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## The cycle of life in motion. Educational/Creative Dance at a prison psychiatric hospital

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## **The cycle of life in motion. Educational/Creative Dance at a prison psychiatric hospital**

*Fátima Moreno González*

### **Introduction**

Prisons are transitional spaces where adults of diverse nationalities, ethnicities and ideologies coexist. Managed in Spain by the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions of the Ministry of the Interior, their main objective is to guarantee internal security and order, ensure decent living conditions, respect human rights and promote socio-educational and civic practices aimed at social reintegration.

These centres come in different models and types, including prevention centres and prisons, Social Reintegration Centres (CIS), Maternity Units and Prison Psychiatric Hospitals. The latter specialise in caring for people with severe mental disorders who have committed crimes, combining intensive psychiatric treatment with a medical-prison approach to promote stabilisation and reintegration.

The Spanish prison regulatory framework, established by Organic Law 1/1979 and the Prison Regulations (Royal Decree 190/1996), guarantees common standards regarding internal operations, the treatment of inmates and their classification by security level. Among the recognised rights, access to education stands out, provided through programmes equivalent to Adult Education Centres (CEPA) and, in Andalusia, Continuing Education Centres (CEPER), with the aim of facilitating social reintegration. The training is delivered by civil service teachers, who constantly adapt the curriculum to the heterogeneity of the student body and the diversity of educational levels, with official qualifications awarded to those who meet the established requirements.

In this context, the project *Ilusión-ARTE: the dance of emotions* is an emotional and artistic education initiative developed in a prison psychiatric hospital, led by CEPER teaching staff. Traditionally, artistic and emotional practices were not part of the usual activities in such settings. This initiative, carried out in collaboration with European centres as part of the Erasmus+ ESCAPE project, was designed as an innovative inter-centre arts education experience, with a direct impact on the motivation and behaviour of the participants. Dance was chosen because it can be a tool for social transformation, but for this to happen it must have a clear, distinct and powerful presence in the classroom, which is the responsibility of artists, teachers and politicians (Galiana, 2020).

### **Who, when, how and why**

The project was conceived and promoted by the teaching staff at the CEPER 'Alfonso Muriel', located within the psychiatric hospital of the Seville I Penitentiary Centre, as part of the *El Alambique* Continuing Education section.

The teaching team, together with the centre's management and psychology and therapy professionals, selected twenty male participants, aged between 18 and 72, with various mental health conditions and a wide range of motor and cognitive abilities, as well as differing lengths of imprisonment and types of offences. For methodological and privacy reasons, no detailed information was collected on offences or clinical diagnoses, as the inmates were stable and under medical supervision, allowing the workshop to proceed safely.

The intervention, carried out between 2020 and 2021, included coordination meetings, the design of specific artistic programmes and the creation of an original musical piece for dance, composed by José Torres. Following an initial visit to the centre and the group, two practical sessions of Educational/Creative Dance were held and a final project report was produced.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the implementation: the planned sessions were reduced, the use of face masks was required, and the activities took place in an outdoor space not ideally suited to dance—the centre's courtyard, with a concrete floor and partial cover. To promote inclusion and build trust, teaching and psychological staff actively participated in the sessions. Each session lasted two hours, on 25 and 26 April 2021, using resources such as a portable loudspeaker and specific materials.

The project received institutional and financial support from the *Erasmus+ ESCAPE Strategic Partnership 2019* programme, enabling the implementation of an innovative initiative with an international reach, subsequently replicated in similar centres in Portugal and Italy. The music, visual arts and dance workshops, delivered by specialists, aimed to foster group cohesion, improve emotional regulation and promote artistic enjoyment. Each discipline was explored independently, resulting, in the case of dance, in a choreographed piece.

The teaching team's motivation lay in bringing the arts closer to the participants, generating meaningful emotional experiences and strengthening art as an educational pillar, with the conviction that singing and dancing in a group remain more relevant than ever, as activities that offer a counterbalance to the trend towards individualism (Maschat, 2006). Furthermore, this initiative established links with other European schools to share practices in challenging educational contexts.

### **The cycle of life in motion**

The project was structured with the participation of teacher-artists, who developed independent workshops and designed specific theoretical content, with documentation prepared and approved under the ERASMUS+ programme, allowing each teacher to imprint their pedagogical identity on the implementation.

The preparatory tasks were numerous, and uncertainty about the impact the dance sessions might have on participants raised certain doubts. Consequently, the work focused on the methodology of Educational/Creative Dance, making dance accessible to all, based on a

reflective approach to the body as a terrain for personal meaning, inclusion and co-education (Pastor, 2018). The activities were planned and designed with a central theme that would enable the creation of a group choreographic composition; suitable materials were selected and authorised in accordance with the restrictions of the prison environment; and, above all, attention was focused on generating interest and motivation among the participants. It should be noted that attendance was not compulsory and that participants were free to leave the workshops at any time during the sessions if they so wished. How can we make the work of emotions tangible through the body in motion? What central theme might be suitable for this age group and for participants with mental health conditions? How can we approach this in an accessible way without resorting to obvious approaches or clichés?

The life cycle was chosen as the central theme of the workshop because it is a universal concept that allows participants to explore emotions and qualities of movement. Organised into five stages (birth, childhood, youth, maturity and the end), each was associated with a musical quality inspired by Gabrielle Roth's Five Rhythms: fluid, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness. The composer José Torres created short musical pieces for each stage, as well as a composition integrating all five, serving both for individual work in each phase and to accompany the final group choreographic composition, entitled *The Cycle of Life in Motion*. The methodology adopted was participatory and based on guided discovery learning, eliminating hierarchies between the participants and the teacher, with the latter acting as a mediator between the art and the students (Roche, 2010). The work involved exploration, improvisation and choreographic composition, both individually and in pairs, small groups and as a whole group. As Fuentes (2008) states, the use of dance in education places greater emphasis on the process than on the result.

A common 'class ritual' was established for the sessions, beginning with a warm-up focusing on joint mobility and spatial movement, followed by a main block of content (two stages in the first session and three in the second). During this block, activities involving exploration, improvisation and choreographic composition were carried out, alternating between individual, pair, trio and group exercises. Each session ended with a cool-down. The first session began with a brainstorming session on each stage, whilst the second concluded with the presentation of the complete choreographic composition and a final discussion to round things off.

And it was then that the essence of Creative/Educational Dance and its unifying and inclusive potential emerged.

## Objectives

- Implement Creative/Educational Dance in a prison psychiatric hospital.
- Work on emotional education through the body in motion.
- Foster motivation towards dance among prisoners with mental health conditions.
- Promote group cohesion in a diverse setting.
- Develop physical and expressive skills linked to the stages of the life cycle.

- Integrate individual and collective work into artistic creation.
- Incorporate materials to facilitate movement and conceptual understanding.
- Create a final choreographic composition based on exploration and improvisation.

### Workshop structure

- The workshop was organised into three teaching units or blocks of work:
  - 'The awakening of movement' (from birth to childhood)
  - 'From youth to the maturity of movement' (from chaos to calm)
  - 'The closing of the cycle' (the healing power of stillness)
- The materials used were selected in advance in accordance with the restrictions of the prison environment and their potential as creative stimuli:
  - Pipe cleaners
  - Curved and straight materials
  - Paper and coloured pencils
  - Plastic plates
  - Colours and a blank jigsaw puzzle
  - Music and a speaker
  - Whiteboard
- Activities

### Session 1

TEACHING UNIT 1: 'The awakening of movement' (from birth to early childhood)

1. Introduction: 'Drawing my first letter'

Standing in a circle, each participant draws the first letter of their name using a chosen part of their body. They then say their name out loud.

2. Presentation of the work 'The cycle of life in motion' (brainstorming)

Seated in a circle, participants are invited to share which words each stage of life brings to mind (whiteboard).

3. Warm-up 'Let's get the body moving'

In a circle, the group performs a joint warm-up following the teacher's lead.



*Body warm-up (initial)*

#### 4. Shaping the pipe cleaner 'Birth-awakening'

Each participant is given a pipe cleaner in a different colour, initially unformed. They are invited to shape it, creating a figure that evokes birth or creation.

Afterwards, an exhibition is organised in the style of a "museum", placing each creation on a blank sheet of paper within a circle, allowing everyone to observe their classmates' work.



*Museum of shapes*

#### 5. We bring movement to the form we have created: 'We are born = Fluid'

Each participant retrieves their creation and tries to bring it to life. They then demonstrate their interpretation to the group, who observe and imitate it.

A group discussion takes place on the shapes created and the variety of movements.

Finally, the movement is performed in the space itself, accompanied by music corresponding to the stage of birth (fluid).

*Birth*

#### 6. Movement 'Curves/Straight Lines'

Materials with curved and straight shapes are presented, which are subsequently translated into types of movement. Each participant freely explores curved and/or straight movements around the space, accompanied by different musical pieces.

Finally, participants are invited to represent childhood through movement, focusing on the movements and the musical rhythm.

#### 7. We conclude 'From birth to childhood'

Each participant performs the movement on the spot created for birth and links it to the movements of childhood = Staccato, incorporating movement, as a choreographic composition.

The sequence is performed to the two musical pieces corresponding to both stages. To conclude, a group reflection is held on the work carried out and the emotions experienced.

### Session 2

TEACHING UNIT 2: 'From youth to maturity of movement' (from chaos to calm)

#### 1. Introduction with body percussion: 'Circle of names'

An introductory activity using body percussion, in which each participant says their name following a common rhythmic pattern.

#### 2. Presentation of the work 'Back to the board'

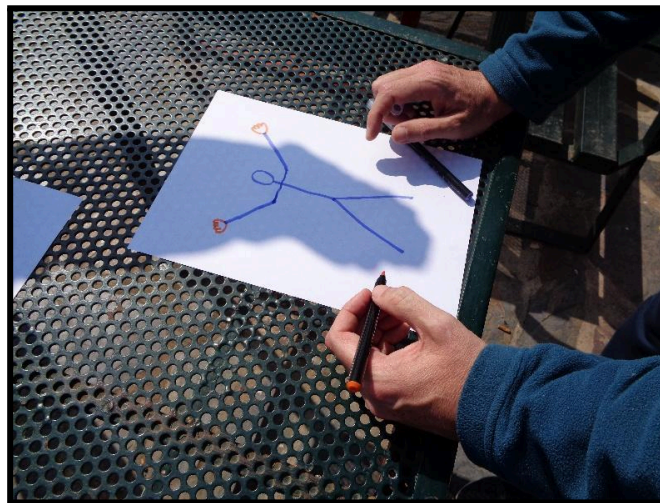
An analysis is carried out of the work done in the previous session and the content to be worked on is presented.

3. Physical warm-up 'Waking up the body through movement'  
Guided joint warm-up, combined with movement through the space.
4. Youth = Chaos 'Shall we paint?'

We reflect on fears, the chaos inherent in youth and the importance of peer groups. In pairs, each participant adopts a 'still image' representing adolescence, which is then imitated by their partner.

Next, each member of the pair sketches their partner's pose using paper and coloured pencils.

The drawings are displayed for the group to observe.



*Drawing emotion through the body in pairs (adolescence)*

5. Youth = Chaos 'Shall we dance?'
- Working individually and freely in the space, each participant starts from the position created previously and transforms it into movement, representing adolescence through gesture and the body.

Afterwards, the group reflects on the emotions generated during the activity.

6. Maturity = Lyrical 'After the chaos, calm... the plates'

We reflect on maturity, calm, responsibility and the lessons associated with this stage, in contrast to the chaos of youth.

Plastic plates are handed out as a working tool, with free movement exercises focusing on balance and body control. The way the plate is held is varied using different supports (five, four, three, two and one finger).

Finally, a journey is undertaken from birth to youth with musical accompaniment; after this, each participant picks up their plate and interprets maturity through balance and movement.



*Group improvisation with plates (maturity)*

TEACHING UNIT 3: 'The closing of the cycle' (the healing power of stillness)

1. 'Everything fits: the jigsaw puzzle'

A parallel is drawn between the final stage of life and a jigsaw puzzle, where each piece finds its place.

Each participant is given a blank jigsaw piece, which they must decorate with pencils, felt-tip pens or crayons.

The pieces are displayed for the group to view.

Finally, each participant keeps their piece.



*Puzzle*

## 2. Physical performance: 'We dance stillness'

Participants are invited to represent, through movement, the arrival at the calm and stillness characteristic of the end of the life cycle, moving freely until they return to the starting point.

## 3. Review of all stages 'Life cycle without movement'

A mental journey is taken through all the stages covered, following the guidelines learnt, accompanied by the workshop music, but without movement.

## 4. Free performance 'Life cycle in motion'

A complete journey through the stages is undertaken through movement. The following choreographic guidelines are recalled:

- Initial and final spatial positioning.
- Birth: slow, fluid movement in place.
- Childhood: movements involving movement, fresh and dynamic.
- Youth: starting from the created position; representation of chaos in place and subsequently with movement.
- Maturity: picking up the plate from its position in space; free movement and grouping by colour; conclusion by placing the plate on the floor.
- Finale: gradual return to the starting point, reaching stillness.

Rehearsals are held on several occasions leading up to the final performance.

## 5. The farewell

The session concludes with a final reflection on the work done, the handing out of small gifts related to the workshop, and brief feedback on the experience.

**Results and feedback**

The participating students showed 100% commitment, with no absences, dropouts or disciplinary incidents, despite the activity being optional. This behaviour is unusual among the participants, as we had been told previously, due to various factors, such as a lack of motivation within the group, the medical treatments they are undergoing and/or the possible occurrence of occasional crises.

The final session was attended by other members of the centre's staff, which brought satisfaction to the participants and sparked interest within the community.

Some participants became emotional as they recalled personal experiences that had emerged through movement and expressed their gratitude for the initiative; others expressed an interest in continuing the activity for longer; and some remained silent during the discussion, though without leaving the room, paying attention to their peers' contributions.

The centre's teaching team described the activity as highly motivating, having a significant impact on the participants.

**Conclusions**

Creative/Educational Dance is a powerful tool for socio-emotional and educational transformation. Thanks to its adaptable nature, it can be integrated into both curricula and complementary workshops in various contexts, including complex and hostile environments such as the one described in this article.

The heterogeneity of the group in terms of abilities, ages and conditions did not pose an obstacle to achieving the set objectives. On the contrary, it highlighted the value of a flexible methodology, capable of respecting different learning paces and promoting the genuine inclusion of all participants.

Psychiatric hospitals within the prison system are settings particularly suitable for improvement through art. In these settings, both staff and patients coexist under particularly demanding conditions: a shortage of support staff, intensive pharmacological treatments, visiting arrangements that sometimes cause emotional distress, as well as the occurrence of violent incidents, self-harm or suicides. Added to this is the post-pandemic (COVID-19) context in which this experience took place, which further intensified these difficulties.

Art, and in particular Educational/Creative Dance, offers benefits that go beyond the cognitive and motor domains, having a significant impact on the emotional, affective and social dimensions of the individual. It also fosters the development of the multiple intelligences described by Gardner (1995), particularly spatial, kinaesthetic and musical intelligence, as well as those linked to self-awareness (intrapersonal intelligence) and social interaction (interpersonal intelligence). However, its scope is even broader, as it promotes processes of reflection on one's own practice that also contribute to the development of verbal intelligence, communication, observational skills, respect and empathy.

As evidenced throughout the text, the participants' engagement revealed high levels of motivation, expressed through such significant gestures as smiles, shared enjoyment, peer support and personal improvement in memorising and executing the movements.

The workshop has been replicated in centres with similar characteristics in Portugal and Italy, where it has also been well received, reinforcing its viability and potential for adaptation to different cultural contexts.

As an area for improvement, it is worth noting the need for greater organisational coordination within the centre, particularly regarding the scheduling of the workshop alongside other activities, as the interruption of sessions affected the continuous flow of the work and prevented some participants from completing all the activities with the group, although they eventually joined in again.

Although the activity, funded by the ERASMUS+ programme, has not continued in the same format following the completion of this pilot project, the teachers involved continue to integrate the arts into their teaching practice. In this regard, it would be desirable for this type of intervention to be sustained over time, in order to more rigorously evaluate its impact and its contribution to improving interpersonal relationships and group cohesion.

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