

Biodanza and the Implementation of the Principle of Biocentric Education in Kindergartens

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Abstract

This study examined the introduction of biodanza to kindergartens together with the implementation of the principle of biocentric education, with emphasis on affectivity, to create an affectionate climate and to encourage meaningful interactions between children, and between the kindergarten staff and the children. The research question was: How would introducing biodanza and implementing biocentric education in kindergartens achieve these objectives? This was a qualitative study. The data were collected in Israel in the years 2017-2019. The study findings show that biodanza in kindergartens allowed for situations that required children to deal with emotional and social aspects of their interactions. As a result, positivity resonance in the kindergarten intensified greatly, and the atmosphere became more and more affectionate, accepting, and sharing, and positive gestures increased substantially. Communication between the kindergarten staff and the children underwent a change and became considerably more affectionate, compared to what it had been at the beginning of the process.

Keywords: emotional competence, social competence, interaction, wellbeing, biodanza, dance, body work, empathy, affectivity

Introduction

Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period: the experiences of early childhood form the infrastructure for the children's development (Early Childhood OECD, 2021; Phillips et al., 1987; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994; Zilka, 2021). The introduction of biodanza in kindergartens and the implementation of the principle of biocentric education with an emphasis on affectivity was based on belief in the ability of children and kindergarten staff to cooperate, show initiative, lead, learn, explore, and create—all this through ongoing interaction and mutual empowerment of all participants. The understanding was that when such a process takes place, there will be a change in the characteristics of the kindergarten and in the interaction between all involved, especially between the children, and between the kindergarten staff and the children. This process increases the chance for optimal development by balancing risk factors and protection factors. Children need a sensitive environment that reads their signals, provides an appropriate response to their needs, allows them to develop emotional, social, and cognitive abilities, and enables them to be open and to develop (Early Childhood OECD, 2021; Phillips et al., 1987; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994).

The present study examined the introduction of biodanza to kindergartens together with the implementation of the principle of biocentric education, with emphasis on affectivity, to create an affectionate climate, and to encourage meaningful interactions between children, and between kindergarten staff and the children. An affectionate climate (Pianta et al., 2008; Reyes et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2007; Zilka, 2022) is determined by the quality of interactions between children and adults, and separately between the children themselves and between the adults as a group. An affectionate climate allows children to reach their academic, social, and emotional potential, to promote coping skills, cooperation, interpersonal communication, and the ability to learn and develop, while addressing the needs of other children. It also makes possible the cultivation and development of interpersonal, group, and intergroup communication, and serves as a basis for developing mutual understanding, and for reciprocity.

Biodanza in kindergartens

Biodanza (Stueck, 2011; Stueck & Villegas, 2012; Toro, 2010)—bio = life, danza = movement, dance: a dance of life, evoking affectivity, vitality, and creativity through movement, music, and encounters. Biodanza is based on encounters with others that evoke affection, pleasure, vitality, joy of life, health, and quality of life. Rolando Toro Araneda, founder of Biodanza—teacher, educator, anthropologist, scientist, poet, and intellectual—sought a way to create affectionate communication between human beings. He found that the integration between music, movement, and encounters creates

affectivity, connection, closeness, warmth, love, understanding, and listening, and that it is likely to help make progress toward a better world.

Vivencia, from the root *vivir* (“to live,” in Spanish), refers to the intense experiential happening of biodanza, which may produce powerful emotional and kinesthetic effects in people (Stueck & Villegas, 2012; Toro, 2010). *Vivencia* is the main methodology of biodanza. The five lines of *vivencia* are: vitality, creativity, affectivity, pleasure and sexuality, and transcendence. *Vivencia* may have an effect on a person along all or some of the five *vivencia* lines.

Researchers (López-Rodríguez et al., 2017) have found that biodanza has a positive effect on stress reduction in young adults. Researchers (Greaves et al., 2016; Stueck et al., 2013, 2016; Stueck & Tofts, 2016) also found that biodanza resulted in a statistically significant improvement in emotional regulation, behavioral regulation, and pro-social behavior in children, compared with the control group that did not have biodanza experience. The researchers found significant differences between the groups in the children's social competence after biodanza.

Biodanza and the principle of biocentric education

The principle of biocentric education is a key element in biodanza. The biocentric principle (in biodanza units 2, 12, 18, extension of the biocentric education principle, biodanza extension for children) places life, communication, affectivity, the joy of life, and the sanctity of life at the center. The goal of biocentric education is affection, joy of life, and love; its vision is relationship-based humanity. The human figure targeted by biocentric education is a “person of relationships.” Every expression, every movement, every dance are a living language. The methodology, the *vivencia*, allows expressing the potential for vitality, creativity, affectivity, and transcendence.

The objectives of biocentric education (as an extension of the principle of biocentric education) are:

1. **Cultivation of affectivity** and of affective intelligence, through dances of solidarity, friendships, and meetings.
2. **Connecting persons to their identity, expanding awareness, stimulating instincts, enjoying life:** practicing challenges in the face of difficulties; the courage to defend one’s point of view; connecting to one’s driving force; strengthening one’s instincts by choosing foods and the pleasure of tasting and consuming them; stimulating the sense of pleasure and enjoyment through biodanza exercises such as harmonization and flow exercises.
3. **Cultivating expressiveness, communication, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and the creation of knowledge:** expressing emotions through dance and dialogue; expressing creativity and innovation, painting, sculpture, design.
4. **Development of kinesthetic sensitivity, self-awareness of the body, and motor skills:** exercises of flow, coordination, synergy, eutony, movement practice that promotes independence and confidence, and experiences of pleasure and enjoyment.
5. **Integration into nature and development of ecological awareness:** exercises appropriate for the seasons of the year, the senses as openings into the world, sensations.

The principle of biocentric education and the five lines of Vivencia

The five lines of *vivencia*: affectivity, creativity; vitality; pleasure and sexuality; exaltation.

Integration between the lines (in biodanza unit 3). The integration between the five lines is created by combining two, three, or more lines. The lines of the *vivencia* may connect in different ways and with different lines, depending on the group and on the individuals dancing in the group, and depending on the choice of facilitator. The practice of Biodanza may lead participants to still greater integration between the various lines.

Affectivity. Rolando Toro Araneda, the founder of the method (as an extension of the principle of biocentric education), wrote that “education is affectivity, a process of affectivity, with affectivity.” According to its definition, affectivity is the ability to connect with life, with others, with the environment, and to make a connection between personal identity and universal identity. Affectivity connects, creates an affinity with life, meaning for life, caring and empathy for human beings as well as for all things alive, including plants and inanimate objects. It energizes the perception of beauty, imagination, and understanding.

Creativity. Vygotsky, Montessori, Gardner, and many other researchers have emphasized the importance of developing creativity early in childhood. Creativity (Beetelstone, 1998) is defined as a generic human trait, with unique personal manifestations, and a skill required for personal, human, emotional, and social development. Early childhood is perceived as a significant period in the development and cultivation of creativity in the conceptual, emotional, social, physical, and symbolic realms. Preschool children have creative potential, curiosity, and an instinct for inquiry, so that originality, imagination, abilities, and expression of impulses and desires must be allowed and nurtured. It is common to

explain the connection between creativity and emotional processes in traits and factors such as self-confidence, motivation, curiosity, imagination, sense of challenge, pleasure, perseverance, observation, sensitivity, etc. To stimulate, develop, and foster creativity, children need to be given a creative environment, creative activities, and creative adults who allow the children freedom to create.

Stimulating vitality, strengthening identity, self-esteem, and transcendence. The body expresses the history of a person, the inner reflects the outer, body language is a mirror to the trapped inner self that wants and does not want to be revealed. Biodanza opens a door for a person to release the trapped inner self, to achieve a balance between the inner and the outer. Vitality, from the existential point of view, is motivation to live, the drive to live, and the availability of energy for action. The body is an expression of health, harmony, and beauty, and should be treated as an expressive and vibrant structure. The body is form and feeling. The body is distinct, alive, expressive, with identity and vitality of its own.

Pleasure. We must create “pleasure factors” in kindergarten, increase the enjoyment and pleasure of life, of movement, music, and encounters with others. Pleasure is a highly important need at this age. It is important to develop and cultivate the joy in action, in creation and in ceremonies; to stimulate the pleasure of living, the pleasure of loving, and the pleasure of movement, of dancing, and of encounters. Biodanza is likely to evoke pleasure and thus bring about far-reaching changes in an individual.

The state of expanding consciousness is a state of extended perception. Perception refers to a process that begins with the perception of reality, physiological arousal (bodily sensations), and the interpretation and labeling of reality. People can interpret their perception of reality in different ways. We see times and again how people who shared an experience interpret what they have experienced differently. People interpret in a subjective manner, creating their own “reality.” At times, a person finds strength to cleanse oneself of residues and inhibitions, to see reality clearly, and to break forward into openness and development, but at other times, individuals are bound to inhibiting interpretations and unable to see things as they are but rather through their fears (Zilka, 2014, 2017, 2018).

Social awareness: awareness, mindfulness, listening to our own and others' feelings. Empathy is built on emotional self-awareness and the ability to read signals that others send us, and listening to others, as opposed to “emotional deafness.” Social competence (Bandon et al., 2010; Collie et al., 2017; McKown, 2017; Zilka, 2015) refers to individuals' skills to create meaningful interactions with those around them, to be able to adapt to their environment, to develop appropriate skills, and to establish social connections. In the literature, social competence is associated with the term “emotional availability,” which refers to the quality of emotional relationships between adults and children, the nature of interactions between them, and the way in which adults convey messages to children about commitment, support, and trust. These messages form the basis for safe communication between adults and children. The emotional availability of adults in the child's life is expressed in the fact that they perceive the children as having their own needs and desires, allowing them experiences that match their needs, helping them understand processes, and encouraging them to ask for help and support when needed. Emotionally available adults show interest in children and invest thought in having high-quality relationships with them. In this way they become meaningful in the children's life and bring about a change in their mental wellbeing (DeSchipper et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Zilka, 2015). Studies (Howes, 1999; Myers & Pianta, 2008) suggest that children build attachment relationships with non-parental adults who have been in regular contact with them for a long time. If the relationship is a positive and lasting one, the adults become meaningful and affect the child's life. Studies (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Saft & Pianta, 2001) show that children who enjoy attention and interactions with significant adults in a learning setting, develop resilience in this setting and improve their behavior and academic achievement.

Stueck (2011) found that biodanza creates space for exercising emotions, for organizing and managing behavior, regulating emotions and behavior, reducing feelings of anger, and promoting a sense of optimism. It provides space for the acquisition and development of social and emotional skills (Jeong et al., 2005; Stueck et al., 2009; Stueck & Tofts, 2016; Stueck & Villegas, 2013). Researchers (Stueck et al., 2013) have pointed to psychological and physiological effects as a result of children's biodanza experience, and a short-term positive effect on the self-regulation ability of children aged 4-6 years. Researchers (Giannelli et al., 2016; Stueck & Tofts, 2016; Stueck & Villegas, 2013) found that biodanza leads to improvement in psychological aspects, such as optimism, relaxation, self-efficacy, arousing feelings of love and empathy, reducing stress and anxiety, and raising the sense of wellbeing.

The present study examined the introduction of biodanza to kindergartens together with the implementation of the principle of biocentric education, with emphasis on affectivity, to create an affectionate climate and to encourage meaningful interactions between children, and between kindergarten staff and the children.

The research question was: How would introducing biodanza and implementing biocentric education in kindergartens achieve these objectives?

Method

This is a qualitative case study (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gerring, 2007; Thomas, 2021; Yin, 2012). The researcher is a biodanza facilitator certified by The International Biodanza Federation. The International Biodanza Federation is the world federation of national associations of the Rolando Toro System Biodanza Schools. Over three years, the researcher conducted the vivencias in a kindergarten, watching and analyzing audio recordings after each session. The sessions were held once a week, on a set day (Thursday), throughout the entire period.

The duration of each activity was about two hours, divided into three parts: (a) arriving at the kindergarten about half an hour before beginning vivencia, connecting with the children, and setting up for vivencia; (b) vivencia (about 45 min); and (c) creative activity following vivencia.

Sample

The activities took place in a kindergarten for five-year-olds. They were held regularly for three school years. Every year, the kindergarten children practiced biodanza throughout the school year. Each year new children participated in the program, but the kindergarten teacher and assistants remained the same throughout the three-year period.

In the first year of the study there were 30 children in the kindergarten, in the second year 28 children, and in the third year 30 children, about evenly divided by gender.

The parents of all the kindergarten children agreed that their children would participate in the study, and all the kindergarten staff. The data were collected in Israel in the years 2017-2019.

Data processing

Data were processed following the method of Bernard and Ryan (2010) and Fletcher-Watson (2013). The vivencias were audio-recorded. After each vivencia, I conducted content analysis and extracted statements, events, and situations. Next, significant recurring anchors and codes were identified, followed by grouping several of them into concepts and sorting the concepts by categories (Galletta, 2013). The process followed a spiral path, where the nuclear elements identified at the beginning of the study became increasingly condensed into a picture that reflects the process of introducing biodanza into the kindergarten (Glaser & Strauss, 2012).

Over time, clear trends were identified that kept reappearing in the different vivencias within the same group, and with the groups that changed each year these trends became stronger.

The processing of the data into themes took place in three stages (Galletta, 2013):

1. Open coding, which started with the beginning of vivencias in kindergarten. In this process, the concepts in the collected material were located and defined.
2. Axial coding. At this stage the concepts were associated with categories by a process of merging and separating, and identifying connections between the concepts.
3. Selective coding. At this stage, themes were formulated and all the data that did not converge into the formulated themes were extracted.

Over three years, an extensive amount of data was collected. From the overall data were extracted particular items with a focus on the research questions. Because of the length of the study and the vast data collected, a careful attempt was made to explain the data, to some extent arrive at generalizations, and define working principles for practicing biodanza in kindergartens.

Vivencia in the kindergarten is divided into several parts (Biodanza Catalog, 2018, 2012; Stueck & Villegas, 2012; Toro, 2010):

- Get-together and short sharing. Exposing the subject of vivencia and stimulating motivation using background materials and illustration.
- Phase 1. Beginning, opening circle, group integration. Walking and dancing for motor and affectivity-motor integration.
- Phase 2. Adrenergic, rhythmic integration; walking; physiological or synergistic integration; rhythmic motor integration, games, jumping, dancing; accepting the body, opening up to new movements, and opening movements that have been closed. Dances from the vitality and creativity lines were usually incorporated in this phase.
- Phase 3. Transition, gradual slowing down (bridge). Reduction in sympathetic activation and transition to parasympathetic, segmental expansion and flow.

- Phase 4. Cholinergic. Accepting the body, opening up to new movements, and opening movements that have been closed. Parasympathetic activity. Dances from the affectivity, pleasure, and transcendence lines were usually incorporated in this phase.
- Phase 5. Final activation, gradual ascent (bridge) from the parasympathetic phase, activation dances, and ending circle.
- Short sharing and creative activity.

Findings

This section presents the findings regarding the kindergarten staff and activities in the host kindergarten vs. short-term activities in the other kindergartens, the principle of biocentric education, and the *vivencia* lines.

The kindergarten staff is part of the *vivencia*

When I started *vivencias* in the first year of kindergarten, after a few weeks of *biodanza* in kindergarten the kindergarten teacher told me: *"I make sure to come on the day you come, to avoid a situation where a substitute teacher will be there who doesn't understand what biodanza is. It took me also some time to understand that there are some work principles, important things that need to be provided in vivencia, I realized that this is not just a fun activity, that it is not just a physical activity, that it is not just a musical activity, but a 'space' that stimulates emotional and social development."*

I asked the kindergarten staff not to take out the children from the *vivencia* space the entire duration of *vivencia*, and not to interfere if something appeared to be a disruption during *vivencia*. They said they were afraid of losing control. They said they feared there would be different messages during the *vivencia* time from the ones in "normal" time at the kindergarten. We sat and talked and came to the understanding that we want to provide a nurturing, developmental, safe, and protected space for all children in the kindergarten. *Vivencia* creates a space where there is freedom to move, express oneself, and create social interactions, but it is a protected space, there is no room for harm to the dignity or body of another child.

In the first conversations with the kindergarten staff, the teacher told me: *"They need completely clear things, otherwise it's a mess."* When children are accustomed to behaving according to clear rules and instructions, instead of allowing them freedom of expression, then the confusion begins. Therefore, in kindergarten *vivencia* the instructions should be clear, given pleasantly, in a soft voice, to allow free dancing, to gradually develop free movements. Gradual progress can bring about a process of change. Slowly, gradually, *biodanza* created an affectionate bond between the children and the staff. *Biodanza* is not intended for a certain age, it is cross-age, therefore *vivencia* should be suitable for both kindergarten staff and kindergarten children. At one point, the kindergarten staff experienced difficulty when we danced an expressive dance; they felt exposed, unlike when they danced at the motor level. Therefore, at first, they did not dance at full force and did not allow themselves to express themselves in the dance, but rather engaged in motor rather than expressive movement. Slowly, they allowed themselves to participate in *vivencia* fully, not merely as caregivers and enablers of the kindergarten children. At that point, I felt that the gates of *vivencia* opened before them.

Activity in host kindergarten vs. short-term activities

Every kindergarten has a staff that manages the kindergarten in a unique way, according to the profiles of the staff and of the children, and depending on the communication between staff members. Before starting *vivencia*, meetings with the staff should be arranged to coordinate expectations, describe what is going to happen, and so on. The kindergarten staff must be involved in planning the work with the kindergarten children. Respectful, participatory, and non-critical communication with the staff should be established, and difficulties that arise during *vivencia* should be discussed. Feedback conversations with the kindergarten staff are needed to ensure a pleasant atmosphere during *vivencia*, which should be conducted in accordance with the procedures of the kindergarten. No new procedures should be incorporated without consulting the kindergarten staff. Confidentiality and the privacy of the children and of the staff should be preserved. Regularity of the sessions is important; if you are delayed or do not intend to arrive, notify the kindergarten in advance. The kids are expecting *vivencia* and waiting for it, and the teacher has an agenda for every day, which should not be disrupted. One of the important things for the kindergarten staff is to have a clear agenda for the children.

Comparison between the host kindergarten and short-term activities. In the host kindergarten, children's angry outbursts and quarrels declined and positive gestures increased compared to kindergartens where only short-term activities took place, not throughout the entire school year. Over time, the differences between the kindergartens expanded in other respects as well: in the host kindergarten there was a change to more affectionate communication between the children, compared to the beginning of the process and to the situation in other kindergartens. Over time, children who left the *vivencia* space returned to it more quickly, and later there were almost no cases of children leaving the *vivencia* space throughout its duration.

Affectivity

The data show that children need *vivencia* with music that allows and promotes an affectionate, emotional connection. It combines exercises that involve affectionate, reciprocal relation, such as eutony of the palms of the hands, performed by pressing together the palms of two children. In time, it is possible to move to finger eutony, bringing together the index fingers of two children, dancing slowly with small steps, which contributes to lightness. Eventually, the movement may also involve the feet: lying on the floor, the children bring together their feet at a distance that allows movement (similar to cycling). Rhythmic and melodic synchronization refers to two children standing in front of each other, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes, and making rhythmic movements to the sounds of music. It can include collective games and active exercises in combination with relaxing and harmonious ones. It enables activities that establish connections between children spontaneously, playfully. In the early days of *vivencias* in the kindergarten, children preferred to dance with partners of their choice, and they expressed pleasure when they chose with whom to dance. Later, they learned to enjoy random choices. But it takes time, and it involves a process of arousing and cultivating affectivity. When they danced in pairs with whomever they chose, the connection between them was a pleasant one, but when they danced with someone they did not choose, it happened that they were disturbing each other, pulling arms or squeezed the partner's hand too strongly. Some children are highly sensitive to differences in the others' muscle tone or temperament. I asked the kindergarten staff not to make them dance "with whoever is assigned," but to let them enjoy the dance, which slowly opened the gates of affection toward more and more children in the kindergarten.

Creativity

To stimulate creativity, after a few lessons some exercises were accompanied by simple instructions and a short demonstration, to allow children to move their bodies in harmony with the music, which permeated their inner self. It allowed them to develop their sense of rhythm, the awareness of the effect of the music on them, to develop their ability to express themselves through movement and music, and it allowed them to express emotions spontaneously. The instruction was simple: listen to the music and let your body move to the sounds of music. Over time, the children learned to listen to the song and to their reaction to the song, and to say which song they liked, which song made it difficult for them to move, to flow, or made them sad. Children should be allowed to experience biodanza to develop the literacy of body and mind.

Creativity bursts forth when the child feels free and relaxed. At the end of each *vivencia* and of the short interaction, the children were divided into groups. I asked that children be allowed to choose a means of expression and provided with creative spaces that encourage diverse, free or structured activities. Children were furnished with high-quality materials and accessories that allow creating diverse forms of expression and allow children to open up in an artistic atmosphere that encourages creativity. The workspaces included various means, depending on the exercises that were in *vivencia*, such as painting on different types of paper, cardboard, or fabric; using different types of paints, such as gouache, hand paints, panda, wax and oil chalks, dry paints, watercolors, hand paints, acrylic paints, colored chalk, charcoal, colored pencils, markers; sculpting with various materials such as clay, DAS, playdough, or papier-mâché writing songs (the children composed and the adult wrote); using a box of fabrics of different colors and sizes; having access to a pantomime corner, a voice-making corner, a corner for making cookies in various shapes, and a mask- and costume-making corner; children had access to individual and group painting on various materials and with various colors, gouache, watercolors, on absorbent or non-absorbent thick paper; they could do origami. Art corners were themed around holidays and appropriate exercises that were part of *vivencia*, such as a spinning top and masks. Children worked in their own way and decorated in their own way, to emphasize the freedom to create.

Dialogs took place in creative groups, as well as personal conversations, if necessary, to derive meaning from their experiences and connect them to other past, present, and future experiences, and expand the child's immediate experiences (e.g., by conceptualization, generalization, analogies, and cause-and-effect relationships). I chose each time to sit next to another child who expressed difficulty during *vivencia*, when I felt a change in child's movement, participation, or mood. I used the word "sparks:" the intention during the meeting in the creative corner was "to share the sparks that flashed in us." What was the spark that flickered in me? When, why... what did I feel?.. Throughout the year, I saw that the change that took place in the children occurred not only in the movement and in the way they encountered others, but also in the way they expressed themselves through the post-*vivencia* creation. This was especially noticeable in comparison with other kindergarten children, where the *vivencia* was not practiced regularly throughout the entire school year. There has been a change in the children's verbal ability, in the interactions at the beginning and at the end of the *vivencia*, and during their creative time after *vivencia*. Children who always chose the same way of expression (painting, coloring) slowly joined other groups, such as pantomime, sculpting, and so on.

Expanding awareness

Differences between children. Some of the children danced spontaneously without inhibition, changing their movements according to the sounds of the music. Other children moved their upper or lower body to the sounds of music. Some of the children moved their bodies in the same way regardless of what music was played. It seemed that certain children allowed the music to permeate their bodies and felt its effect. Some children have weak body tonus and others have stiff body tonus. There are children who feel reluctant to reveal themselves, and exposure is difficult for them. They are timid, do not want to attract attention, and feel uncomfortable when you look at them. There are children who exude weakness, do not initiate interaction or connections, wait for things to happen to them, to come to them, do not fight to achieve results, and do not protect their rights, their spot, their body. These children need to be helped, at their own pace and at the time they choose, to bring them out of their shell, to arouse in them a desire to reveal themselves, to show the world who they are. *Vivencias* included dances of visibility and concealment, usually of powerful animals (“We are a tiger cub that hides... and appears...”), exercises that involve wide basic movements, making sounds from the center of the body, deep abdominal breathing, then releasing a strong growl with deep exhaling, movements coming out from the center of the body and toward the hands and feet, intensely, to feel each part of the body. The music must combine rhythmic, happy tunes, not to create a terrifying feeling.

A sense of responsibility and visibility. Gradually, exercises were incorporated that aimed to evoke in children a sense of responsibility, as opposed to a lack of responsibility, toward themselves and toward their environment; a sense of personal and collective identity, as opposed to anonymity; a sense of belonging, sharing, and relationships as opposed to one of indifference, avoidance, alienation, and rejection. Each child should be allowed to progress slowly, at his or her own pace. Development that is not at their pace will lead to children closing up, distancing themselves, and wanting to avoid participation.

The children loved identity games, such as someone saying their name and making a movement, and everyone repeating the child’s name and movement; walking through the “children’s tunnel” between two rows, with children saying their name when they reach the head of the row and passing between the two rows; round-walking, with the facilitator lowering the volume when the children say their name, then increasing the volume again, and so on, with every child.

Transitions. Transitions between various movements (such as different movements in a regression exercise and another exercise) may trigger emotional change. Over time, children felt increasingly free to express the change—transmutation—that occurred in them in transitions, such as moving to regression exercises or exiting the regression phase. The transitions indicated emotional changes that they experienced during the exercises, and they expressed their feelings with facial expressions, laughter, smiles.

Facing fears and releasing fears. Most children’s fears stem from their primary instincts, from natural things, such as darkness, animals, natural phenomena. The encounter with “nature” can create shock and fear. Connecting to nature is like being a spider, being darkness, not being in the dark but being darkness, when things that scare them come out. When we danced “animals,” I incorporated nature films, not scary ones, but short films that show the habitat of the animal. As the children watched the film, I told the story of the animal, and the children participated and contributed from their knowledge. For example, I showed a movie about a lioness caring for her cubs and a movie about a tiger running fast. The children expressed amazement at the size of the animal and at its power. For example, we saw a short film about a family of gorillas, and after the movie they danced like gorillas, made powerful movements, and made contact with others like gorilla children. To get inside the fear and also come out of it more empowered than before, the children need to be in their totality a tiger, a lion, or a gorilla, completely and not partially; then a process of observing the fear and befriending the fear may develop. In other *vivencias* I told the children that I was looking for a child to volunteer to say what animal he was afraid of, and a boy said he was afraid of dogs. I asked who wants to be a dog? One of the children volunteered. He began to move around in a “six” position in the *vivencia* space. I asked the child who was afraid of dogs to approach the child-dog. The boy said: Dogs can pounce, dogs can bite. The children started advising him what to do, for example, saying that there are friendly dogs and you can approach them, and there are wild ones, and we will avoid them. If you run, the dog will run after you. “I love dogs but I don’t immediately approach any dog, I stand watching, if the dog is friendly he will come to me...” The child-dog said he was a friendly dog, the child who was afraid of dogs approached the child-dog, gently stroked his head... and started playing with him. At one point, all the children were dogs. In another *vivencia*, I asked everyone at the same time to be an animal they were afraid of. After they danced many animals in the space, I asked them to tell me which animal they chose. A boy said he was afraid of parrots, he said “parrots jump on children, bite them ...” A boy volunteered to be a parrot, and the children started advising him what to do. The animals that the children mentioned as scary were the ones that were in the children’s environment: a dog, a cat, a parrot. They were afraid of the animals they saw around them, and not of animals such as lions or tigers.

Animals were included into a large part of the *vivencias*. For example, we danced the tiger after watching a short film that showed a tiger waking up, stretching, and making contact with other tigers. Later, the children were tigers,

growling like tigers, tiger cubs playing with big tigers, rocking, and cuddling. Being a powerful animal gives a sense of security, of vitality, as opposed to a sense of helplessness, of crippling and paralyzing fear. The children learned to improvise movements when they were an animal, especially when they made contact with another animal child. They learned to breathe deeply into the chest and release deep roars during the rhythmic motor integration stage. They learned deep abdominal breathing and releasing a deep growl while exhaling.

In biodanza, importance is attached to the way in which individuals present themselves, their body, their appearance, the “door of the body.” What does dancing lions or tigers awaken in us? In time, when the children were lions or tigers they projected power, confidence, and a great deal of social initiative, daring to approach other children. “We are now powerful as a tiger,” said the children-tigers, looking at others and petting them. Barriers were broken because we were strong, powerful animals. The children liked being animals, expressed a great deal of joy after dancing the animal, offered suggestions for “animal dances,” and demonstrated the eagle dance, the sparrow dance, and the peacock dance.

Movement is likely to elicit a process of release of fears, emotions, and breaking obstacles. Some of the children felt exposed and unprotected, some more so than others, some only in the joint exercises and others throughout. A feeling that they are exposed, unprotected, lonely, socially rejected, different from everyone else constrains the children and does not allow them to feel free to create, grow, open up, and develop. Release from fears and feelings such as these is likely to open up the children and help them be creative, dance relaxed, and feel protected. When children feel they are in a secure and protected place, and they dare to dance their own dance, and to make contact with others. If children feel insecure, they are liable not to allow their creativity to emerge.

Developing children’s trust in their body is essential for building their self-confidence and trust in their ability to face the world, and to face confusion, misunderstanding, and cynicism. Establishing trust in their body means developing a flexible body (as opposed to a rigid one), and open movements (as opposed to closed ones). Because they are young and still connected to some degree to their “I,” the signals of their body, standing, and walking can be seen as mirroring or reflecting their soul. Today, children are exposed to many characters, both face-to-face and in the media, especially in the TV programs they watch, therefore their repertoire is relatively rich compared to children who know only single characters, parents, teaching staff, etc. Therefore there is a chance of bringing them to choose a “pattern of behavior” based on their essential being.

Group power. For preschoolers who need a supportive environment, the *vivencia* sessions should meet the child’s basic need of belonging to a group, to society, and acquiring social skills.

In the first interactions, it is advisable to provide a short feedback to children, to respond to them, give them a compliment, encouragement, and reinforcement, such as: thank you for sharing, what you say is very important, thank you for your smiles, you add so much light to our group; how nice, it’s such fun to come here, it’s always fun for me to come to the kindergarten to be with you.

Below are some ideas for questions: What did you like today in *vivencia*? What song did you like today in *vivencia*? Did you enjoy meeting friends in *vivencia* today? After several sessions, children cooperate and there is no need for questions to encourage cooperation.

Exposure. Allow children to choose songs for the next *vivencia*. Ask them what song they like and why. This helps in the process of exposure to the group and causes a sense of belonging.

When there is an exercise for pairs, tell them to make eye contact with each other, feel the partner, try to adjust the movements between themselves. Eye contact creates a sense of connection between people, the person feels “revealed” and not “transparent.” At the same time, eye contact creates presence, whereas the absence of eye contact may allow a sense of freedom to dance the way one feels. For example, an exercise that allows for gradual contact, depending on the interaction between the partners is the Game of the Chinese Fan in Pairs, when a pair of children stand facing each other, hiding their eyes and face with their hands. Slowly, the fingers slightly open. They seek each other’s eyes, slowly exposing more and more face parts, and they dance together.

Discussion

This study examined the introduction of biodanza to kindergartens together with the implementation of the principle of biocentric education, with emphasis on affectivity, in order to create an affectionate climate, and to encourage meaningful interactions between children, and between kindergarten staff and the children.

The study findings show that biodanza created situations in the kindergarten, where children faced emotional and social challenges, as a result of which the positivity resonance in the kindergarten intensified and the climate became increasingly affectionate, inclusive, and participatory. Children’s angry outbursts and quarrels diminished, and positive gestures multiplied. There was a change to a more affectionate communication of the kindergarten staff with the children, compared to that at the beginning of the process. The conceptual principle in biodanza is that one should be

present in one's life and responsible for oneself, for one's behavior, and for one's mental and physical health. The facilitator guides the children, provides various options, but does not "take the child's place" as the creator of the reality of the child's life, not even in the case of the kindergarten children. Biodanza in kindergarten allows children to undergo a process of becoming who they can or want to be, to connect with their essence. This is likely to occur if the children come to better know themselves and how they act, expanding self-awareness and instigating the process of change. Biodanza uses transformative exercises, but the children must progress at their own pace. When *vivencia* was being introduced into the kindergarten, when the children performed dancing exercises to themselves, I saw that some of the children danced energetically, but in the exercise that followed, when they had to make eye contact or some different type of contact with others, they appeared different. In general, these states are clearer, more transparent in children than in adults. Children's restricted movements and inhibitions in encounters with others, their insecurity in being with others are quite obvious. They can be helped, and the chances of optimal development increase. Biocentric education aims at teaching children to be awake, observant, sensitive, and gentle. We look at everyone to find out what is special and different about a particular child. Children need a sensitive environment that provides an appropriate response to their needs and signals, so that they can develop social-emotional skills. Proocial behaviors should be encouraged in interactions between children to establish social-emotional relationships with other children and with the kindergarten staff, to create secure circles, and to boost the drive to live, initiate, and create.

When I felt that a child was distressed during *vivencia*, I found a way to approach the child, so that we could dance together. In the preparation and demonstration before dancing, I incorporated movements that I remembered the child had liked in the past, a song the child loved in one of the previous *vivencias*. Biodanza allows us to understand the language of movement of the child, and when the child is in distress, we see it. In early childhood, children learn to adapt to the world, they are intuitive and instinctive. They need to learn how to guide and control themselves, and if it is difficult for them, we can help them. Good communication, mutual respect, a sense of security between children and those around them are likely to empower the children and lead to a change in their wellbeing. The first step in building trust is accepting the children as they are. The child does not have to change first to be "accepted." The process is different. The children need to feel accepted, loved as they are, then eventually they will be willing to accept themselves and become open to change (Zilka, 2014, 2017). Trust is built gradually. Children should progress at their own pace, step by step. They need to feel able to turn to adults in difficult moments, with problems that arise, knowing that we will help them—discreetly or with the assistance of others, as required by the child's wellbeing and with the child's consent (Early Childhood OECD, 2021; Phillips et al., 1987; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994; Zilka, 2021).

To bring hearts closer. Some children, after having been hurt by someone or something, will not want to participate anymore and will leave the *vivencia* and the group. They should be allowed the freedom to choose to leave or stay. They should be able to take a break, but slowly and gently, the facilitator should try to approach them and bring them back into the group. It happens at times that a child receives a blow or is pushed during the *vivencia*. Some children, as soon as somebody pushes them, instinctively push back, and if they do not know who pushed them, or they avoid pushing back the one who pushed them, will push a different child who is close to them, usually one who does not know how to protect personal space. This creates negative resonance. Over time, the negative resonance in the kindergarten was greatly reduced, and the positive resonance greatly increased. Positive resonance should be encouraged, children should be encouraged to respond with a gesture (like making eye contact) when someone does something that evokes in them a positive feeling. In time, the group allowed children to reduce the use of defense mechanisms, to let go, love, rejoice, make connections, and form relationships. The group is a protected, supportive, helpful, nurturing, and encouraging place. A group provides a sense of comfort, ease, harmony, and satisfaction. It promotes personal and collective development and the expansion of self-awareness.

Boundaries, rules, and laws — set in love

In biocentric education (as an extension of the principle of biocentric education) boundaries are set affectionately for children to empower them, to connect them with their abilities, to allow them to be part of the whole, with sensitivity, and being attuned to themselves and others. In *vivencias*, children should have awareness of boundaries: the boundaries of their body, boundaries in their encounters with others, which children should be allowed to set. The awareness of boundaries and the ability to set boundaries strengthen the child's sense of identity. The children's adaptation to the boundaries set for them creates a space that may empower and nurture them, but if the boundaries become the most important thing, as opposed to the children themselves and their needs, the children's development may suffer. Kindergarten children face demands and boundaries. At times, boundaries become a significant part of life in a kindergarten. Many children spend a considerable amount of their time in kindergarten with coloring books and engaged in organized activities, and discipline often becomes a significant value in the kindergarten. Young children may experience a "disconnect" from their strengths, they can no longer be spontaneous, do whatever they want, jump whenever they want, or run whenever they want. Therefore, some of them experience crises that are manifested in

seclusion, crying, fear of initiating and doing things, fears, and a need to seek approval for any action so as not to be exposed to condemnation and anger. At times, there are no “clear boundaries,” and the reaction of one adult to a certain behavior is different from the reaction of another adult in the kindergarten, which causes confusion and a feeling of uncertainty and even helplessness. **Boundaries are set with love, kindness, and not with anger. Boundaries are set as rules in a game** (Zilka, 2017, 2018).

Listening to body sensations. Looking at the kindergarten children, one notices that there are large gaps between the children regarding emotional and physiological control. Some of them have rough movements and others gentle ones. The introduction of biodanza into kindergarten started a process that led, in varying degrees, to empowering children and to their emotional, physiological, and motor balancing. The emphasis in *vivencia* in kindergarten is on movement, music, and meetings, not on following instructions or on prescribed movements; children can choose their own ways and their own movements.

Another emphasis was on creating an affectionate group: safe place exercises, the possibility of being together in a common space, making room for another, not pushing. We must be attentive to differences that exist between human beings, including those who find it difficult to hug a child they are afraid of, or to approach an aggressive child. For example, to a child who felt distressed because of his difficulty in approaching other children, I suggested coping tools individually, personally, and discreetly, showing him how to make his choice without hurting others. If we force children to do something difficult for them, they will not want to participate in *vivencia* of their own free will. I saw that in time the children made contact with others who at first had a hard time getting close to them. Patience is needed in working with small children. Moral preaching should be avoided, as well as shaming or embarrassing the child in front of others. Most children are afraid of rejection, of being shamed or embarrassed, of being reprimanded in front of all the children. These fears may cause children to refrain from doing, from experiencing, and from expressing themselves. Some children at this age are affected immediately and by almost anything. They connect from an observational, identifying, intuitive place and less from a place that they can understand and explain (Collie et al., 2017; McKown, 2017; Zilka, 2015). For example, the kindergarten teacher turned to one of the girls and said to her: “Why don’t you want to dance with him? That’s not nice.” The girl left the common space and cried. She was offended because her being different was not respected and earned her the label of a girl who behaves badly, in an unfriendly way. For children to express themselves freely and liberally in *vivencia*, they need to feel that they are in a protected space, without being preoccupied with the aspects that are holding them back. The child needs tools, skills, means of expression and sharing, means to connect with the world. **Biodanza is a space for learning to love**, learning about each child, a place for each person to be different and special. At times, children find it difficult to be “together,” and they prefer to choose with whom to dance, with whom to hold hands, rather than doing it randomly. The adults should understand this difficulty of the children and proceed carefully and slowly, making sure not to spoil, and should refrain from continually dictating what is allowed and what is forbidden. They should not say at all times, “however it turns out, I’m happy.” They should not force children to do things that would cause them to “seal up” their feelings. The children’s feelings, their desire for closeness or distance should be accommodated. *Vivencia* boundaries are set with love and with an embrace, opening new channels for response. Children are sensitive to body language, to forcefulness, to the absence of physical regulation of others, to smells, and to voices. It should be obvious that there are differences between children and that not everyone can accept everyone—this is also an acknowledgment of differences. Slowly, at times more slowly than at others, children learn to get closer to more and more children, to join hands randomly and not only with those whom they chose, to dance with randomly selected others, and they learn to adjust the level of their strength to those they face. Children should be approached gently, nicely, with softness, so that they feel protected and want to be nearby. We do not expect the children to be the way we want them to be, but to be exactly the way they are, and from that point on we will help them develop.

Interactions in the kindergarten. Interactions that take place between children and adults in an educational setting are considered to be one of the critical factors that promote or inhibit normal development of children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Interactions between children and adults take place throughout the day. The interactions of each of the staff members with each of the children create unique relationships, and the interactions between the kindergarten staff and all the kindergarten children create the social-emotional climate in the kindergarten. In biodanza in the kindergarten emphasis should be placed on characteristics such as accepting the child as is, as a whole that needs guidance. Trust in the children, in their abilities, and in their ability of being what they want to be is likely to lead to a meaningful process. The staff should show respect for the child; closeness, using words of closeness, expressions of affection and attention; availability, emotional support, guidance, encouragement, and calming down the child; encouraging personal and social initiative and respecting the wishes and needs of the child; avoiding exclusion, discrimination, conflicting messages, use of pressure, threats, and criticism. Children need an inclusive, sensitive, caring environment that meets their needs, so that they can develop emotional, social, and cognitive abilities. An environment

must impart a sense of ability and desire to grow and develop (DeSchipper et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Myers & Pianta, 2008; Zilka, 2015).

The findings of this study support those of previous ones. Stueck (2011) found that biodanza provides space for emotion training, for organizing and managing behavior, for regulation of emotions and behavior, and that it reduces feelings of anger and stimulates a sense of optimism. Biodanza space boosts the development of social and emotional skills and the acquisition of emotional skills (Jeong et al., 2005; Stueck et al., 2009; Stueck & Tofts, 2016; Stueck & Villegas, 2013). Researchers (Stueck et al., 2013) have pointed to psychological and physiological effects in children as a result of experiencing biodanza, a short-term positive effect on the self-regulation ability of children aged 4-6 years. Others (Giannelli et al., 2016; Stueck & Tofts, 2016; Stueck & Villegas, 2013) have found that biodanza leads to improvement in psychological aspects, such as higher optimism, relaxation, self-efficacy, ability to express feelings of love and empathy, reduction of anxiety, reduction of stress, and improved sense of wellbeing.

In conclusion, the biodanza facilitator should emphasize a focused and structured process alongside *vivencia* that allows free activity, encouraging children's initiative and self-expression. The facilitator must provide many and varied opportunities for development, for free playful and non-playful activities, with emphasis on fostering social-emotional relationships, cognitive nurturing, and creativity that are appropriate for the children's development. The facilitator must cultivate and develop a positive emotional climate and various ways of expressing joy, frustration, anger, insult, and more, while acknowledging and responding to the needs that children voice. Facilitators should give children basic confidence and daring to explore their body, their reactions, their movement, and their environment, and to learn from it. They should provide interesting and intriguing experiences for children. When children are allowed and given a sense that they participate in the development process, when their inner drive to explore the environment is allowed to manifest itself, the process may lead to a sense that they are part of the whole, that they understand and know their environment. Children need an environment that presents them with challenges at a level of difficulty adjusted to their abilities, so that they can face the challenges and grow, open up, and develop. The children's movements in the *vivencia* space and their communication with other children allows us to identify and help the children when they project distress, difficulty, and desire to develop in a certain direction, by encouraging an affectionate process of social-emotional adjustment. All this is to be achieved through a process of contemplation and in-depth investigation by a biodanza facilitator who selects appropriate ways that enable the implementation of an affectionate and inclusive space.

Research contribution, future studies

This study examined the introduction of biodanza to kindergartens together with the implementation of the principle of biocentric education during three years of schooling, to understand how it can help create an affectionate climate and encourage meaningful interactions between children, and between kindergarten staff and the children. The findings shed light on this topic and add to the knowledge accumulated to date, regarding the introduction of biodanza and the application of the principle of biocentric education in kindergarten. It is recommended that further studies examine the issue of affectionate climate in kindergartens because of its great importance for the development of preschool children.

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Unit 2 An essential subconscious and the biocentric principle

Unit 3 Vivencia

Unit 12 vitality

Unit 18 Implementation and Implications

Extension of the principle of biocentric education

Biodance extension for children

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