

# DANCE AS A FORM OF ARTISTIC EDUCATION FOR THE COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

The fact that dance is a universal language, makes it accessible in all corners of the world, regardless of the space or time we find ourselves in. In fact, the advantages of the study of dance are multiple in any of the systems we relate, formally or non-formally, the latter encompassing the freedom of expression, so preferred today in all age categories. Within the Pro Napoca Art and Sport Association, in addition to the usual ballet and dance classes, numerous programs and projects are carried out that have as objective the implementation of the show-exercise, through which children become young artists, are part of the story of the show, play roles, transmit the character's feelings, get acquainted with the notions of music, act according to the instructions of the show coordinator. Since 2008 until now, the association has carried out about 28 projects with young people and children from non-vocational backgrounds, in the form of recitals, productions, performances. We chose as case studies four types of artistic projects, namely: *The Voice of the Birds*, *The Lark*, *Gala of Champions* and *Jazzy Christmas*, being suggestive in terms of the objectives that were set. Having a different context of development, these activities have generated multiple and diverse benefits to children who practice dance.

## Keywords:

Non-formal education; ballet/dance for children; dance performances with/for children; interference of the arts.

## INTRODUCTION

Non-formal education is a method whose potential as an important form of learning has only recently been understood. A form of learning outside the formal school system, through which activities are organized in many fields, and practitioners discover the pleasure of knowing and evolving. The non-formal exercises its force mainly in the area of arts and sports, with the role of completing, deepening and expanding the information matured in school, especially by means of its practical side.

In contemporary society, one can almost no longer conceive learning without the intertwining of formal and non-formal, both being healthy, viable and relevant ways for the harmonious development of the human personality, regardless of age.

Benefits of non-formal education:

- It can be practiced at any age and in any field
- The inducement factor can quickly reach maximum levels because in most cases it is practiced for pleasure (not out of obligation)
- Places particular emphasis on practice
- Contributes to the discovery and development of multiple skills
- It is an effective way of spending leisure time, because it takes place in an organized environment, led by a professional in that field...
- It effectively complements formal education, because one can learn the same thing with more attractive, fun, pleasant, agreed, accessible means
- Integrates new types of education: health education, leisure education, entrepreneurship education, communication education, community education

The concept of *long life learning* that characterizes learning nowadays is part of the vision of the great scientist Jan Amos Comenius on the permanence of education throughout the entire life of man, following three directions:

- formal education - institutionalized
- informal education - daily experiences
- non-formal education – systematic, intentional, carried out outside the school

"Unesco defines non-formal education as consisting of "any organized and sustained educational activities that do not exactly correspond to what we call formal education. It can be done within or outside educational institutions and is aimed at people of all ages. Non-formal education does not follow a hierarchical system and may differ in duration without necessarily involving the certification of learning outcomes" (according to <https://www.nonformalsepoate.ro/index.php/educatia-nonformala/ce-este-educatia-nonformala>).

Non-formal education is essentially a different way to learn. The very term of Latin origin *nonformalis* signals to us a type of activity that takes place outside of officially organized forms. In this way, learning accesses an approach from the perspective of freedom of expression, motivation, joy/ pleasure, open dialogue, collaboration, satisfaction of curiosities. The break with the imposed structures and the rapid ability to adapt to the lifestyle of the twenty-first century man, make today non-formal education part of the life of the community. Being an activity/ learning method that has no preconceptions and no constraints, the non-contradiction factor appreciated especially by the new generation increases the popularity and access to this type of education. Focusing on the needs and finding solutions for the target group, the non-formal system addresses all ages and can be practiced in any field.

Circles, clubs, workshops, educational centers, studios or teams come to meet the curiosities of students small and large, educators being preoccupied with responding pleasantly and effectively to their expectations.

### **Dancing and its imprint in everyday life**

Ever since its appearance on Earth, dance seems to be more than an art. It is one of the human instincts, and its history began long before it was written about it. In its primitive form, it was a ritual, but nevertheless it was decorative ever since.

"To dance is to express oneself. More, more beautiful, stronger..." (Agnes de Mille. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from BrainyQuote.com). Surely dancing in everyday life means spiritual, mental and intellectual wealth.

The benefits of practicing dance have an impact on both body and mind and are countless, with influences even in unexpected spheres. Thus, we will see how dance makes its mark in a multitude of areas: discipline, general culture, health education (nutrition, hygiene), means of acquiring life skills (multitasking, concentration, healthy eating), organization, efficient management of free time, rhythmic sense, musicality, agility, mobility, motricity, form of socialization, vision in space.

### **Introducing dance in the life of children**

The use of interactive teaching-learning methods is a "must" of non-formal education, their active-participatory character having a real formative value on the student's personality, significantly contributing to the development of their creativity and imagination.

"If you tell me -- I'll forget, if you show me -- I'll remember, if you get me involved -- I'll understand." (anonymous) Starting from this principle, the importance and prevalence of using active-participatory methods in non-formal education is highlighted from the start. The characteristics and advantages of interactive methods are already well known and clarified:

- are attractive
- stimulate initiative, creativity, inventiveness, involvement, free/open dialogue
- ensure the practical part of knowledge matured
- develop skills and abilities
- harness students' creative potential and authenticity
- ensure an interactive approach of the teaching-learning-evaluation act
- empower students in solving tasks
- promote cooperative learning
- develop the social, relational and communicative aspect
- act the critical thinking of the students

We list some types of activities that can be carried out in the field of education through dance:

- Composition of rhythmic games, with the help of dance elements on musical support
- Exposing drawings with pictures/ballet positions, explaining them and forming a dialogue based on them
- Watching age-specific ballet/dance performances
- Organizing productions with dance moments
- Playing stories and/or favorite characters through dance and music – pairing method: for example, a character will be assigned a few suggestive movements (between 4 and 8 movements / steps / suggestive elements of a character: e.g., for the bunny you can use the jump from two legs to two legs)

#### **Implications of creativity on the study of dance in a non-formal environment**

Children/pupils tend to show intolerance towards the opinions of their peers. In order to alleviate this trend, it is important for teachers to help them develop their openness towards what is new, unique, sometimes even bizarre. On the other hand, many of the children/pupils have low self-esteem in relation to dance, which they love, but they often think like this: "I will never be able to perform on stage", "I don't have the right physique", "I certainly don't have talent", etc. This is where the encouraging role of the dance teacher in the non-formal environment steps in, to change the student's optics, opening a new perspective through valuable statements like: "I'm creative", "It doesn't matter what others think". Thus, there are high chances of diminishing the level of anxiety in case of solving tasks that involve originality, freedom, divergent thinking. Often the fear of mistakes, the fear of ridicule or criticism gives rise to shy and introverted children/pupils. Other times, there is a reference to certain canons, in order to please teachers or colleagues.

In a ballet studio where dancing is an extracurricular activity, where children come driven by their passions, the instructive-educational process takes place in a climate that favors creativity by adopting principles such as: rewarding creativity, challenging them to expose and share their ideas (on the principle: *there is nothing wrong*), the use of problematisation, debate and argumentation of opinions, the practice of individual or group projects. In such situations the teacher becomes a kind of mediator/coordinator between the child/young person and his/her creative potential. Questions such as: "What if...?", "What do you think?" capitalize on the student's contribution and increase the level of confidence in their own skills.

#### **Strategies, techniques and methods with creative potential**

1. Developing the fluency of choreographic ideas: this activity has the role of generating as many answers as possible regarding a given situation/theme. The production of ideas can be achieved by:
  - Building a state and finding more bodily situations.

- Associating body positions/phrases with words and vice versa.
  - Finding a chain of movements starting from a sentence/story.
2. Development of flexibility/adaptability
    - Finding multiple endings for a single exercise/story.
    - Presentation of the same dance in different styles (e.g. by changing the style of movement-classical, modern, character)
  3. Development of originality
    - Making up a brief dance moment from a key movement/keywords
    - Modifying an established dance by introducing (a) movement(s) instead of the original ones
  4. Developing vision in space/exploring space/relating the body to space
    - The same movements/exercises/variations/dances performed at different points, on levels, with and without displacement
    - Awareness of space. Adaptation of the same dance/variations in different spaces: small and large
  5. Development of execution rhythm/dynamics of movement
    - Performing the same element/dance in several tempos by changing the musical background (e.g., *passé* to the *battement tendu* versus *adagio* exercise)
  6. Awareness of the meaning of movement
    - Students will need to answer the questions: Who am I? (king, fairy), How am I? (glad, sad, child, old man), Where am I? (in the city, on the moon, in the forest, etc.), When? (now, in Antiquity, etc.)
    - Realization by the students of expressions/characters through suggestive movements and mimicry to refer to the given situation/theme (state of melancholy, joy, a king, anger, etc.)

### **Case study – the activity of the Pro Napoca Art and Sport Ballet Studio**

**Pro Napoca Art and Sport** Ballet studio was founded in 2008, with the desire to cover a less exploited side at that time of the offer of non-formal education, namely activities aimed at the interdisciplinary intersection between dance and sport. All the activities organized are permanently focused on the pursuit of the general and specific objectives defined in the statute of the association. The four projects described below come to illustrate this fact, along with the diversity of the approach to non-formal education through and for dance. Please note that the images used (posters and photographs) come from the author's personal archive.

General objectives of the association:

- Supporting young talents in art and sport, through activities of general interest, as well as in the interest of the community

- Development of cooperation relations with other organizations with similar purposes or with public authorities in Romania or abroad
- Implementation of events with the public by casting children who study ballet / dance in non-vocational systems: productions, recitals, performances
- Making interdisciplinary productions and collaborating within these productions between vocational, professional and non-vocational spheres
- Formation of a nursery for vocational high schools

Specific objectives:

- The assimilation by children who study dance/ballet into non-vocational systems of the basic notions of dance art
- The competence of children who study ballet/dance in non-vocational environments to present the dances learned in front of the audience – the exercise of being a small artist on stage
- Making short and medium choreographies, of specific difficulty on the principle of memorization (by heart)
- The formation of a set of dance-specific skills, also valid in professional environments, such as: discipline, confidence, healthy eating, development of time coordinates of movement (rhythm, duration, tempo), coordination of body segments on music
- Practicing a system of values and rules specific to the art of dance and professional dancers
- Awareness of the fact that physical effort is beneficial, healthy, forms a harmonious body, body flexibility being achieved
- Overcoming stage and performance anxiety through mental preparation and thus obtaining self-confidence, subsequently applicable by children in various life situations (school, contests, special situations, etc.)

**1. *The voice of the birds*** – musical-choreographic show in collaboration with *Sigismund Toduță Music College*, occasioned by the International Day of Birds. In this performance, the student Albert-Ani Sonia (12 years old, student in the fifth grade, at *Nicolae Bălcescu Theoretical High School* in Cluj-Napoca) participated in the choreographic moment *The Death of the Swan* on the music of Camile Saint-Saens, accompanied by the students Raul Vălean – cello and Andra Vălean – piano.



**Figure 1: Event poster**

The student has been studying ballet since the age of 4, twice a week. She is very consistent, ambitious, she easily learns the elements taught. She has made great progress in a short time, which is why I have guided her to *Octavian Stroia High School of Choreography and Dramatic Art*, but she wants to continue practicing dance as a hobby.

Qualities: agility, flexibility, sensitivity, tenacity.

Currently, Sonia is my student in the repertoire, where we individually work various solos from classical consecrated ballets, adapted for children. She is extremely emotional and we discovered together that it would be very useful for her to go out periodically on stage, in front of the audience: productions, recitals, choreographic miniatures. Therefore, I am always looking for collaborations with colleagues from various artistic departments for such projects, which will give her the opportunity to perform on stage. Thus, in addition to the side of my specialty of teaching her repertoire/ classical dance, I intend to contribute as effectively as possible to her mental and emotional preparation. Motivating her, she becomes more self-confident, she becomes more ambitious, more optimistic and eager for progress.

The student gladly accepted the invitation to the event, also understanding its educational side. And by having a concrete goal to complete, she felt extremely motivated.



**Figure 2: Sonia Albert-Ani in *Death of the Swan***

In conclusion, this event was a beneficial experience for the student, as she adapted exemplarily to the conditions of the show: stage, lights, costume, live accompaniment, audience. By discovering well-being and using positive thoughts, she increased her level of confidence in appearing in front of the audience. As a result of these results, the student was open to participate in other events discovering their positive side.

**2. The ballet-enchancement "The Lark"** was born from an assignment received at the discipline of Musical Theatre Directing, coordinated by PhD associate professor Ina Hudea. Due to my training and experience in the field of choreographic art, I chose to present a show in which the story is being danced.

After establishing the music and the script, the choice of distribution followed. The adult characters (the Lark/Prince Rolos, Princess Zia, Queen Orola, The Young Man) were attributed to artists with professional backgrounds: The Romanian National Opera of Cluj-Napoca, *Gheorghe Dima* National Academy of Music Cluj-Napoca. The children-characters were attributed to some girls selected from those who study dance at the Pro Napoca Art and Sport Ballet Studio: The Princess Girl – Georgia Maier, The Goblins/Fairies – Carla Maier, Diana Paul, Isabel Rotar-Souca.

In the first phase, we contacted the children's families to present them the project (script, work time, show) and to ask for their consent for the collaboration.

**Stages of work** in preparing the young girls for the show:

1. Meeting with the four little girls to present the script, the work plan, the schedules of the shows.
2. Scheduling rehearsals with each individual/collective character, 3 times a week, about 1 hour, for 3 months.



3. Compiling handouts for each character, with physical, moral characteristics to guide each one's artistic path.
4. After completing the choreography for a certain painting, rehearsals were carried on with all the characters of pertaining to that painting, so that the girls could form an overview, then realize the interaction parts between the characters.
5. As the learning of the choreography for two paintings was completed, they were repeated bound, for memorization, a better understanding of the thread of the narrative, fluency and continuity. This was maintained until all the paintings of the show "*The Lark*" were tied up. As the girls mastered the sequence of choreography, I insisted on the gestures and interpretation part in order to create authentic characters, as truthfully embodied as possible.
6. Scheduling of strings: in this phase, the girls obtained breath and safety in rendering the choreography from a technical and interpretive point of view.
7. Schedule the site rehearsal on stage with décor and props. In addition to the aspects related to dancing, it was very important to familiarize the girls with the stage space, lights, props, décor.
8. Scheduling of general rehearsals on stage with décor, carpet and costumes.



**Figure 3: Poster of the show**



**Figure 4: Photo from the show**

The involvement of the four girls in the show *The Lark* was based on several well-determined educational objectives, aiming to achieve some fundamental competences: expression by means other than the word (gesture, elements of dance, mimicry), general competences: learning choreography and observing the directorial-choreographic indications, performing rehearsals and pre-show activities, obtaining an overall vision in terms of preparation for a performance of ballet and specific skills: maintaining the physical form, technically correct execution of the components of the choreography, rendering as faithfully as possible the danced character from an interpretive point of view.

Normally, the introduction of a large-scale project into the lives of children aged 4-10 is a great challenge. Their daily schedule changes, in the sense that rehearsals for the show require a much more efficient time management, in order to cope both with school and performance preparation tasks. It was extremely important and valuable to collaborate with the family, which permanently offered its support in organizing the busier days, respectively provided valuable information so that the school activity would not suffer.

Through their presence, professional ballet dancers involuntarily offered patterns of behavior both for and outside the dance: the attire of the body, the level of involvement, the way of executing the elements, the gestures and visual expressions, punctuality, nutrition, teamwork, empathy, etc.

Rehearsals and time spent with the ballet dancers improved the execution of the technical and artistic elements, the little girls being motivated to go beyond their own limits.

**Results and impact:** the show took place on April 28th, 2022, at the Studio Hall of *Gheorghe Dima National Academy of Music*, on occasion of the International Dance Day.

Direct benefits: the formation of competences and skills: motivation, courage, confidence, self-discipline, experiencing well-being through one's own body, better coordination of the body (in dance hands and feet make different movements), management of emotions, personal development; developing a nursery for the vocational system, some of the girls expressing their desire to enroll in *Octavian Stroia* High School of Choreography and Dramatic Art.

Indirect benefits: the formation of a chain of art-consuming audiences, the families and relatives of the girls having the curiosity to participate in genre shows in Cluj-Napoca; the familiarization of the owners with the stages, backstage and preparations of a show, a boost of respect towards art and artists.

Resumption of the show in June 2022, at the Studio Hall of Music *Gheorghe Dima the National Academy of Music*, within the second edition of the Symposium

*Opera Aperta*, organized by the The Romanian National Opera of Cluj-Napoca, was preceded by a presentation given by Hilda Elisabeta Iacob, PhD, who also emphasized on this occasion that "the performance follows some objectives of great actuality" (Iacob, 2022, p. 43), among which we also find this aspect of the existence of dance as a method of non-formal education in a professional context.

### **3. Champions Gala**

It is a summer day camp that the Pro Napoca Art and Sport Association organizes in partnership with the U Cluj and / or U Evolution Football Sports Clubs, and it addresses juniors aged 5 - 13. Since 2013, year after year, for 4 weeks (the first 4 weeks of the summer holidays) 40-50 children-athletes from the football section spend part of their holiday interfering with pleasant disciplines, and useful at the same time for their passion. Thus, English, swimming, reading, gymnastics or dancing make the children happy during these camps.

Referring to dance classes, they aim to develop both motor and general culture or rhythmic sense, while also learning to use their body differently than on the football field. It is very important to propose to them themes, styles, sound background and attractive choreographies, precisely in order to touch the area that non-formal education provides, that of spending a pleasant time, so that they can return again and again with pleasure. Not by chance, thanks to a successful program, we have had numerous cases in which the children have returned annually.

At the end of the 4 weeks, in which about 10 one-hour meetings are allocated for dance activities, children perform on one of the stages of Cluj (for example, Dacia Cinema, Mărăști Cinema and others). Every year, for the dance section, we chose to approach a theme of the camp that would unfold on an artistic/musical style, which would remain in the minds and at the same time in the children's body. Genres approached: musical (2016 – *My fair lady* by Frederick Loewe), Argentine tango (2017 – composer Astor Piazzolla), symphony (2021 – *Ode to Joy* in the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven). For learning dances I used especially the method of associating movements with objects, phenomena, living things, etc. At the end of the dance class within the camp, the children learned about classical, pop, opera music and the styles of movement suitable for a certain musical category.

2022 was the year of animated film music and feature film. We projected moments of dance and pantomime on hits from *Pink Panther* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* productions. For the fragment of the *Pink Panther* we took the panther movements from the cartoons by the same name, adapted them and tailored them to the potential of the group, outlining the dance to the music chosen. At the time of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, we associated the movements with both pirate movements and elements of nature, such as storm, wind or waves.



**Figure 5: Snapshot from camp**

**Results and impact:** a unique, interdisciplinary, fun experience on the one hand, because the children fully enjoyed the theme, the music, the dance, the process itself, but on the other hand we had to work a lot on homogeneity and unity as they were familiar with the sports environment where there are no synchronous actions.

Direct benefits: harmonious development from a physical and mental point of view, general culture (musical, choreographic, literature, art), overcoming physical limits (mobility), developing the rhythmic sense and musical hearing, developing the ability to memorize the elements that compose the dance, knowing some artistic styles, education for health (healthy eating), increasing self-confidence, achieving well-being.

Indirect benefits: the formation of an audience for the performances in the community (the families of the children and their relatives), the practice of dance as a way of delight for the members of the children's families.

**4. Jazzy Christmas** - show at the Concert Hall of the Territorial Radio Studio of Cluj. Such events, organized on occasion of the winter holidays, are always a very good "pretext" to complete the activity within many types of organizations aimed at non-formal education. Their preparation benefits from an extra motivation from the participants, which is beneficial in all stages of work.

This time, the theme of the show was the repertoire of American songs for Christmas and Winter, very popular and familiar to both children and public potential. To provide extra interactivity and verification, we opted for live music and not

recordings. Thus, through the partnership with *Sigismund Toduță* College of Music, the students of the jazz-light music singing department, accompanied by the Entertainer Orchestra of the college, prepared the musical part of the show.



Figure 6: Poster of the show



Figure 7: Photo of the show

The Pro Napoca Art and Sport Association had the choreographic mission. Being a show dedicated to winter and its holidays, we created on the different songs individual and collective characters, such as: stars, fairies, snowmen and snowflakes. This identification with allegorical and fairy-tale characters helped the children in rendering the movements, but also the specific gestures.

### **Results and impact**

Direct benefits: the acting exercise of the children, the rendering by specific means of the dance of some fantastic characters, the memorization of the choreography.

Indirect benefits: attracting the families of the children involved, collaborating with the students from *Sigismund Toduță* College of Music who played live music, generating new ideas related to other genre projects between the two institutions.

## Conclusions

Surely for the XXI century non-formal education in the artistic fields is becoming an increasingly important niche for achieving the maximum potential of the individual. The development of creativity and the formation of a general culture, by choosing a comfort zone, open the doors to a different kind of training, which harmoniously complements traditional learning. The whole community benefits from this journey, because the collaboration of the two systems creates a healthy environment for the development of new generations through art. A basic training folded on the freedom to opt for the complementary needs offered by the field of dance and not only, stimulates the interest of the individual for sensitivity, emotion, beauty, making him/her a real value of society.

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