

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICE OF BIODANZA SRT; AN INNOVATIVE METHOD OF BODY AND EMOTIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD

## INTRODUZIONE ALLA PRATICA DELLA BIODANZA SRT; UNA METODICA INNOVATIVA DI INTEGRAZIONE CORPOREA ED EMOTIVA IN CAMPO EDUCATIVO SCOLASTICO



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### ABSTRACT

Biodanza SRT is a practice of bodily expression that is gaining momentum in the world thanks to its innovative pedagogical-experiential teachings. It can be a method of awareness of the body useful to promote the relationship between people. It has many benefits in terms of physical and mental health. Biodanza can be used in the educational field as a support of physical education to promote the relationship in the context of body expression, body language and emotional-affective education.

Biodanza SRT è una pratica di espressività corporea famosa per i suoi innovativi insegnamenti pedagogici-esperienziali. Può essere una metodica di presa di coscienza del corpo utile a favorire la relazione tra le persone. Ha numerosi benefici in termini di salute fisica e psichica. Biodanza può essere utilizzata in campo scolastico come supporto dell'educazione fisica per favorire la relazione nel campo dell'espressività corporea, del linguaggio del corpo e dell'educazione emotiva-affettiva.

### KEYWORDS

Biodanza SRT, body, school, self awareness, affectivity

Biodanza SRT, corporeità, scuola, consapevolezza di sé, affettività

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on one of the most controversial issues in the field of education: body expression.

This term encompasses everything related to the body and its movements, associated with emotions, which manifest spontaneously in the relationship with others and ourselves.

Dance can be considered one of these activities. In fact, like other forms of bodily expression, its goal is to foster greater awareness of the self by creating a positive relationship with the body. The awareness that arises in this context highlights the spontaneity that so strongly characterizes the imagination and emotional openness of this discipline toward the outside world. Dance allows the body to move freely and express emotions such as joy, pain, anger, sadness, and happiness through postures and movements that enhance emotional expression (Manuali per l'educazione fisica: Vol. 1 - Fascicolo 2., n.d.).

Moving on a well-paced and rhythmic music helps regulate our body and express ourselves freely, letting us be carried away by what we hear. Biodanza is based on these principles, a dance discipline in which the fundamental objective is to bring the individual to full body awareness and self-expression, free from any predefined scheme. *«Working within the body and through the body, using appropriate strategies, would create the conditions for teaching that does not pre-establish and plan, but rather anticipates and foresees the consequences of action»* (Rivoltella, 2013). Identity is nurtured in an atmosphere of well-being and harmony, where corporeality reigns supreme.

On the international scene we have seen how there are shortcomings in the treatment of the theme Biodanza that is so far little investigated. It could be useful for educational purposes and integrated into both school and non-school education. This innovative bodily practice is based on the free expression of self in relation to the surrounding environment. We will analyze the important potential benefits of Biodanza SRT.

This paper presents the concept of Biodanza, its educational significance, methods of implementation and its role in promoting bodily awareness. We hope that it will soon be considered comparable to other expressive activities. The aim is to provide a comprehensive view of the practice by discussing its benefits, objectives, and potential applications. Finally, we explain its relevance to education and its use as a bodily activity in schools.

## 1. Theoretical references of the Biodanza

The concept of Biodanza originates from the psychological and pedagogical research conducted by its founder, Professor Rolando Toro, born in Concepción, Chile, in 1924 (Toro, 2020). Initially, he focused on a system of group psychotherapy: Psychodance. This early form of Biodanza evolved over the years, through further research, into what is now known as Biodanza SRT (Rolando Toro's System).

*«Biodanza is a system that accelerates the processes of integration at the cellular, immune, metabolic, neuro-endocrine, cortical, and existential levels through Vivencia, induced in an environment enriched by music, dance, contact, caresses, and the presence of the group». R. Toro (def. Academic of Biodanza)*

The term Biodanza is composed of the prefix Bio-, which comes from the Greek "Bios" meaning "life," and the word "dance," understood as the natural movement of human beings. Consequently, we can define Biodanza as the "dance of life". It is a dance conceived as a holistic reality in which key elements are the physical, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of the person. The physical aspect is central because we express ourselves through our bodies, which serve as the engine for the most powerful forms of emotional communication (Vayer & Destrooper, 1976). The social aspect is vital because this dance takes place in a protected, almost familial environment where we are free to express ourselves in a group context, emphasizing empathy; the spiritual aspect is fundamental because it is a holistic dance based on the flow of unrestrained emotions emerging from the body. This dance was created to develop human potential and induce integral experiences called Vivencia, which Toro defines as *«the experience lived with great intensity by an individual in the present moment»* (Toro, 2000). This experience allows individuals to come fully into contact with their inner selves and express themselves without prejudice, as all participants are doing the same, leading the other access to their most hidden and latent selves. It is a journey of self-discovery where individuals connect with their body, emotions, context, others, and identity.

Biodanza is rooted in the Biocentric theory. In this discipline *«a direct experience with the body is generated in the participant, a learning and a deep knowledge of what we feel and perceive»* (Molisso & Di Palma, 2017). This direct experience places life at the center, serving as the fulcrum of the biocentric principle. In biocentrism, we are guided by universal laws that position human beings not at the center of the world, but rather the life of every living being. Every creature is placed on an equal plane, with no one holding greater importance than another. Life is the absolute reference point, as highlighted by the name of this philosophical theory:

Biocentrism, Life at the Center. «*The Biocentric Principle proposes the strengthening of life and the expression of its evolutionary powers by focusing on a universe conceived as a living system*». The realms of life include not only plants, animals, and humans but everything that exists, as everything is part of the living system. According to the Biocentric principle, «*the universe exists because life exists and not vice versa*» (Biodanza, I Suoi Principi, Le Applicazioni E Le Estensioni, n.d.). In Biocentric education, living is considered a continuous learning process. Every experience becomes part of life's journey, altering each person's history. This education emphasizes direct contact with nature through activities like sowing, caring for animals, contemplation, cooking and environmental stewardship (Scuola Toro, n.d.). According to David W. Orr (Professor of Environmental Studies, born in Iowa U.S. in 1944), today's world is fighting against nature. It is essential to change this course of actions by teaching young people to become more responsible toward nature and other forms of life. Ecological literacy can educate according to the principles of Biocentrism («*Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*» of 1991). Biocentric education in Biodanza aims to stimulate the appreciation and recognition of our identity by recovering the joy of life, affectivity, and the holistic sacredness of existence (Ongaro, 2023).

Biodanza serves as a method to achieve this goal, described as «*a poetics of the living, grounded in universal laws that preserve and allow the evolution of life*» (Biodanza, I Suoi Principi, Le Applicazioni E Le Estensioni, n.d.).

According to the Biocentric principle, we must develop affection toward every living being, considering all life equally deserving (Biodanza, I Suoi Principi, Le Applicazioni E Le Estensioni, n.d.).

«*The Biodanza SRT system is based on the reality of the meeting, and on the fact that personal identity, alongside music, is permeable to relationships with the other*» (Rosa, 2022). The group is essential because «*the active participation of every single member of the group represents an enrichment for all the others*» (Ghedin, 2016). It allows a continuous exchange of experiences. The group allows everyone to experience a personal rebirth because «*The presence of another similar being alters a person's functioning on all levels, both organic and existential*» (Toro Araneda, 2012). This rebirth is part of the emotional reconstruction path that Toro describes as the foundation of his dance.

In the 1960s, he believed that our deepest need was to live in a world without violence, where the human condition could recover its essential meaning. Chaos, according to him, is an attractor of order, which he associates with love. «*I propose a form of rebirth, an education that has, as a basic reference, life, and that gives us*

*access to happiness; a sociology of love»* (Toro, 2000). These are the foundations of Biodanza and of an affective emotional education that can be achieved through his method: *«an ideo-affective-motor experiential system that restores the balance between “feeling, thinking, acting” through the experience of the body, emotion and encounter»* (Toro Araneda, 2007).

## **2. Elements of Biodanza and its objectives**

In Biodanza people are guided by music to express themselves freely, as there are no fixed-established movements. The facilitator suggests, according to the music, a possibility of movement, but participants are free to expand their expressiveness without correction of what happens. However, one rule applies: participants must actively engage and cannot be passive observers. It is an inclusive dance, open to all, as there is no need to know how to dance; participants only need to engage, leaving behind prejudices and the fear of being judged by others. The carefully selected music is intended to evoke various emotions in each participant, which are expressed through free bodily movements, fostering non-competitive relationships with others. Verbal communication is not allowed, as body language reigns supreme. Biodanza consists of two moments within a session: firstly an active part and secondly a regressive part (Ongaro, 2023).

### **Active part**

In the first part, we are encouraged to immerse ourselves in lively, rhythmic music designed to free participants from insecurities and repressions, allowing joy, happiness, anger, euphoria, and amazement to emerge. Sharing one's being with the group becomes essential. Drawing again on the Biocentric theory, those who engage with this practice should *«sentir al otro como parte tuya, lo que al otro le sucede le está sucediendo a ti... estamos muy unidos cósmicamente»* (Toro, personal communication, n.d.). The words of Rolando Toro, the discipline's founder, emphasize the importance of human connection and the love that binds everything together. He continues, *«La biodanza la pensé como una poética del encuentro humano, como un modo diferente de relacionarse en un mundo extremadamente solitario»* (Toro, personal communication, n.d.). This active phase emphasizes the importance of overcoming loneliness and individualism, as we play and enjoy being with one another, rediscovering the pleasure of communicating through the body.

## Regressive part

In the second part, participants maintain a dynamic connection with each other and the group, deepening their bond with the other participants. This phase takes place in a safe environment, encouraging individuals to express themselves freely and connect on a profound soulful level. The bodily aspect greatly enhances this connection, creating an intimacy often unreachable through verbal communication alone. This part incorporates soft, slow, and relaxing music, allowing participants to rebalance their internal energy and connect with their inner space (Ongaro, 2023).

Rolando Toro in his interviews highlights the importance of breaking down barriers that create distance between people nowadays. For him, the hug facilitates this by providing a more personal connection than a distant greeting or handshake. With the hug all patterns of proxemics are broken by moving directly from a social distance to an intimate one (Toro, personal communication, n.d.). In this recessive phase, individual or group listening spaces emerge, supported by exercises and dances accompanied by soft, slow and relaxing music that allow participants to rebalance their energy and communicate with more fluid and mindful movements. A key feature of this regressive part is bodily relaxation, achieved through controlled breathing and muscle tone regulation. Sound waves resonate with participants, subtly shaping their attitudes and energy levels; in fact, sounds influence our energy system through either arousal or relaxation, which later affects muscle tone (Casolo & Melica, 2005).

*«It is hypothesized that the sound stimulus is somehow rewritten in the muscular system; in this way, an external stimulus becomes an intrinsic experience, mediated through afferent pathways. Through this process, the individual grasps the existential meaning of the stimulus by reliving it within their own body (muscular system). Here the stimulus is truly felt»* (Ruggeri, 2001). This principle forms the basis of the two-part Biodanza session: in the active phase with rhythmic music a responsive reaction is produced, while in the regressive phase soft music induces a relaxation response.

*«The activities may conclude with an optional verbal reflection, either spoken or written, allowing participants to express the emotions they experienced, analyze themselves and reflect on their newfound ability to connect with others»* (Ongaro, 2023).

### **3. General and specific objectives of the experiential practice of Biodanza**

Biodanza has the following general objectives (Ongaro, 2023):

- Promote integration between thinking, feeling and action;
- Enhance awareness of one's potential through self-discovery;
- Develop sense perceptive, auditory, tactile, visual, ideo-sensitive-affective-motor abilities;
- Increase bodily awareness through Vivencia;
- Foster relational skills within a group;
- Promote group integration and acceptance, building a solid cooperative social foundation and encouraging the discovery of others;
- Stimulate organic self-regulation or homeostasis through the Action-Rest cycle;
- Raise awareness and respect for nature and life.

Biodanza has the following specific objectives (Ongaro, 2023):

- Cultivate bodily awareness, listening to signals and needs responding to stimuli (music, emotions, movement);
- Encourage free self-expression within a group context;
- Alleviate muscular and emotional tension;
- Enhance creative expression through movement, cooperation, and varied activities;
- Teach empathy and integrate physical contact with others;
- Discourage bullying;
- Nurture affectivity;
- Overcoming individualism.

### **4. Benefits in the practice of Biodanza**

In Biodanza *«the body can be understood, in a wider sense, as a space through which you can experience a deep contact with yourself and with each other; it is an instrument of expression, relationship and connection, personal and social»* (Molisso & Di Palma, 2017). Through this process, the body gains several benefits, including stress reduction, fewer depressive symptoms and better sleep quality.

*«Biodanza induces people to weave “functional” interpersonal relationships and to live their lives fully and creatively»* (Rosa, 2022). This aspect is analyzed in a study in the field of Mental Health (Ghedin, 2016) that found that participants recognized their uniqueness, experienced the joy of existence and rediscovered the pleasure of connecting with their bodies and with others, forming meaningful emotional and empathetic connections within the group (Ghedin, 2016). These individual and in

group experiences allow the cultivation of emotional intelligence, including self-knowledge, self-motivation, social skills, empathy and self-control (Cabrera, 2010). The studies have localized the most known rational intelligence in the cerebral cortex, while the above mentioned emotional one more deeply inside the brain, precisely in the subcortical areas of the amygdala. The emotional intelligence is able to control the rational one to obtain a greater intellectual capacity and a higher chance of success in the study field, as well as facilitate human relationships. It has been defined as *«the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions; to discriminate between feelings and emotions; to use information to guide thoughts and behaviours in an adequate way»* (Franco & Tappata, 2007).

A study conducted on some high school students at IES Josefina De La Torre (Cabrera, 2010) analyzed the benefits of a session of Biodanza on emotional intelligence using the TMM24 test (Dr. Berrocal. from the IE group of the University of Malaga) to examine emotional components of perception, adjustment and understanding of emotions before and after the dance session. The students showed a balance of both positive and negative feelings before the lesson (sentir A) (53% positive, 46% negative), while there was a significant change in the post lesson (sentir D) (95% positive, 3% negative) as shown in the graph below.

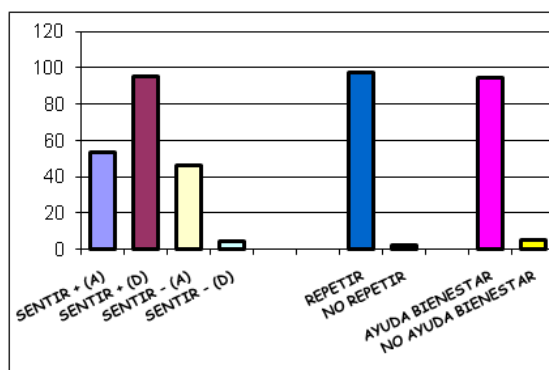


Table 1. Graph of positive and negative sensations before and after a Biodanza lesson (Cabrera, 2010)

Furthermore, nearly 100% expressed a desire to repeat the session, and 95% were convinced that the activities they had just participated in contributed to making them feel good. Emotional intelligence can be considered trainable through



Biodanza sessions; however, it is not the only human trait that benefits from this discipline.

A study published by the University of Almería's Faculty of Health Sciences (López-Rodríguez et al., 2017) analyzed the effectiveness of Biodanza in reducing perceived symptoms of stress and depression. The study also examines the promotion of sleep quality in young adults by comparing changes with those observed in a control group. The 121 subjects, university students experiencing perceived stress, were divided into two groups: the control group and another group that participated in Biodanza sessions for 90 minutes per week over four weeks. The results obtained after testing the subjects before and after the research period demonstrated that a brief program of Biodanza is associated with reduced levels of depression and stress during the academic period. However, no significant improvements in sleep quality were observed. It can, however, be assumed that there may be an improvement in this parameter due to a reduction in stress. Biodanza can be considered an effective method for managing depression and stress. To support this claim, a meta-analysis (Stueck & Tofts, 2016) published the year prior reviewed the main research on stress reduction (with increased immune response) and enhanced well-being following Biodanza activities.

An increase in immune response resulting from positive emotions was previously studied in California at Loma Linda University (Berk et al., 2001). Immunoglobulin levels (A, G, M) were analyzed in 52 healthy men before and after watching a comedic video, and the results showed that levels after viewing were significantly higher. It is known that immunoglobulins act as antibodies to bacterial and viral infections.

Positive emotions generate a positive response in our bodies and can also enhance our relational interactions, as confirmed by the study on memory by Rimmele et al. (2009) and a meta-analysis on social-emotional learning (SEL) by Durlak et al. (2011). Therefore, Biodanza can offer numerous benefits associated with the interconnection of the body with music and communicative relationships with others.

Despite the findings established so far, it should be noted, before making inappropriate and inaccurate claims, that most studies conducted in this area rely on data analysis derived from questionnaires. This implies a lower credibility of the results. Well-being and stress reduction are biological processes, and it is therefore essential to understand the underlying biological mechanisms that contribute to the specific effects of Biodanza. In conclusion, we recognize that Biodanza can certainly help with emotional management and body expression, two inseparable aspects fundamental to this dance.

## 5. Biodanza in Educational setting

Since birth we begin to relate to the world through our bodies. Our experiences play a crucial role in developing perceptual skills related to both external and internal stimuli, leading to appropriate reworking and motor responses. Mental abilities are intrinsically linked to bodily experiences (Delacato, 1983). Therefore, introducing bodily activities can significantly contribute to a healthy development. We know that children relate to the world by constructing their identities through interactions with others through movement, which fosters an awareness of their own bodies (Boulch, 1975).

*«Todas las personas pueden bailar y no solamente los privilegiados... pueden bailar el niño, el adolescente, el anciano, el enfermo... se abriría un mundo»* (Toro, personal communication, n.d.). According to Rolando Toro, everyone can dance. Thus, Biodanza can be used as a teaching tool for bodily awareness within the school context.

In educational institutions, Biodanza *«can be inserted with the aim of improving the quality of life within the school system. This can happen through an experiential methodology that promotes the integration and development of healthy potentials of each one, with particular reference to emotional expression, creative and interpersonal communication»* (Ongaro, 2023). This approach facilitates a harmonious and complete development of students through the frequent integration of corporeal awareness linked to emotional communication. In school education, the Biodanza system distinguishes between the methodological principles applied to children (primary school) and those applied to adolescents (secondary school).

### Primary School

The teaching of Biodanza in this age group primarily aims to aid in the recognition of identity. Children tend to be more open to expressing emotions, so it is generally easier for them to reveal their true selves during the sessions. However, despite this openness, there may be situations where some students find it more difficult to express themselves. This is particularly true when students have experienced limiting and suppressive education that hinders their individual potential (Ongaro, 2023). Biodanza SRT can be an effective method to help these students express themselves freely without the fear of judgment, leading to positive changes in the child's behavior. For primary school students, a progressive and mediated approach, often through storytelling, is preferred. Some physical activities are guided by music while exploring an environment as if the students were the

protagonists of a story narrated by the teacher. For example, if the story is set in a forest, students imagine themselves as animals living there and move accordingly, embodying the main characters (lion, snake, monkey, frog, zebra, giraffe, etc.). This is combined with guidance on breathing, listening to the heartbeat, and harmonious movements following the musical rhythm.

## Secondary School

In the adolescent age group, Biodanza focuses on discovering one's identity, with the added goal of affective education. This macro-objective is achieved through empathic collaboration, particularly through bodily communication with others. The facilitator will look for any discomfort or emotional repression within the class and select the most suitable Biodanza activities accordingly. At this stage, the discovery of one's body is a significant theme, as it is evolving due to physical growth and the development of sexual characteristics. Moreover, adolescents often withdraw into themselves if they feel excluded from their peer group. Biodanza offers a method to reintegrate those who have been marginalized, fostering greater class cohesion. This cohesion develops over time, naturally and without any obligation, as Biodanza is non-judgmental. Students learn to accept and understand each other because they first learn to tune into themselves in ways they had never thought possible. A Biodanza session is divided into two classic phases: active and regressive (Ongaro, 2023). The active part is playful, energetic, and lively. Students move, play, and communicate with others in the group through body language. This non-verbal communication enhances empathy among classmates. The regressive part, in contrast, involves slow music that helps students relax and tune into their bodies. They begin to see their classmates in a different light, developing deeper, more intimate relationships. Biodanza helps adolescents develop their identities, building self-awareness through the relationships they form with others.

However, not everyone is qualified to teach Biodanza; it requires years of study and certification. Physical education teachers can, however, use similar activities to evoke emotions and feelings similar to those experienced in Biodanza. It is possible to facilitate emotional experiences for students through musical and similar activities, enabling them to understand their own bodies and use them for communication with others. Activities focused on body expressiveness prove to be a very effective alternative to Biodanza.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have thoroughly analyzed Biodanza from various perspectives. As we have documented, Biodanza is an excellent form of expressive practice and can be integrated into educational programs to raise body consciousness, even in adults. The expressiveness of this practice leads participants to an emotional awakening with important ethical implications. Those who practice this discipline experience emotional benefits (Cabrera, 2010), reduced stress (Stueck & Tofts, 2016) (López-Rodríguez et al., 2017), improved empathy (Durlak et al., 2011), enhanced social memory (Rimmele et al., 2009), and a boosted immune system (Berk et al., 2001). In conclusion, Biodanza fully manifests the connection between the body and emotions. We have explored its objectives and benefits, concluding that it is an excellent method for educating both corporeality and emotionality, two aspects that are greatly lacking in today's schools, which tend to favor directive teaching and, less frequently, inductive approaches. This paper provides a preliminary yet comprehensive overview of the practice of Biodanza. We hope that further research and literature reviews will delve deeper into its benefits and potential applications. Furthermore, it is of great importance that this discipline be introduced into the school system as an expressive practice. We hope to find more fields of application and research, and continuing to honor the creation of Rolando Toro.

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