

## **Bringing the Body in the Educational Environment: a Theoretical Approach**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *We initially experience the world through movement and only afterwards we develop the verbal language, which makes human beings pre-linguistic. Movement is the fundament of all learning processes, therefore extending the movement vocabulary and developing body awareness improve the quality of education, which nowadays is based more on the cognitive dimension.*

**Objectives:** *Taking into consideration that our first identity is the body and that there is a strong connection between body, mind and emotions, the main objective of the present study is to extend the tools of working with children in the educational environment using their bodies as the core instrument of change, from a theoretical point of view.*

**Methods:** *The main methods used in this study are the literature review, the observation method and the movement biography.*

**Results:** *The present study offers new tools in working with children in the educational environment.*

**Conclusions:** *It is crucial for people - teachers, psychologists, parents who work with children - to have a holistic perspective on the educational process and on the development of the children, in order to find the right ways to help pupils raise to their full potential. Therefore, we consider that this study supports the process of improving the quality of education.*

**Keywords:** *body, movement, education, personal development*

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## **I. Introduction**

Everything that surrounds us has a shape and a rhythm. We find these shapes and rhythms also inside us, at either a physiological level – breathing rhythm, heart rate, digestive cycle, etc., either at a psychological or emotional one, through thinking or emotional patterns. The space that contains and expresses these processes is the body itself. This is the expression tool of our personality.

The amazing body structure and the complex actions that body can accomplish represent true miracles of the human existence. Every movement phrase, every small weight transfer, every gesture of every single body part reflects some aspects of our inner world (Laban, 2011). Seeing things through this perspective, movement is never a random, irrational or uncontrolled response to the life events of a person (Pearson et al., 1996).

Long before the manifestation of the spoken language, individuals experienced despair, joy, fear, surprise, isolation or any other emotions. Therefore, humans are not detached from the feelings just because they are not able to speak. Babies cannot name their emotions, but they experience them through movement. The “dance” of hungriness, of loneliness feeling, of discomfort – as well as the joyful feelings that they experience when they see the loved ones or an object that they like – is clear and explicit. It depends on the observer to interpret these “dances” and to offer the right answer or reactions (Pearson et al, 1996).

Taking into consideration these aspects, connected to the importance of movement in our lives, we will explain in the next sentences the movement and dance role as motoric expressions in the children’s personal development process. Movement represents the main modality of communication for children and also for adults, if we consider the studies that showed the fact that 50-90% of communication is nonverbal.

Children use movement to communicate their feelings and needs. Relationships and emotions are expressed through body – through tensing or relaxing the muscles, through facial expression, body shape, eye contact, breathing, gestures (Bromfield, 1994, Levy, 1995, in McCarthy, 2008). More than ever, children need to be sustained in their evolution process starting from the specific abilities of their development stage.

Children need to be guided to become aware of their bodies and emotions for a healthy integration and self-expression in the society where they grow. Taking into consideration that understanding emotions and the ability to read the nonverbal expressions are important for successful social interactions, the

emotional validation, the improvement of the ability to recognise emotions and to identify feelings represent essential goals in supporting social and emotional development of children (McCarthy, 2008).

Dance and movement therapy sustains children’s personal development process starting from the premise that movements of the body reflect inner feelings and that the changes made in the movement behaviour lead to changes at the psychological level. Including the therapeutic use of movement for generating a process of emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration, dance and movement therapy fosters a multidimensional body-mind-spirit unification of the individuals.

The present Romanian education system focuses more on the cognitive dimension rather than sustaining the body-mind connection. Dance and movement therapy approaches the individual in a holistic way, emphasizing the importance of a multi-layered education. Through creative dance, motoric improvisation and movement games completed by the verbalization of the body experiences, children have access to new ways of self-knowledge, interaction and expression of their potential and at the same time they learn to create and keep healthy boundaries, receiving a type of education that values their personal resources.

In other words, bringing the body in the educational process leads to improved abilities of being in the present moment. To be present is the attitude through which we perceive and discover the world. Every kind of knowledge, including self-knowledge, starts with experiencing the present moment (Mitrofan, 2005). Applying dance and movement personal development techniques from an unifying experiential perspective in working with children improves the quality of education. Also, using specific tools as Movement Biography (MB) helps professionals better observe the improvements in the development process of children in order to adapt and personalize their intervention or educational techniques.

## **II. Methods**

The main goal of our study is to offer new practical movement-based tools in working with children. We assume that involving the body in the personal development process which takes place in the educational environment will improve the quality of the educational outcomes. We fundament our study on the literature review, on the observation method and on a new tool that we developed in evaluating the improvements of the children’s movement vocabulary

which will lead to psychological, social and cognitive improvements - the movement biography.

Movement biography is a tool that we created starting from the assumption that changing the movement patterns determines a multilevel development process. This new tool has two parts: one that includes the movements made by the children in the prenatal period of their lives and before the age of two and the second part includes information about the set of movements that children prefer in the present, following some aspects as rhythm, use of space, level of body awareness and movement-based activities. In

building this tool we used concepts from Laban Movement Analysis and the "Evaluation scale for motricity and psychomotricity" (Radu, Ulici, 2003).

This instrument helps professionals (teachers, psychologists, doctors) and parents have a body-based perspective on the child development, which can be correlated with other dimensions of the child development, in order to find the right tools and ways to sustain children improve their lives.

We attach in the following lines some items from the movement biography tool which can be used for children aged 6 to 14:

*Table I. Movement biography - part I. Movement biography analysis from prenatal period until the age of two*

<b>Prenatal movements</b>	No intrauterine movements/ Subtle movements	The time when the prenatal movements appeared and how they manifested	<b>Movements before walking</b>	- Holding his head - Visual contact - Looking for objects - Sitting on the belly - Crawling	<b>Walking</b> - At what age he/she started walking - Context of learning to walk
<b>Preferred movement activities (climbing, jumping, dancing, etc.)</b>			<b>Accidents/wounds</b>		

*Table II. Movement biography - part II. Present movement patterns and preferences analysis*

<b>Rhythm</b>	<b>Space</b>	<b>Body awareness</b>	<b>Movement-based activities</b>
Slow movements (examples)	Upper movements (e.g. jumping, running)	Identifying his/her own body parts	Preferred
Fast movements (examples)	Bottom/close to the ground/ on the ground movements (e.g. crawling)	Identifying directions (up/down, left/right, forward/backwards)	Not preferred
A combination between slow and fast movements (examples)		Balance	

This tool was created to assess the personal development group process using dance and movement as the main techniques where pupils experience different games and exercises that help them extend the movement vocabulary and find their balance. At the end of 12 group sessions, pupils are re-evaluated to identify the changes that took place. Groups must have a maximum of 10 pupils and, for a more detailed evaluation, we recommend also using quantitative instruments.

Movement biography (MB) can be used not only in the personal development or counselling sessions but also in the classroom, combining it with movement exercises or games that value the body dimension which is an essential part of the educational process. Therefore, we find it important to describe the importance of personal development through dance and movement process, giving some practical examples and exercise suggestions that can be applied in the educational environment.

A personal development group process through dance and movement has four stages. Every stage has a goal that brings the participants closer to expressing their potential.

The first phase is the warm-up and it is important because children are guided to be aware of their bodies, to find their own rhythm and a common rhythm for the group and it also helps them energize their bodies, which raises their attention and concentration. An example of a warm-up activity is moving like different animals - to find different ways of walking (e.g. the bear walks slower than a rabbit), of going through different sensorial activities - imagining walking on ice, walking through honey, water, etc., having a conversation using only the elbow or the feet, or any other body parts.

Challenging is the second phase. Children move together in pairs or in small groups following a movement theme which aims to develop not only the motoric skills, but also the psychological aspects. For example, if the goal is the improvement of concentration of attention, children play "Complete my movement!" game. In pairs, they modulate one another by adapting in turns to their partner posture. One of them stays in a posture and the other one has to find a movement that completes the posture. Afterwards, the first one that was in the still posture has to come out from that position without altering the other one's posture. This exercise involves attention, the ability to adapt, to wait and it also stimulates creativity.

The third stage is calming-down. The exercises included in this phase are based on visualization,

mindfulness and breathing techniques. Children sit on their backs with their eyes closed and imagine a land of flowers. They walk through the flowers and they pick one flower and smell it - therefore they use visualization and breathing that help them relax. This exercise can be also used in the classroom.

The last phase is the analysis. Children are guided to share their experiences and to express them verbally and nonverbally. This stage helps pupils connect with the other and integrate the experience by taking it to the verbal dimension which is an important part of the personal development process. This analysis can also be done in the classroom because it encourages pupils to express their opinions and the see other perspectives that enlarge their point of view on a subject.

### **III. Results**

Our expected results regarding the increased use of the body in the educational process and in personal development groups are:

- ✓ developing physical skills connected with social, cognitive, emotional ones - a parallel holistic development starting with the body and not with the cognitive information as the present learning process does in the present;
- ✓ extending the working tools in the educational process with an emphasize on the body dimension;
- ✓ improving children's creativity, sociability, body awareness, attention and learning skills,

The movement biography (MB) assessment tool can be used in finding the right exercises and activities for children in order to express their potential and to overcome blockages. The expected results after applying this instrument are:

- ✓ identifying children's relationship with their bodies and their movement vocabulary;
- ✓ setting the goals for the movement-based approach of children behaviour;
- ✓ monitoring the changes in the movement behaviour in order to connect them with the changes that take place on the other human development dimensions: cognitive, social, emotional.

### **IV. Discussions**

The present study aimed to combine theoretical information about body, movement, personal development and education with practical suggestions regarding how movement-based exercises can be used in the educational setting.

The sense of the moving body, also defined as kinesthetic sense, is as important as the other five senses which inform us about the relationship of our bodies with the physical world. If the kinesthetic sense is not developed or not so used, it becomes unconscious so the person starts living only in her "head". And this fact is reflected on the body level through different distortions, restraining or harmful movement behaviours (Pallaro, 1999, p. 42) which may lead to illnesses.

This sense of the moving body can be awakened and developed through using any type of movement, but apparently it becomes conscious only when the inner connection is discovered - the personal sensation that one experiences when he/she swings, stretches, etc. Physical education works with the body as if it were only an object and not a subject, so there is not a connection with the personal identity (Pallaro, 1999). Therefore, through the present study, we try to bring the focus on the connection between movement and personal growth in the educational environment.

## **V. Conclusions**

We consider that our study is valuable because it approaches an essential dimension of the human being that is not valued enough in the educational process.

Attention and sensitivity to movement experiences and expressions represent a path to connecting with what exists in the present. A conscious attention that is focused on the movement experiences

can develop a new perspective on the self and on the others. Marian Chace, one of the pioneers of dance and movement therapy (*apud* Sandel et al, 1993) stated that if a person changes the perspective on him/herself and if he/she brings attention to her body, he/she may experience relief and support. This switch on the perspective determines an inner harmony.

In conclusion, we encourage professionals and parents to use tools that empower the connection between body-mind-emotions for a holistic educational process.

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