

The Importance of Art in Special Education

The Dance Pedagogy Program at Idad Center

A. *A multi-disciplinary approach*

At Idad Center, we define dance therapy as the psychotherapeutic use of movement which triggers the emotional, cognitive and physical integration of the individual.

Our Music and Dance classes were also conceived with the idea of raising public awareness as to the many hidden talents of our students. The long-term goal for us is to create a theatrical band that would perform anywhere, starting from Lebanon to other Arab countries and perhaps, why not, in the Western countries. The idea is to have our own “Idad Dance Group” composed of young mentally disabled dancers and actors.

We like to think about our Dance Workshop as a mixture of disciplines: psychomotor training is involved, so is sensory integration as well as psychotherapeutic treatment. *We appeal to the entire body of the person but also to his/her soul.*

By **Body**, we mean everything related to the physical self and the physical environment (the senses, the movements, the postures, the rhythm, the orientation in space and time, the art of communicating with others...)

By **Soul**, we mean self-consciousness (feelings, emotions...), self-discipline and self-esteem. The goal is to trigger the *narcissism* of the student in order to reach the stage where he will realize what a good and lovable person he is.

This workshop, which is an integral part of our educational curriculum at “Idad”, is a therapeutic treatment, very similar to the psychotherapeutic psychoanalytical experience or the relaxation therapies.

To achieve our goal, we proceed very gradually along two dimensions: the Physical (Body) and the Psychological (Soul).

B. *Appealing to the Body*

The following aims are set:

- The students will gradually learn through dancing the potentials as well as the limits of their bodies in the absence of any competition (**body image**).
- The students will start desiring to improve and refine their steps, their postures, their movements by trying to get closer and closer to the model-dancer (**environmental awareness / imitation**).
- The students will learn to respect the context in which they are standing or moving (**spatial orientation**).
- The students will learn to respect the rhythm of others around them (including that of their model-dancer) and will start genuinely feeling the need to be absorbed by the overall rhythmic experience (**time orientation**).
- The last aim is *creative corporal expression*: the students will be able to create their own movements, their own rhythm, in response to various types of music and also in response to the lyrics (if any) they are hearing. We call this the **aesthetic** aim (appreciating harmony, sense of order)

Observable results (especially among children with *Trisomy 21* and *Autism*)

- Higher sense of motor coordination is achieved
- Amelioration in equilibrium and balance
- Decrease in stereotypic movements (these are transformed or converted by the Model-dancer into more functional movements)
- Enhanced body-image: thus the slow and passive child realizes that he needs to work on his slowness in order to synchronize with the music and with the others in the group; the hyperactive child realizes that his movements are too impulsive and that he needs to slow down and give more structure to his movements in order to fit.
- Behaviour self-management is achieved: because of the “team-spirit” that prevails during the Dance Workshop, all the dancers within the group learn that they have to cooperate in order to achieve one common goal (harmony), and so the students learn to master their impulsions and work as a group toward that goal.

C. Appealing to the Soul

The following aims are set:

- The students will externalize their negative feelings and emotions such as anger, sadness, hostility(**cathartic experience**)
- The students will openly express their positive feelings and expressions : learning to “feel” and “capture” the joy of the moment (**blissful experience**)
- The student will become interested in his/her own person (**self-consciousness**): who is he, what can he do, how can he do it, what is his impact on others...
- The student will learn to valorize himself based on this self-awareness (**self-esteem**)
- The students will develop better communication and social skills to relate with others (**emotional intelligence**).

Observable results:

- Students with behaviour disorders are escorted by the center’s psychologist throughout the sessions of the “dance workshop” and are closely monitored , using a behaviour-modification approach to make sure the cathartic experience they are undergoing is integrated within the general atmosphere of the workshop, rather than becoming disruptive. Thus the student is allowed to act out his aggressive feelings on stage, in front of a mirror for example, but is led to realize that he is not allowed to hurt the others as the session must go on, in harmony, and that his presence is welcomed as long as he is ready to contribute for that harmony.
- Learning to feel and capture the joy of the moment is such an important experience for all of us, and for our students, it is a privileged experience where they learn to feel “good about themselves”, accepting themselves, acknowledging how beautiful they can be...Such experiences are particularly valuable for raising their self-esteem and further triggering their creativity. This is mainly achieved by 3 factors: 1) the positive feedback and encouragement they receive from their tutors during the session, 2) the mere fact that

dancing is really a “no-fail” experience, there are no mistakes, no failures, and mostly, no competition, and 3) the sensory experience of the music itself.

- Our dance workshops really act as training sessions to enhance the students’ emotional intelligence: this self-appreciation leads them to appreciate and accept the others around them, especially when they realize that the whole dance experience is a “team-work”. They start assisting one another on a particular step, they give cues to one another, they encourage one another, etc. Thus timid students gradually become more daring...Passive students gradually feel more motivated and willing to participate...Attention-seekers gradually realize they are part of a group and start manifesting the need to belong and to be absorbed by this group ambiance rather than disrupt it...

Below are some examples of Activities :

- Christmas celebrations : each class prepares a dance or sketch related to the Christmas theme.
- The “Superstar” auditions : simulation of the selection process of candidates.
- The Superstar prime party : selected candidates sing and imitate their favourite singers.
- The End of the Year Celebration : all classes are involved in preparing and performing in the end-of-the-year celebration, usually a musical comedy ;example 1:*There is no place like Home*(June 2005), example 2: *The Thousand and One Nights* (June 2006), example 3 : *Arts Divers* (June 2007).

D. Major benefits

It is the third year now at “Idad” that we are incorporating dance pedagogy into our educational curriculum, and toward the end of each of these years, we would pause for an evaluation of the work being done, and ask ourselves: was it worthwhile? Did the students benefit from this experience? Did they enjoy the lessons? What is missing in these lessons? How can we improve them? ...

Is it worthwhile?

Our yearly evaluation of the dance workshop activities definitely are in favour of the importance of such workshops in our educational curriculum, based on the following comments:

- They provide variety into our program and thus enrich the daily life activities away from rigid academic teaching and monotonous vocational training: it is a kind of an entertainment recreational activity for our students.
- They promote better socio-adaptive skills among the participants
- They promote a “team-spirit” amongst the students: each one feels he/she has an important role to fulfil toward reaching a common goal(the final performance)
- They definitely complement the other therapeutic and rehabilitative services provided at “Idad”(speech-therapy, occupational therapy, psychotherapy)
- They definitely fall within our understanding of human development: that the human being is a multi-faceted entity and development in one facet naturally influences the other facets, therefore leading to a full-fledged development.

The following behavioural and psychological improvements have been noted in our students over the last 3 years:

- A common problem shared by all children with disabilities is their lack of spatial and time orientation for they are unable to deal effectively with the variability of time and space. The dance workshops have helped students gain control over time and space, as reflected by the overall improvement and refinement of their movement , posture and assessment of time.
- All students who participate in these workshops evolved from a state of passivity and shyness to active participation, initiative-taking and, in a few cases, even creativity.
- The dance rituals that are commonly used in these workshops have helped many students acquire a better perception of their own bodies: over time, we see they are less awkward in their movements, they are more aware of the physical environment.
- The students have come to learn to appreciate the importance of working together to fulfill a common goal: observing the others, waiting for their turn, imitating a dance-model...Skills that are needed in most of daily life experiences.
- The students have been introduced to different and various types and genres of music from all over the world.
- The aggressive of some severely disturbed students have been successfully channelled in the rhythmic execution of some movements (we designed a dance using “kick-boxing” and “karate” steps)
- The sexual impulses of most of our adolescent students have been successfully channelled in relevant exercises of corporal expression
- Over time, we have noticed a great boost in self-confidence in many of our adolescent girls with respect to their body-image : how they look, what they can do with their bodies

The input of “Very Special Arts”

Our strong determination to incorporate artistic activities into our educational programs was inspired by the philosophy of the "Very Special Arts" Foundation with whom Dr Moussa Charafeddine, President of the Friends of the Disabled Association, has had frequent contacts over the last five years.

The concept of "Very Special Arts" can be best understood as an intensive professional development opportunity for artists, educators, administrators, disability service providers, and non profit leaders of all levels to explore a variety of ideas about how to maximize student achievement in and through the arts, by engaging them in lessons and learning environments that meet the diverse learning needs of all students. People who participate in the "Very Special Arts" experience are provided with ideas, theories and concepts related to teaching in and through the arts, with an emphasis on learning how to design and deliver learning experiences that are accessible to students with and without disabilities, and methods that ensure progress for all students.

Moreover, special focus is placed on the creation of inclusive learning environments, a particularly valued goal of the "Very Special Arts"(VSA) Foundation, which is achieved through the beneficial creation of partnerships between schools, educators, artists and community organizations. The varied

courses, workshops ,events and activities of the VSA are all geared toward fostering opportunities for all to meet, learn about and experience creative arts practices, new ideas, and strategies to promote creativity and skill building through the underlying idea of an inclusive community.

Such a philosophy has always attracted the Friends of the Disabled Association since it is entirely compatible with its Mission Statement. That is why, after a series of constructive and fruitful contacts with VSA officials in the United States of America, our Association was recently honored with the affiliation title (August 2007) whereby the Friends of the Disabled Association has been approved as an affiliate host of VSA in Lebanon. Such a title will ensure our Association's commitment to maximize student achievements in and through the arts. Our pedagogical curriculum will be modified so as to include a wide variety of activities that foster creativity and take into consideration the diversity of needs in the student population. Guided by the VSA spirit and experience, our Association will thus benefit from the various types of suggested activities, from core-sessions to hands-on workshops and reflective discussions. Furthermore, emphasis will be placed on working on establishing and strengthening a network of relations among different associations and organizations throughout the country and at the regional level as well, in art-related activities and events in an inclusive orientation.