

## **The Cascais Portugal Dance Project associated with a transformative pedagogy**

Luisa Alegre

### **Abstract**

This project, committed to students from disadvantaged schools “Agrupamento de Escolas de Alcabideche – Cascais” between 2016-2018, aimed to promote the artistic practice of an integrated dance (body, rational and emotional) associated with transformative humanistic pedagogy. The project’s mission was closely linked to building a more present, integrated and participatory citizenship, focusing on the fight against poverty in all its forms, on the construction of peaceful, responsible societies and on the promotion of well-being and inclusive education. Project partners included the School Sports Program and the “Confiar Association” whose function is to prevent the risky behaviour of young people in the community. The project applied an integrative methodology involving 120 students between the ages of 9 and 15 years. The results revealed the collective learning capacity and self-improvement of all the agents involved.

5 keywords: Dance, School, Education, Learning, Well-being

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the “Dance Cascais project” from three perspectives: the pedagogical perspective, the curricular perspective, and the practical perspective, in a coherent way between theory and practice.

The dance project was carried out between 2017 and 2019 in Cascais, Portugal.

In this article we will review the two curricular documents that stand out for valuing the implementation of Dance in schools as Artistic Education, namely: “The Profile of Students at the End of Schooling Obligation” and “Essential Learning”. These documents were prepared based on a humanist, constructivist, and transformative pedagogical perspective of the public-school social project.

Through the Dance Cascais project we will observe the coherence between theory and practice, that is, the coherence between the transformative pedagogical perspective, the curricular perspective and educational practice in action, which not only understands the educational value of teaching creative dance in schools but acts to transform people who are at school.

Lastly, I emphasize that in this paper, the meaning of what is transforming, or transformative pedagogy will be indistinctly assumed, despite being differentiated by several other authors.

### **The pedagogical perspective**

Based on the assumptions of the conceptions of education found in the literature review in Alegre (2015), we have gathered a vast set of pedagogical guidelines that help us to frame the pedagogical perspective of dance circumscribed in two major paradigms, namely, the paradigm of technical rationality and the paradigm of critical-reflective rationality.

i) The paradigm of Technical Rationality lasted for most of the twentieth century and is still a model of training and teaching (Tyler, 1949). The teacher is seen as a technician who uncritically implements the curriculum which is the same for all, considering neither the learners, nor the contexts.

We witness the passive role of the student as a mere receiver and reproducer.

An investigation into dance in Portuguese public schools (Alegre, 2015) with more than 560 teachers interviewed by questionnaire and 63 by interviews, revealed that at a national level, the culture of dance at school in the Arts Education discipline reflected what was prescribed in the curriculum of dance in the Physical Education discipline, a curriculum that focused on the reproduction of steps and choreographies found in social dances, aerobic or fitness dances and traditional Portuguese dances. In other words, for decades the Dance component of Artistic Education was taught by Physical Education teachers. These results were relevant because they allowed us to identify a problem, among others, that hindered the development and innovation of dance as an art form in schools in Portugal in recent decades. Furthermore, it was found that the culture of school dance was predominantly reproductive and lacked the promotion of creative environments. We concluded that the teaching and learning of dance in schools was based on a school practice guided by a pedagogical perspective based on the paradigm of technical rationality.

ii) The second paradigm of Critical-Reflective Rationality that was referred to in Alegre (2015), and which re-emerged in the 1980s, offers assumptions in opposition to the strategies of the traditional memoristic and repetitive pedagogical practices from the previous point.

In this second paradigm, we can frame transformative pedagogy.

Transformative pedagogy is not a new educational orientation. It is based on a set of models, theories, and educational currents in circulation since the last century.

The word “transform” is etymologically defined (Machado, 2003) as “to give new form, modify, alter, renew, metamorphose, transfigure, regenerate, vary, disfigure, make different.” So, a transformative pedagogy should be interpreted as one that can restructure and renew teaching and learning processes according to the needs of students in the social environment and the broader social context.

One example through which to understand practical or local changes from a general pedagogical perspective is provided by the Jacques Delors European Information Centre (CIEJD) which, aware of the world's challenges for the new 21st century, committed itself in 1996 to improve and transform education through teacher training. The objectives were to fulfil the mission of progressing, evolving, and innovating to improve methods, techniques, processes,

procedures, and strategies that facilitate and accompany changes in the teaching and learning process in a more open, globalized, and technological world. However, change has not been easy in our educational environment, despite the efforts of the National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Training (INAFOP) which listed necessary dimensions of the desired teacher profile for changing practices in school two decades ago. So, for years we witnessed an inconsistency between what was theoretically desired and actual teaching practices in schools.

We can remember at this point all the representative pedagogues and scholars who founded the Escola Nova.

However, I give special emphasis to the contribution made by Edgar Morin. His systemic complexity thinking underpins the curricular change in the destiny of education in Portugal since 2017. His work also underpins the implementation of the interconnected humanist and constructivist social systemic paradigm of complexity in the National Project for Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility in the current educational system in Portugal.

Morin's complexity theory contradicts the rationalist technical vision of education and the curriculum, which separates disciplines and fragments the objectives of knowledge, reality, and life. The concepts of curriculum and complexity, recognized in their ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects, as well as the importance of the curriculum/complexity relationship and some of its possible developments in education, are a challenge when changing the paradigm of traditional education towards the implementation of a paradigm that integrates a humanist, social and constructivist vision in an attempt to overcome the fragmented and reductive vision of the universe, aiming to impact contemporary education.

Morin's thought of complexity influences our current education materialized in the curriculum, reconfiguring the guidelines of educational practices more consistently with a new school culture that reflects a new perspective: a) a curriculum that interconnects all physical, natural and social phenomena; b) active learning methodologies; c) development of students' skills in a personal, citizenship and professional dimension that allows them to adequately mobilize the results of their learning and knowledge for social action.

We asked, how can dance education be framed according to the paradigm of Critical-Reflective Rationality?

In accordance with Critical-Reflective Rationality, we highlight Laban's disciples, who spread his work throughout the world after the Second World War. For example, many English and North American Physical Education teachers, captivated by the potential of spontaneous and naturalistic movement, felt attracted to introducing creative dance into the school curriculum as a vehicle for the student's integral formation and to introduce it into composition and the Physical Education curriculum.

Understanding dance not only as an artistic manifestation, but as an integral means for human formation in the educational process presupposes having a teaching concept that is not restricted to methodologies based on copying

models (steps and choreographies), excessive teaching of technique or in the repetition of static and formal content.

For this purpose, from an epistemological point of view, we assume in the paradigm of Critical-Reflective Rationality the model of Laban's creative movement (1978) as it allows us to outline pedagogical proposals that embrace, through appropriate didactics and methodology, the principle of the person as being unique, integral, and singular, with the power of freedom and autonomy to create, work and appreciate. Based on studies of the system and categorization of movement by Laban, Marques, (2010) reinforces the social aspect of dance in "context" directed by a methodology associated with the triad between dance, teaching, and society. Marques elaborates on the four axes that intersect in the teaching and learning of dance as an art form: (1) Problematize (ask, investigate, inquire); (2) Articulate (connect, relate, weave networks); (3) Criticize (compare, hypothesize, analyse, decode) and (4) Transform (change, reformat, reorganize, reconfigure).

In Portugal, we observed through research in our environment that the most expressive and creative dance, in the form of "Educative Dance", which can be inserted in this paradigmatic nucleus, was not incorporated in schools, despite teachers expressing its value. In research studies (Alegre, 2015) it was observed that there was a need for improvement in terms of knowledge of content and teaching of creative dance to be implemented in schools from an early age by Physical Education teachers and by generalist primary teachers whose content is prescribed in primary and secondary schools. On the other hand, when schools choose to hire a dance specialist, they teach in the fifth to eighth grades, and the remaining grades miss out on the opportunity to learn creative dance.

In conclusion, the local Cascais Dance Project was based on the paradigm of Critical-Reflective Rationality by promoting a change in the traditional practices of paradigmatic dance installed in schools and by contradicting the vertical, authoritarian, isolated logic of dance teaching in Portuguese schools.

The Cascais Dance Project recognized the value of the role of the arts in education, in metacognitive learning, in the dissemination of "creative dance" and in its democratization in the school context. Providing students participating in the project, from the first to the ninth grade, with the opportunity to learn and explore their bodies, space, time, and new dynamics through creative dance was very significant and important in the integral development of these children and young people.

### **The curricular perspective**

In the curricular changes that were carried out in 2017, two very important documents are referenced that redirected the axes of education in Portugal. These theoretical references are the Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Schooling (2017) and the Essential Learning document (2017).

Both are theoretical references structuring the change underway in curricular reform that mark a new stage in the life of schools in Portugal in all areas of

teaching and learning and that open up favourable perspectives for the practice of Educational Dance at school.

### **a) The document, *Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling***

The Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Schooling implements an educational policy measure that aims to promote the improvement of the quality of learning and the success of all students from preschool to the end of 12 years of compulsory schooling. It is also defined as the set of assumptions and goals that teachers want the student to achieve; it is the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes focused on competencies.

This document contributes to the definition of strategies, methodologies, and pedagogical-didactic procedures to be used in the practice of all teachers in all curricular areas. The vision of a student educated for the 21st century provides for the operationalisation and promotion of different areas of skills spanning a cognitive and metacognitive, social, emotional, physical and practical nature.

Its entire design is based on the contemporary thought of Edgar Morin's complexity and, as we have seen previously, it is based on the humanist, constructivist, interconnected and integrated conception of the person, the community, and the world. This theoretical framework guides teachers and all educational stakeholders, highlighting the need for "in context" responses to the type of education we should give. How should we educate in a more changing and complex world? How should we lead the education of a critical student and participatory citizen, active and interested in his surroundings?

The student must acquire and mobilise skills or areas of competence such as critical and creative thinking, reasoning, communication, problem solving, interpersonal relationships, well-being, environmental awareness and responsibility, aesthetic and artistic sensitivity, scientific, technical, and technological knowledge and body awareness and mastery.

This framework must be worked on and mobilized by all teachers at the school through their content, including the school's dance teacher. This implies that the teacher is capable of working on disciplinary content in a concerted, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary and collaborative way. Each discipline should no longer concentrate its content in isolation. Thus, dance at school will have a focus, beyond mere motor and artistic skills, and will be committed to performing and choreographing works with significant speeches, addressing topics of interest to the school project, the student, and their historical and political implications. There is cultural, social, and cultural context.

So, we can observe that teaching dance through the Technical Rationality Paradigm does not fit into the current educational purposes that guide education in Portugal. Thus, we are facing a new educational cycle for the teaching of dance at schools.

### **b) The Essential Learning Document**

These are new background and curricular documents introduced in 2017, for the planning of content and assessment of teaching and learning. The good

news is that for the first time, the curricular document of the Essential Apprenticeships (2017) was drawn up for the curricular area of Dance within the scope of artistic education, to be taught by the generalist teacher (first to fourth grade) and then taught by a pedagogue with a dance degree for the second cycle (fifth and sixth grade). Three organising axes of the teaching and learning of dance are framed through appropriation and reflection, interpretation and communication, experimentation, and creation.

A new dance cycle was inaugurated at the school, starting in 2017. The creative dance can be taught by other teachers, removing the physical education teacher from sole responsibility for dissemination of dance at the school. Those responsible for teaching dance are guided by a curricular document titled "Essential Learning of Dance" (2017) which is based on learning creative dance through the creative model of Laban's movement (Laban, 1978).

Therefore, creative dance features hybrid content in the hands of the generalist teacher who, in addition to teaching all subjects, also teaches dance in artistic education in primary education (from the first to the fourth year). Creative dance in Physical Education from the 5th to the 12th year is a zero subject that is almost not considered in classes. In Physical Education, traditional dances and social dances are promoted. Thus, in the research study (Alegre, 2015) it was observed that many Physical Education teachers do not work, teach, or promote creative dance in their classes.

Finally, there is only one measure that allows schools, through their autonomy, to hire teachers specialized in teaching Dance. This is an achievement because until now the doors were completely closed to dance teachers in public schools. Therefore, if there is interest on the part of a school or educational project in offering students the subject of dance as an art form, then it can hire a dance teacher to teach from the 5th to the 9th year. This is the only case in which there is added value in terms of students learning about and practicing creative dance at school with a specialized professional. Unfortunately, the professional situation of dance teachers is still precarious in regular public schools and there is still no official recruitment of them to the schools' professional staff.

In conclusion, these documents reflect the paradigm shift in traditional education and are, therefore, promising practices for Transformative Dance. Educational dance as a curricular area is legitimized through the Essential Learning document under the pedagogical vision of the document "Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Schooling". In this new educational perspective, the Cascais dance project gains pedagogical significance as it fits into the vision and educational mission of the public school's social project, being recognized as transformative as it constitutes an innovative and inclusive dance.

### **The practice perspective**

Sharing this local practical experience in the Alcabideche School Group in Cascais is the materialization of the concepts of the pedagogical perspective centered on the paradigm of Critical-Reflective Rationality and of the two documents that changed the curricular perspective in Portugal: the Student

Profile at the Exit of Schooling Mandatory (2017) and the theoretical framework of Essential Learning (2017) with regard to the coherence between theory and practice in the teaching and learning of dance at school.

Currently, the Alcabideche School Group is dissolved, as in 2020 it was merged with another neighbouring school community. However, I will recap the process in a set of points below, which characterize and describe the Cascais Dance Project (2018):

- a- The context - It was a school community situated in the invisible part of Cascais, in one of the most beautiful and touristy counties of Portugal, but out of sight. The pupils were from three multicultural social neighbourhoods where the African culture of the former Portuguese colonies was prevalent. We suffered from problems of identity, of indiscipline, of acceptance mixed with aggressiveness and at the same time with affection.
- b- Priorities of the Educational Project in the Alcabideche School Grouping - Social and cultural demands and the search for better integration. The fight against poverty in all its forms in the construction of peaceful, responsible societies and the promotion of well-being and inclusive education.
- c- The mission - It was closely linked to the path of building a more present, integrated, and participative citizenship.
- d- The genesis of the Project - How does it arise? It emerges on the assumption that Dance is Education in a transformative pedagogical perspective, humanistic and committed to the students:
  - In the logic of understanding that expression, creation, body language, communication and composition guarantee the transmission of an integrated culture of artistic and cultural intervention.
  - In the promotion of new spaces for the "Dance project showcase", that is, from the competitive space of School Sport to a space of sharing and communication.
  - In the dignified integration of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and thus in strengthening social cohesion in the community known as Cascalenses.
- e- The specific objectives:
  - Democratising the creative and contemporary dance base in a school for everybody.
  - To promote a healthy lifestyle in the physical, psychological, social and emotional field with dance at school for everybody.
  - To provide a space for knowledge sharing and active involvement of the whole school community: teachers, parents, students, Cascais local government.
- f- Content: Educational Dance integrated and transformative (body, rational and relational) understood as content / educational means of added value in teaching practice enabling:
  - democratic participation of all educational agents, regardless of age, gender, condition, or physical structure.
  - inclusion as a form of education.

- liberation of imprisoned and oppressed bodies by widening their borders.
  - interdisciplinarity.
  - improvement of pedagogical relationships.
  - promotion of creative and innovative environments in the teaching-learning process.
  - self-discovery of the body and movement
  - materialization of the structural components of the body, space, energy and relationship.
  - aesthetic experience.
  - stimulation of critical thinking.
  - questioning personal and social reality.
  - expression and communication.
  - openness to spaces of inscription.
  - entrepreneurship.
  - personal well-being in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem.
- making culture and especially the integral formation of students and the construction of their active citizenship.
- g- The inspiration: "The story of a snail who discovered the importance of slowness" by the writer Luís Sepúlveda, for promoting environmental education, active citizenship, and personal and social development through the experience of values.
- h- Strategy - The project was built on the logic of the methodology of interdisciplinary project-based work, whose organizing theme was the short story worked on by 8 classes from 3 different schools of the Grouping of Schools of Alcabideche, with students of different school years, aged between 9 and 15. The theme of each part of the story was chosen by the students.
- i- Interdisciplinarity: Topics such as environmental education, citizenship and personal and social training were addressed by the subjects of: Citizenship and Development, Visual Education, Portuguese Language, Physical Education, School Sport and Special Education.
- j- At the evaluation level, the impact of the activity was highlighted by parents, the school headmaster and the person responsible for the Education portfolio in Cascais. However, our main feedback was the transformation visible in the process and in the involvement and joy of the students in the presentation and the evident spirit of overcoming by the educational agents of the school community.

## **Conclusion**

The Cascais Dance Project was associated with a transformative pedagogy by:

- Breaking with the traditional practices reigning in the teaching and learning of Dance in a disadvantaged school environment.
- Promoting an integrated Dance project (corporal, rational and relational) of active methodology.

- Providing a space for sharing knowledge and involvement among teachers, parents, students, local government.
- Promoting a healthy lifestyle in the physical, psychological, social, and emotional field with Dance at school for everybody.
- Involving participation of all educational agents, regardless of age, gender, condition, or physical structure
- Inclusion
- Freeing trapped and oppressed bodies by extending their boundaries through self-discovery and metacognition.
- Fostering interdisciplinarity.
- Improving the pedagogical relationship.
- Stimulating creative and innovative environments in the teaching and learning process.
- Working with the following competencies in a concrete way: living the aesthetic experience; issuing critical thinking; the questioning of personal and social reality; expression and communication; entrepreneurship; personal well-being at the level of self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Making culture.
- Building active and mobilizing citizenship.
- Democratizing dance for the opening of spaces.

The implementation of curricular changes was very useful and important when the 2020 pandemic imposed the use of new technological tools through virtual learning. However, the missionaries of "transformative dance" now encounter new challenges to balance students' excessive use of digital technologies with more conscious and ecological body practices that allow restoring our well-being and our own survival.

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## Biography

Luisa Alegre completed a PhD in Human Motricity - Dance at the University of Lisbon - FMH. She has been working on school projects since 1994 as a teacher of physical education, expressive rhythmic activities, and dance. She is

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currently a teacher at “Agrupamento de Escolas São João do Estoril – Cascais” in Portugal. She was responsible for the National Dance portfolio in 2018-2019. She supports other teachers in the dissemination of dance at school and she believes in the potential of Dance inserted in a transformative and human pedagogy as a way of building people's citizenship.

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