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Theoretical Arguments for Dance as a Means of Providing Aesthetic Education in Primary School

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Abstract

Building autonomous and creative personalities is one of the ideals of integral education that also includes aesthetic education. One of its components is the education for self-expression through movement which can be achieved in school by means of physical education activities. The most representative artistic field enabling the development of an aesthetic posture through movement is dancing, and this is why we have chosen to dedicate our study to the formative-educative value of dancing and the importance of including it in primary school curricula, considering that the years spent in primary school are particularly significant in laying the foundations for the further development of the pupils' personality.

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1. Introduction

Aesthetics or “the science of artistic beauty”, as defined by Vianu (1936), is a cultural value that leaves its mark on human personality development. One of its manifestation forms is represented by dance, a human activity with many facets, from the simple pleasure of joining together movement, music and feeling to the perfectionism of artistic performance.

From an educational perspective, this science prepares the human being to perceive, understand and promote artistic beauty. Essentially, it shapes the individual's personality and behavior, by constructing his aesthetic attitude towards life and the surrounding world (Vianu, 1936; Dobrescu, 2008).

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The role of aesthetic education in school has already been recognized and described in detail, as demonstrated by the rich specialized literature focusing on this topic. In this context, Neacșu (1988) emphasizes that “the aesthetic component in the human personality structure” is achieved by educating the pupils’ sensitivity “for and through the beautiful”. The author highlights that aesthetic education has a well-defined role in building the pupils’ personality, and it includes elements that go beyond the aesthetic and the artistic and can be traced back to philosophical, psychological, anthropological, ideological or cultural roots.

Along the same lines, Cristea draws a distinction between aesthetic education and other educational forms and methods used in school, specifying that the former develops sensitivity to beauty in art and nature, in society and in various artistic fields. Cultivating artistic attitude is one of the premises of pre-university education and it involves two fundamental aspects: “education for art” and “education through art” (Cristea, 1947). The former aims at developing the pupils’ artistic sense and their desire to learn how to appreciate beauty in art and nature and to be receptive to values. Education through art is designed to develop the pupils’ personality, which will later incorporate new perspectives in adult age.

Physical education can also be included among the subjects whose goal is, among others, to achieve aesthetic education. Physical education is recognized to have formative-educative valences that contribute, along with the development of both motor and psychomotor behaviors and various bio-motor capacities, to ensuring a constant and consistent enhancement of creativity (Stănescu, 2002). Motor activities performed in schools contribute to achieving the pupils’ education for and through movement, thus directly contributing to the integral development of their personality.

2. Purpose and hypothesis

The purpose of our theoretical approach is to argue in favour of the formative-educative value of dance, as a means used to achieve aesthetic education, as well as in favour of the important role it plays in fulfilling the objective of physical education.

Our reference to primary school relies on both ontological and pedagogical considerations, this being a period in the pupils’ life that is crucial for the construction of movement fundamentals, in parallel with the development of creativity and artistic sensibility.

We start from the theoretical hypothesis that the implementation of the means of dancing into various sequences of physical education classes can contribute to achieving the goals of aesthetic education and to increasing the attractiveness of those classes.

3. Current state of play

Primary school, as the first schooling cycle, induces deep modifications in the children’s life and significantly influences their evolution over the years. This is a period of fundamental changes, with an influence on the further development of the personality because, due to its eminently educative function, primary education ensures the acquisition and the basis for “the construction of knowledge and skills later on in life” (Golu, 2010).

From the point of view of physical education, the beginning of primary school coincides with the time when children start acquiring the specialized motor skills specific to various motor or sports activities. The children’s future competences related to movement, to motor learning and to self-expression through movement will depend on their experiences accumulated during primary school. According to Puran and Stănescu (2010), if movement patterns, along with motor communication and expression patterns, fail to be developed at the appropriate age, this will have a limiting effect on the individual’s skill acquisition capacities.

During primary education, the formative purpose of pedagogical intervention targets the acquisition of abilities, capacities and intellectual operations, while physical and motor education aims at improving coordination (Golu, 2010). Among the elements making up motor capacity, coordination is a component that can

be developed starting with an early age. Weineck (1994) noted that deficiencies in the manifestation of this capacity are not necessarily due to some insufficient hereditary predisposition, but rather to the inappropriate attention given to its development already in the first years of life. This capacity ensures the accuracy, fluidity and deftness of overall body movement and the movement of body segments or, to be more specific, it is the prerequisite for the best execution of the motor program (Manno, 1992). If we refer to dancing, we can state that coordination-related aspects are maximally involved in any dance, due to the variety and diversity of movements associated with music they include.

4. Perspectives in the field

According to pedagogical literature, aesthetic education in school pursues the following objectives (Cristea, 1994):

- to build up and educate sensibility to beauty;
- to cultivate taste and aesthetic judgments and to configure the aesthetic attitude;
- to develop creativity;
- to develop the capacity for social integration and receptivity to the environment.

Within physical education, aesthetic education can be achieved through expressive corporal activities, such as dance, rhythmic gymnastics, aerobics, aesthetic gymnastics, pantomime, eurhythmics etc.

These activities have a self-shaping role on the body, with effects upon (Epuran, 2006):

- the creation of a real self-image, as compared to the ideal image;
- the increase of self-confidence, due to enhanced body awareness, self value and social awareness;
- the development of the capacity to use non-verbal language through bodily motor communication;
- the improvement of the capacity to cope with different situations.

In practice, the didactic approach can be oriented towards the development of two categories of competences, some of them of a motor-behavioral type, reflected by the execution capacities, others of a psycho-creative type, reflected by the creation capacities, as showed in Table 1 below (Levieux, Levieux, 1997).

Table 1. Capacities developed by the utilization of expression exercises

Capacities developed by the utilization of expression exercises	
Execution capacity	Creation capacity
Suppleness	Imitation
Speed	Memorization
Endurance	Improvisation
Rhythmicity	Imagination
Laterality	Communication
Coordination	Creation of movement designs
Dissociation capacity	Staging

Within the formative-educative process, dance can be practiced in schools as a form of cultural and recreational education or as a method for developing motor skills, with an emphasis on the coordination-related aspects. These elements result from the general modalities of dance practice that are oriented towards two types of activity:

- Physical-artistic activities – performed for fun, with a recreational or an educative-formative goal. We can include here educational approaches within physical education classes.
- Cultural-artistic performance activities – carried out in public. Dance, as a cultural activity with a stage presence, involves a purposeful communication, where both the expression and the motor aspects are performance-related. We can include here school feasts and participation in various festivals.

The objectives of aesthetic education through dance are equally focused on the motor, psychomotor, intellectual and creative aspects. We have listed below some of the aspects that can be developed through dance practice (Dobrescu, 2006):

- artistic attitude and execution, which ensure a correct body posture;
- corporal expressivity, plasticity and elegance in movement;
- musical sense, through the development of motor rhythmicity and musicality;
- corporal scheme and movement fundamentals;
- different types of coordination, through the utilization of a wide range of movements;
- artistic personality, imagination and creativity.

Not accidentally, some definitions of dance formulated by specialists in physical education reflect these desiderata:

“Dance is the aesthetically evaluated rhythmic movement through which different emotional states and feelings are expressed and where motor symbols are consciously composed for the pleasure and satisfaction of the execution, for the creation of some exquisite movement forms, of knowledge, expression and communication through body language” (Vişan, 2005). “Dance is a group of corporal rhythmic movements performed to a melodic rhythm, used as a means of communication, motor education, physical development and health preservation, socialization and confidence building.” (Năstase, 2011).

School dancing, in parallel with the development of an aesthetic attitude and of motor skills, enables pupils to overcome their inhibitions and develop their musical sensibility. It will thus contribute to the achievement of the competences pursued by self-expression activities through movement: voluntary desire for motor expression, for communication with other people and for using one’s own body as an expressive object (Usmer and Rollet, 1995). In an attempt to provide a more memorable definition of dancing, we have composed an acrostic that is shown in Table 2 below. We cannot claim, however, that our little word game satisfies all the rules usually associated with this poetic form:

Table 2. Acrostic of DANCE

D	A	N	C	E
devotion	aptitudes	naturalness	charm	elasticity
determination	attitudes	noblesse	coordination	emotion
desire	abilities	non-verbal	compatibility	elegance
dynamism	accuracy		comfort	expressivity
delight	accessibility		contentment	entertainment
distinction	ambiance		confidence	energy
development	amusement		communication	enthusiasm
	attachment		creativity	excellent health
	attraction			

5. Practical applications

Dance, as a motor-artistic activity, makes use of a varied and complex motor repertoire. Its accessibility depends on the target group and the objectives pursued. Through its judicious gradual implementation, it can be included in the content of physical education classes since the very first years of school. The acquisition of the specific motor content depends on the type of dance selected, on the school facilities available and last, but not least, on the teacher's specialized knowledge (Vişan, 2005).

Physical education curricula for the primary cycle specify neither reference objectives for aesthetic education, nor examples of activities to be used for learning how to dance. However, some of the curricula do include similar skills, for instance some steps specific to gymnastics (Programe școlare revizuite, Educație fizică clasele I - a II-a, 2003, Programe școlare pentru clasa a III-a Educație fizică 2004, Programe școlare pentru clasa a IV-a, Educație fizică 2005). If we consider the recommendation that movement should be associated with music, we think that the introduction of some step types taken from folk dancing or dancesport would be most welcome.

On the other hand, we should not overlook the contribution dancing can have to the education of movement fundamentals. From this perspective, it is important to emphasize the particular contribution it can have to the education of a correct body posture, an essential element to be developed in the first school years.

Correct posture represents a warranty for the health of the locomotor apparatus and it depends on both the positioning of the body's centre of gravity and on muscular activity. Building up the right posture and the bearing specific to various motor activities represents a prerequisite for each individual's motor personality, its effects being reflected throughout his lifespan (Macovei and Vasile, 2009). If we analyze the reference objectives stipulated in the physical education curricula for the primary grades (Programe școlare revizuite, Educație fizică clasele I - a II-a, 2003, Programe școlare pentru clasa a III-a Educație fizică 2004, Programe școlare pentru clasa a IV-a, Educație fizică 2005), we find that most of those objectives can also be achieved through means specific to dancing, whose educative offer also has the added value of being more attractive, due to the association between movement and music (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison between reference objectives in school curricula and the educative offer of dancing

School curriculum reference objectives for the primary grades	Formative-educative offer of dancing
Harmonization of one's own physical development and prevention of possible deviations	Education of the corporal scheme
	Education of movement fundamentals
	Education of correct body posture
Extension of one's own supply of basic, applicative-utilitarian and elementary motor skills and development of the associated motor qualities	Acquisition of a various repertoire of movements performed in concordance with the music
	Development of balance, inter-segmental coordination and kinaesthetic control capacities, of the capacity to differently combine diverse movements
	Development of motor memory
Independent practice of physical exercises, games and different sports	The acquired motor repertoire can be independently used, with a recreational and amusement purpose

Practical and methodological experience has proved that the means of dancing, through their various and attractive contents, can be implemented into different parts of physical education classes, as they contribute to the education of aesthetic movement, the fulfilment of operational objectives, the increased diversity and attractiveness of the learning content (Vişan, 2005; Macovei, Buțu, 2008). In this context, we have developed a proposal that we present in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Place of the means of dancing in the structure of physical education classes in primary school

Lesson sequence	Learning content
Organization of the group of pupils	Rhythmicity and musicality games
Body preparation for effort	Variants of steps from different types of dance, performed either separately or in combinations
Selective influences upon the locomotor apparatus	Specific movement structures for the education of corporal aesthetics, adapted from classical or modern dance
Development of the components of motor capacity	Combinations between dance and rhythmicity and musicality games for the development of different types of coordination
Learning, consolidation or improvement of motor abilities/skills	Various exercises for the acquisition of a specific motor repertoire Imitation/improvisation games on various themes for the development of imagination and creativity in movement Acquisition of compositions from different kinds of dance
Body recovery after the effort	Dance elements/combinations at a slow relaxing pace

6. Conclusions

The implementation of the means of dancing in the content of physical education classes in primary school contributes to the achievement of the goals of aesthetic education, by ensuring the early construction of the aesthetic attitude in movement and the development of the capacity for motor expression. Through dancing, children will be educated to freely express themselves, to repress their inhibitions, to know themselves and to communicate through their bodies.

Dancing contributes directly to the education of a correct posture and builds up an aesthetic attitude of the body in motion, which eventually leads to harmonious physical development, in parallel with the development of coordination capacities.

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