stands: still, in shallow water, with one leg lifted and tucked close to the body. It is a shape of great stillness that is also unstable, and a human body reproducing it has to work constantly to stay upright. The second is the flight across the water: not a straight line, but a small dip downwards followed by a rise, repeated, so that the path across the pond is a shallow wave.

Beyond these, I watched two social behaviours: foraging, in which the bird moves slowly and then strikes quickly, and gathering, in which many birds arrive and settle together in the same trees at the end of the day. Unfortunately, the residents I met could give little information about the birds; they only said that the birds had been placed there by the government, without a specific reason. This differs from written accounts, which say that the flocks came by themselves to feed in the rice fields and that the city later protected the site (Mardotillah et al., 2025).

Music before Movement

The music was made in my own studio before the choreography was fixed. This order was a deliberate choice, and it shaped everything that followed. The sound world I wanted was the landscape the bird belongs to rather than the bird itself: the atmosphere of open nature and of rice fields. The song was built around a feeling I described to myself as flying and floating (*terbang melayang*), a sustained, unhurried quality with no sharp accents, so that a body moving with it would be carried rather than driven. The instruments included piano, *angklung*, *karinding,* and percussion. Water sounds from the landscape were used only in the background.

Working this way had one clear consequence. Because the music has no strong beat to hit, the dancers cannot rely on counting. They have to listen and stay together by breathing together. For thirteen- and fourteen-year-old students with little dance training, this is harder than counting. My aim in accepting this difficulty was a group that moves like a flock rather than like a line.

Three Movement Motifs

From everything observed, the dance kept three motifs. Table 1 shows each motif, the behaviour it came from, and its function in the dance. The dance opens with the wings. The arms move to the right and to the left in a wide, continuous swing, the way a *blekok* opens and beats its wings. This is the first thing the audience sees and the first thing the students learn. It is deliberately simple, because it has to be readable from a distance, in an open space, by an audience that is standing rather than seated in a theatre.

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The second motif is foraging. Here the quality changes: the movement becomes low, slow and searching, with the head leading, and it is interrupted by a fast, short strike. This is the only place in the dance where speed appears, and its function is contrast. Without it, a dance built entirely on floating becomes soft and forgettable.

The third motif is gathering. The dancers, who until now have been spread out in space, come together as a flock. This is a group movement rather than an individual one. In my reading, it carries the meaning of the piece most directly, and this is discussed below. I also decided not to include any narrative of the bird dying or being driven away. The event was a planting, an act of hope, and a dance that ended in loss would have contradicted what the community was being asked to do that morning.

Table 1. The three movement motifs and their source in the observed behaviour

Motif	Observed behaviour of the bird	Movement in the dance	Function in the dance
Wings	The bird opens and beats its wings	The arms swing to the right and to the left in a wide, continuous movement	Opening of the dance; simple and readable from a distance in an open space
Foraging	The bird moves slowly and then strikes quickly	Low, slow, searching movement led by the head, interrupted by a fast, short strike	Contrast; the only place where speed appears
Gathering	Many birds arrive and settle together in the same trees at the end of the day	Dancers who were spread out in space come together as one group	Group movement; shows a colony rather than one bird

Teaching the Teachers

The dance did not go directly from me to the students. It went first to the teachers of SMPN 51 Bandung, in a workshop, and the teachers then taught it to their classes. Five teachers joined the workshop, including Bu Aisyah, the coordinator. I came afterwards for detailing and rehearsal with the students.

This relay was chosen for two reasons. The school was taking part in nature learning (*pembelajaran alam*), not as an extracurricular performance, so the teachers needed to be part of the process. I also wanted the teachers, and not only me, to hold the material, so that the school could repeat the dance without me.

The relay also changed the material. This is what I saw when I visited the school after the teachers had taught the dance. Detail had been lost first: the exact quality of an arm, the timing of a breath. What had survived was structure: the order of the motifs, the floor pattern, the group shape. My visits were therefore spent almost entirely on quality rather than on sequence. Figure 2 shows one of these rehearsals with the students.

Costumes Made by the Dancers

The students made their own costumes from used materials, as shown in Figure 1. I treat this as part of the choreography rather than as a craft activity attached to it. My reasoning was that a student who has cut and shaped a wing has worked with the form of a wing before being

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asked to move one. Whether this changed how the students danced was not assessed. There is also a plain environmental logic: a programme about habitat loss that produces a pile of new plastic waste would contradict itself.



Figure 1. The process of costume making

What Could Not Be Translated

This part is my reflection as the choreographer rather than a record of events. Not everything about the bird can be carried by a human body. The first limit is anatomical. A heron's stillness comes from a body built for it. A human imitating that stillness is performing effort, not calm. In practice, this means the honest version of the movement is not the most accurate one. It is the one that keeps the feeling of suspension without pretending to be a bird.

The second limit is tone. Children in bird costumes are charming, and charm is a real danger in this kind of work. If the audience only finds the performance cute, the ecological content can disappear. The music was my main answer to this: because it floats rather than bounces, it was meant to hold the piece in a serious register. The third limit is scale. The *blekok* problem is a problem of land, water, and permits, played out across a whole district. A dance can hold one bird, one flock, one afternoon. It cannot hold a land-use map.



Figure 2. Rehearsal with the students

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The Performance Day

The performance took place at the Rancabolang retention pond as part of the tree-planting event on 5 June 2025. The dance was performed in the morning, before the first trees were planted. The audience included representatives of DLHK and DSDABM, the headmaster and teachers of SMPN 51 Bandung, and local residents. The performance space was open ground beside the water, without a stage, wings, or lighting. The event was opened with a *ruwat* or *ngaruwat*, which in Sundanese tradition can be understood as a ritual practice of restoring balance and protecting people from forces or conditions believed to disrupt the order of life.

No interviews or questionnaires were used to collect the responses of the audience. What follows is based only on informal conversations after the performance, as I remember them. The people who spoke to me responded warmly to the students' work. Their questions were about how the choreography was created and how the students took part in making the costumes. I do not remember any questions about the bird itself. This is an impression from a small number of conversations. It cannot be read as the response of the whole audience, and it does not show what the audience understood about the *blekok*.

The dance was performed again on 15 November 2025 at the Hallway Space, as part of a Children's Day commemoration and an exhibition organised by Yayasan Tunas Nusa. The performers were the same children who had taken part in the earlier planting event. Its return to the stage shows that the work did not remain a one-time intervention, but continued to circulate as part of the children's artistic and educational activities. However, there is no indication that the dance was formally re-taught to a different group of students after these performances. The performance day is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. The performance day at the Rancabolang retention pond

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Discussion

I want to separate what a dance can do from what it cannot do, because conservation programmes that overstate the power of art end up damaging the credibility of art in conservation. A dance cannot restore a wetland. It does not plant a tree, hold water in the ground, or add a single square metre to the area where the birds can feed. It does not change a land-use decision, and it does not slow a development project. On the day of the performance, the ecological situation of the *blekok* in Gedebage was exactly what it had been the day before. What the choreographic process shows can be stated more modestly, in four points.

First, the choreographic decisions can be read as a way of thinking about the ecological problem, not only as steps in making a dance. The problem of the *blekok* in Gedebage is a problem of a colony and its space: the birds can keep their bamboo and still lose the wide wet land they feed in. Three decisions respond to this. The gathering motif moves attention from one bird to a flock that needs a place large enough to hold it. The music without a strong beat asks the dancers to stay together by listening and breathing, so the group, not the individual, becomes the unit of the dance. The decision not to end with the bird dying or leaving keeps the dance on the side of the planting, which is an act of beginning. At the same time, the choreography leaves much of the problem out. Land, water, and permits are not in the dance, and the foraging motif shows feeding but not the long flight to distant rice fields. The dance represents the colony, not the cause of its difficulty. This is my reading as the choreographer. It describes what the decisions were designed to carry, not what the audience understood.

Second, the process was designed to give students a bodily way of meeting a species that lives a few kilometres from their school. I cannot say that such a relationship was formed, because the study did not measure what the students knew or felt before and after. What can be said is that the task itself asked for close attention to the bird: to swing the arms as wings, or to search and strike as the bird feeds, a student has to follow how the bird does it. This is in line with embodied education, in which the body is a way of knowing and not only a tool for showing what has been learned (Singh & Narayanan, 2021). It is also different from earlier studies in two ways. In Pollitt et al. (2021) the children improvised, so the movement came from the children, while in this project the movement came from the choreographer. Laras and Komalasari (2024) reported an increase in environmental care among students, while this study has no such measurement and can neither confirm nor question that result. My own way of looking at the birds, searching for what a body can hold, is related to ecological somatic practice, which has been developed in Indonesia through Joged Amerta (Reeve, 2010).

Third, the performance gave an invisible process a visible form. Tree planting for future habitat is undramatic work whose results, if they come at all, will arrive in years. A performance turns a slow programme into an event that people can attend. Bentz et al. (2022) point out that embedding an arts project in a local place is one of the elements that helps people make meaning about environmental change. In the same city, Nugroho et al. (2025) showed that choreography in public space can give a community a shared way to respond to an ecological event. The *blekok* dance is similar in being tied to one place, but it is different in two ways. It responds to a slow loss rather than to a sudden event such as a flood, and it was made by a choreographer and taught to students rather than created together with a community. Its contribution is therefore smaller: a form for an opening day.

Fourth, and most importantly for the long term, the process produced a form that can be repeated because it is held by teachers rather than by an artist. A dance that only I can teach ends when I leave. If SMPN 51 teaches this dance again, the *blekok* enters the school calendar.

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So far this has not happened: the dance was performed twice by the same students and was not taught to a new group. The model is what *sagimai* demonstrates over a much longer time, where the children's heron dance belongs to the school and returns every year. Studies of dance learning in schools show that it can carry environmental values when it is built into regular teaching (Laras & Komalasari, 2024) and that local material helps children learn through movement (Rosala & Budiman, 2020), but they say less about what happens to the dance material on its way through the teacher. The specific finding here is that structure survived the relay and quality was lost first. For future programmes, this suggests that the choreographer's time with teachers should be spent on the quality of movement, not only on the sequence. It also fits the finding that teachers' bodily learning grows when they create and work with dance themselves (Ørbæk, 2021).

The dance also sits between two kinds of dance. Nahachewsky (1995) distinguishes participatory dance, done mainly for the people who dance it, from presentational dance, made for an audience. The *blekok* dance was presented to an audience, but the students' part in it was participatory: learning the movement, making the costumes and dancing together. James and Shaw (2023) describe participatory work with children as a balance that must be choreographed, and Breel (2025) argues that participation is meaningful only when participants have real agency. In this project, the students had clear agency in the costumes but little agency in the movement, which was fixed before it reached them.

This has two implications. The dance cannot be described as the students' own response to the bird. It is my response, performed by them. It also limits what can be said about learning, because the students did not observe the birds themselves. A next version of the programme could change this in three practical ways. The students could visit Rancabayawak and observe the birds before the workshops begin. The three motifs could stay as a frame, while the students build one section, for example, the foraging, from their own observation. The students could also decide how the group comes together in the gathering section. Creative dance in schools can support social and emotional skills and experiential learning (Borowski, 2023; Payne & Costas, 2021), so giving students this space would be in line with what is already known about dance in education.

This is what I mean by culture-based conservation. Ecology works on habitat. Culture can work on attention: on whether people notice a bird, name it, and consider it theirs. Habitat without attention is vulnerable to the next permit. Attention without habitat is nostalgia. A conservation programme needs both, and it should not ask either one to do the other's job. This article does not show that attention to the *blekok* increased. It shows how a cultural form aimed at attention was built, and where its limits are.

Nevertheless, these findings should be read within the limits of the study. This is a single case, written by the choreographer of the work, and it is based on documentation and my own reflection rather than on systematic data from the students, teachers or audience. The article therefore describes a process; it does not prove that the dance changed students' attitudes towards the birds or the environment. Further research could interview the students and teachers, follow whether the school repeats the dance in later years, and compare these results with ecological data on whether the birds begin to use the retention pond.

CONCLUSION

The birds still cross the water in the late afternoon, dipping and lifting, and they still return to the bamboo in Rancabayawak rather than to the young trees at Rancabolang. Nothing about

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that changed because a group of students danced beside the pond. But the dance was never asked to do that. It was asked to open something. This article has answered two questions. On the first, observation of the *blekok* became choreography through a small number of decisions: music made first and without a strong beat, three motifs taken from the bird's behaviour, a relay through teachers, and costumes made by the students from used material. On the second, these decisions show that a dance can carry an ecological idea, in this case a colony that needs space, and can leave behind material that a school is able to repeat. A dance cannot restore habitat, and this study cannot show that it changed what the students know or feel about the bird.

The main contribution of the article is therefore a documented choreographic process, read as a way of thinking about an ecological problem, and a record of what a relay through teachers keeps and loses. For choreographers asked to work inside conservation programmes, the suggestion is to enter at the beginning rather than at the end, to give students more space to create movement from their own observation, and to leave the material with someone who will still be there when the artist is gone. Future studies are recommended to include the voices of students and teachers, to follow the dance over several years, and to work together with ecologists so that the cultural and ecological sides of conservation can be studied side by side.

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