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## Rethinking the Body in Education: Aesthetic, Pedagogical, and Political Dimensions of Creative Contemporary Dance in Lebanon

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### Abstract

In the Lebanese context, the body remains a site of tension between social norms, religious inheritances, and aspirations for emancipation. Within the school environment, it is often reduced to an instrument of discipline, marginalizing forms of creative bodily expression. This article explores the possibility of integrating creative contemporary dance into Lebanese schools as an aesthetic, pedagogical, and political dispositif. Drawing on theories of corporeality (Merleau-Ponty, Laban, Foucault) and arts education (Dewey, Freire), the study analyzes how dance can transform the relationship to knowledge, restore the body's cognitive dimension, and establish a

pedagogy grounded in sensibility. It highlights the civic and critical value of the dancing gesture as a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity, individual and collective, freedom and education. By repositioning the body at the center of the educational process, creative contemporary dance emerges as a lever for symbolic and cultural reconstruction in Lebanon.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Dance, Education, Corporeality, Aesthetics, Pedagogy, Freedom, Lebanon

**The Body in Lebanese Schools:** Between Norm and Docility

Within the Lebanese school environment, dance remains marginal, confined to a peripheral role within physical education classes

(CNRDP, 1994)<sup>1</sup>, lacking both artistic legitimacy and cognitive value. This absence does not result from institutional coincidence, but rather reveals an ambivalent cultural relationship to the body: it is perceived less as a vector of meaning than as an object of control and regulation. In Lebanon, the body bears the imprint of a historical and confessional construction in which gestural spontaneity arouses suspicion and free movement appears as symbolic transgression.

Yet in contemporary artistic pedagogies, the body constitutes a space of knowledge, perception, and meaning making. Contemporary theories of corporeality and arts education — from Foucault (1975) to Laban (1958), from Merleau-Ponty (1945) to Valéry (1957) — converge in recognizing the body as the primary site of knowledge, mediating between the individual and the collective, the sensible and the intellectual. From this perspective, the introduction of creative contemporary dance into schools would not represent a mere diversification of artistic activities, but rather a profound reconfiguration

of the relationship to knowledge and culture.

A fundamental question therefore arises: to what extent can the integration of creative contemporary dance in Lebanese schools contribute to the formation of a sensitive, reflective, and critical subject, capable of reappropriating their body within a social context where it remains subject to communal, confessional, and gendered constraints?

By posing this question, the school is examined as a space to produce bodily normativity, and dance is conceived as a tool of symbolic and cognitive resistance to that normativity.

Educational systems that have integrated dance into their curricula — notably in France through arts and cultural education pathways (Germain-Thomas, 2017) — have demonstrated the formative scope of choreographic practice. Far from being a leisure activity, dance is conceived there as a field of aesthetic, ethical, and social construction (Lacince, 2000). As Foucault (1975) has shown, modern institutions participate in the production of

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Educational Research and Development (CNRDP: Centre National de Recherche et de Développement

Pédagogique), the institution responsible for developing the Lebanese curriculum.

“docile bodies,” subject to logics of surveillance, hierarchization, and normalization. The Lebanese school system, heir to this disciplinary model, likewise tends to regulate gestures and postures, assigning the body a functional rather than a cognitive role. Creative contemporary dance, however, by privileging sincerity of gesture over virtuosity, breaks with this docility: it establishes a pedagogy of the sensitive body grounded in perception, freedom, and creativity.

Inspired by Laban (1958), this pedagogical approach values the natural impulse to dance, the spontaneity of movement, and collective creation. It transforms the student into the subject of their own experience, replacing the logic of imitation with that of exploration. In doing so, it introduces into the school context a phenomenology of gesture, where knowledge emerges from sensation and embodiment. Through movement work, students develop self-awareness, relational awareness, and the capacity for symbolic coexistence: the classroom becomes a choreographic space of citizenship, where living together is constructed through bodies in motion (Germain-Thomas, 2017).

This shift in the educational paradigm also presupposes a

transformation of the teacher’s posture. According to Reboul (2007), the teacher should not merely transmit knowledge, but rather pose questions, awaken critical thinking in students, and foster a learning process in which students actively construct their knowledge — a process akin to mediation within the teaching–learning relationship. Learning thus becomes co-construction of meaning, an experience of regulated freedom and critical emancipation. In a fragmented society, creative contemporary dance offers a space of universality, where the body regains its political and poetic dimension. Integrating it into Lebanese schools would therefore entail revaluing corporeality as a foundation of knowledge and citizenship. By replacing a pedagogy of repetition with a pedagogy of lived sensory experience, it would make it possible to conceive freedom differently: not as rupture, but as the embodied movement of thought.

Such a reform, however, presupposes a reconsideration of the place of the body in a society where it remains a major cultural and political stake, situated at the intersection of the religious, the social, and the symbolic. From early childhood, gestures, postures, and ways of occupying space reflect a

process of norm internalization. Michel Foucault (1975) demonstrated how institutions — school, family, church, army — shape “docile bodies”: disciplined, silent, aligned. The Lebanese school system, embedded within this logic, privileges speech and conformity at the expense of sensation and creativity. The body is instrumentalized as a vector of regulation rather than as a space of knowledge.

Yet, as Valéry (1957) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) have emphasized, the body constitutes the original condition of all experience of the world. Thought itself is constructed through it: the “flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) connects the subject to their environment in a relationship of sensitive co-presence. The dancing body, according to Legendre (1978), cannot be reduced to a utilitarian function; it is meaningful, symbolic, and productive of sense. Denying students access to this bodily language amounts to depriving them of a fundamental dimension of their humanity. As Elia (1992) wrote, bodily education should not aim at the repression of affects, but at their conscious socialization — a “civilization of the body.” From this perspective, creative contemporary

dance embodies a pedagogy of the conscious body: it educates sensibility, perception, and presence to oneself.

Nevertheless, this approach confronts the complexity of the Lebanese context. As Donahu (2000) has observed, in a pluriconfessional society, the communal structure confers upon the body an immediately religious and political dimension. Norms of modesty, visibility, and movement vary according to confessional belonging, shaping differentiated bodily behaviors from childhood. The female body, in particular, concentrates tensions between modernity and tradition. In societies where confession structures public life, the body becomes instantly politicized. To dance in public is to assert bodily autonomy, often perceived as transgressive. Yet this transgression, when situated within an educational framework, acquires the value of learning: it allows students to rediscover their bodies as spaces of meaning and freedom, rather than as objects of surveillance.

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This educational shift cannot occur without institutional recognition of the body. As long as dance continues to be assimilated into sports activities, it will remain deprived of its artistic and reflective scope. Recognizing dance as an artistic discipline would imply acknowledging that the sensitive body produces knowledge in its own right. This recognition presupposes the training of specialized teachers capable of transmitting a pedagogy of movement rather than one centered on performance.

Nevertheless, introducing dance into a social context still marked by apprehension toward the body requires caution and gradual implementation. The notion of a

“zone of the permissible” offers a possible pathway: the creation of spaces of regulated freedom where students can experiment without abruptly transgressing established norms. The objective is not provocation, but the opening of symbolic breaches. The concept of the “zone of the permissible” refers to an intermediate space between rule and transgression, within which students are authorized to explore, reinterpret, and transform normative frameworks of action. This concept is grounded in the idea that genuine learning — particularly in the arts — presupposes symbolic displacement: learning does not consist merely in repetition, but in daring to experiment within a framework where error and improvisation are not only tolerated but encouraged (Svendler Nielsen & BurrIDGE, 2015).

The “zone of the permissible” can thus be understood as a strategy of gentle resistance to the school’s disciplinary order. It does not abolish norms; rather, it temporarily reconfigures them by creating margins of autonomy within the system. Far from constituting an anarchic space, it establishes an implicit pedagogical contract based on trust: students learn to position themselves between obedience and

creativity, between adherence to instructions and the invention of self.

Dance thus becomes a laboratory of freedom — a space of gradual emancipation aligned with Freire's (1974) critical pedagogy, which seeks consciousness-raising and the transformation of social structures. In this sense, creative contemporary dance holds an eminently political function. It teaches individuals to think differently: to inhabit the body differently, to inhabit the world differently. Each improvised gesture becomes an affirmation of subjectivity and a resistance to automatism. Through the freedom of movement, students discover the freedom of thought; they experience the dialectic between corporeality and consciousness, the foundation of lived phenomenology. Introduced into the school context, dance becomes a tool of critical and aesthetic formation, where gesture becomes embodied thought.

Social representations of dance in Lebanon nevertheless remain a major obstacle. Frequently associated with frivolity, femininity, or Westernization, dance continues to suffer from enduring cultural stigmatization. Moscovici (1984) demonstrated that such representations condition collective

behaviors. Transforming them therefore requires a long-term strategy: exposing students to dance from an early age, multiplying workshops, performances, and exchanges, to anchor the idea that to dance is to think. The repetition of aesthetic experience reshapes perception and enables the construction of a national choreographic culture freed from prejudice.

This approach does not stand in opposition to tradition; rather, it extends it. Dabké, Lebanon's heritage dance, recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage, remains a pillar of national identity. However, only the encounter between tradition and creation can give rise to a pedagogy of continuity. By integrating contemporary dance alongside dabké, schools would offer students the possibility of reinventing their heritage in a contemporary language. This hybridization between everyday gesture and collective memory would strengthen cultural identity while opening it to the universal.

Thus, the question of the body in Lebanese schools cannot be reduced to a reflection on dance alone; it engages the very purpose of education. Introducing creative contemporary dance would mean

transforming the school into a space of subjectivation and freedom, where students construct meaning rather than merely reproduce knowledge. Corporeality then becomes a foundation of citizenship: learning to listen to one's body is learning to listen to others; expressing movement is participating in social dialogue. The body, far from being an object of control, becomes an ethical and aesthetic mediator between self and world.

### **Toward an Education of the Thinking Body: Aesthetic and Cognitive Stakes**

Emerging from the deconstruction of classical and modern dance codes, creative contemporary dance values the singularity of gesture, spontaneity, and subjectivity. This non-hierarchical dynamic of creation corresponds to the foundations of a contemporary education centered on process rather than outcome. In this sense, creative contemporary dance offers an alternative pedagogical paradigm: it shifts the purpose of teaching from performance toward knowledge of self and others through the body. Students do not learn to reproduce a model but to invent their own; they become authors of their gestures and co-constructors of collective meaning.

This conception of gesture as a vector of thought aligns with what Louppe (2000) calls the “poetics of movement.” Any intentional and inhabited movement becomes a choreographic act, whether drawn from everyday life or imagination. This approach abolishes the distinction between noble and ordinary movement: walking, breathing, or falling can be aesthetic acts insofar as they carry awareness. Transposed into the educational field, this philosophy of gesture opens a pedagogy of sensibility in which students learn to perceive beauty in the ordinary and to transform bodily experience into reflective material. Rather than technical training, this constitutes perceptual and symbolic learning: dance becomes a mode of embodied knowledge.

This pedagogy rests on several fundamental ruptures introduced by contemporary dance. The first concerns the dehierarchization of gesture. By rejecting formal perfection, contemporary dance legitimizes bodily and expressive diversity. It places the search for meaning above conformity. Students are no longer judged on the precision of movement but on their ability to invest gesture with intention. This pedagogical orientation values sensibility and encourages self-

assessment, aligning with the humanistic conception of education that prioritizes the formation of consciousness over the acquisition of standardized competencies.

The second rupture involves the transformation of dance space. Freed from the traditional stage framework, contemporary dance has redefined the site of creation: any space can become a stage — the street, the classroom, the schoolyard. This spatial displacement carries significant pedagogical implications. It makes creation accessible and everyday, abolishing the separation between art and life. In the Lebanese school context, it would enable the integration of dance into the lived spaces of the school, transforming them into territories of artistic experimentation. This process of appropriation fosters students' spatial imagination and environmental awareness: they learn to perceive their surroundings differently, to give them form and meaning.

A third rupture concerns disciplinary hybridity. Contemporary dance engages in dialogue with theater, music, visual arts, and digital technologies. This transversality reinforces its educational relevance, connecting the body to other artistic and symbolic languages. In a society where digital media occupies a

dominant place, such hybridization opens the way to innovative pedagogical experiences. By combining movement, sound, and image, students develop not only creativity but also critical thinking toward technology. Dance thus becomes a tool for reappropriating the virtual through the real body: it recenters experience on presence and perception, countering the virtualization of human relations.

The fourth rupture concerns the relationship between movement and music. In contemporary dance, the body no longer follows music; it produces its own rhythm, grounded in breath and gravity. This reversed relationship introduces a new mode of listening: the dancer learns to hear their own movement. Within the educational framework, this bodily autonomy fosters concentration, self-regulation, and temporal awareness. Gesture becomes rhythmic thought. This approach establishes an education of presence and attention — competencies essential to all learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, these transformations align with the conception of learning as meaningful experience. Reboul (1980) defines learning as the capacity to reproduce behavior adapted to a relevant context.

Creative contemporary dance, however, teaches precisely how to adapt, transform, and invent: it mobilizes kinesthetic intelligence to understand and create meaning. Frimat (2011) emphasizes that the dancing gesture emerges from sensibility rather than mere motor execution; sensation becomes a source of signification. Students learn to distinguish between reaction and perception, between reflex movement and conscious movement. This distinction, central to the pedagogy of the sensitive body, establishes a reflective learning process in which feeling becomes a form of thinking.

Within this framework, the teacher no longer embodies prescriptive authority but serves as a guide to experience. They facilitate awareness, orient attention, and encourage discovery. This posture of accompaniment transforms the pedagogical relationship, rendering it horizontal and dialogical. The teaching of contemporary dance becomes a process of co-creation in which all participants contribute to the production of meaning. This pedagogical configuration aligns with the philosophy of progressive education, which promotes freedom, cooperation, and creativity as educational principles. In the Lebanese context, still marked by an

authoritarian school model, such a pedagogy of movement would offer a first concrete experience of regulated freedom — a freedom practiced in respect for oneself and for others.

At the collective level, creative contemporary dance contributes to the development of social and civic competencies. Shared creation workshops foster cooperation, tolerance, and symbolic negotiation. Within this dynamic, students learn to articulate their gestures with those of others, transforming movement into a space of collective meaning-making (Gauthier, 2020). The body becomes an instrument of social mediation: it teaches listening, solidarity, and responsibility. This collective experience constitutes an embodied education in citizenship, where the relationship to others is not merely theoretical but physically experienced. In a fragmented society, such a pedagogy of the shared body could serve as a model for rebuilding social bonds.

Introducing creative contemporary dance into the Lebanese school system also implies a redefinition of the status of knowledge. Within the local educational tradition, knowledge is primarily associated with speech and memory. Dance introduces a form of embodied, non-verbal knowledge

grounded in perception. It challenges the hierarchy between intellectual and bodily disciplines. This rehabilitation of the thinking body opens the way to an integral education consistent with UNESCO's (2014) vision, which considers the arts essential vectors of holistic development. It values forms of intelligence often marginalized — kinesthetic, emotional, intuitive — and recognizes them as legitimate within the educational sphere.

Moreover, regular practice of contemporary dance contributes to both physical and mental well-being. It promotes breathing, relaxation, and concentration while channeling emotional tensions. In a country marked by social and political crises, such practice could play a therapeutic and preventive role. It would allow students to transform emotions into creative energy, thereby fostering individual and collective resilience.

Finally, the teaching of contemporary dance must include a critical and aesthetic dimension: learning to dance also means learning to watch. Educating the student-spectator entails initiating them into the reading of movement, the interpretation of bodily signs, and the recognition of gesture as a bearer of ideas. This education of the gaze extends the education of the body: it

develops aesthetic sensibility and the capacity for dialogue. It prepares students to become citizens capable of listening and interpretation — qualities essential in a cultural democracy.

The integration of creative contemporary dance into the Lebanese curriculum would therefore not constitute a marginal reform, but a systemic transformation. It would involve recognizing the body as a source of knowledge, revalorizing sensibility within education, and training specialized educators. By articulating creation, reflection, and collaboration, this approach would enable schools to become spaces of living culture, where gesture becomes knowledge and knowledge becomes movement. Through dance, Lebanese education could thus reconnect with a humanistic and universal vision of knowledge, in which body and thought no longer oppose each other, but invent one another.

### **Dance as a Space of Citizenship: Social and Political Dimensions of Gesture**

Reflecting on the introduction of creative contemporary dance into Lebanese schools entails questioning the very foundations of education, the relationship to knowledge, and the conception of the body within

culture. This project cannot be reduced to a curricular adjustment or a technical reform; it implies a paradigmatic transformation in which the body becomes an operator of meaning and an instrument of emancipation. In this sense, creative contemporary dance does not merely enrich the aesthetic dimension of the school program but represents a symbolic refoundation of the act of learning. It actualizes what Dewey (1934) described as an “aesthetic experience”: a unifying experience in which the sensible, the intellectual, and the social converge within a meaningful activity.

The Lebanese school system, heir to a fragmented and hierarchical academic model, continues to privilege abstract knowledge at the expense of lived corporeal experience. This dissociation between mind and body produces a form of educational alienation: students learn to think without feeling, to reproduce without experiencing. Contemporary dance, by contrast, operates according to an inverse logic: it teaches students to think through action and to understand through sensation. This reversal corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) phenomenological conception of the body, in which perception constitutes the primary

form of knowledge. Integrating dance into school therefore reintroduces lived experience at the core of the educational process, in alignment with contemporary theories of embodied cognition.

This transformation of the relationship to knowledge is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the relationship to culture. In Lebanon, culture is often conceived through the lens of heritage — religious, communal, linguistic — rather than as a dynamic of creation. Creative contemporary dance, by its experimental and dialogic nature, invites a conception of culture as an ongoing process of invention. It fosters a pedagogy of creation in which each student becomes a producer of meaning. By exploring gesture, space, and time, students reinvent their relationship to the world; they become actors of culture rather than mere custodians of heritage. This perspective resonates with Freire’s (1974) notion that authentic education consists in making learners aware of their capacity to transform reality through praxis. Contemporary dance, by mobilizing corporeal praxis, actualizes this conception: it renders movement a critical act.

The stakes of this integration therefore extend beyond the artistic

sphere into the political. Foucault (1975) demonstrated how educational institutions participate in the production of disciplined bodies through dispositifs of surveillance and normalization. Introducing creative contemporary dance into these spaces of control simultaneously introduces a space of resistance. The body that improvises, explores, and feels becomes an indocile body — not in the sense of rebellion, but in the sense of a reappropriated body, conscious of its freedom. Dance, in this context, functions as a pedagogy of autonomy: it teaches students to inhabit their bodies as spaces of thought rather than objects of obedience.

This bodily autonomy, however, does not oppose collectivity; it grounds it. Creative contemporary dance teaches co-presence, synchronization, and attentiveness to others. In choreographic composition workshops, cooperation is not a moral injunction but an aesthetic necessity: no gesture exists without relation. This practice concretizes what Dewey termed “democratic education” — an education that teaches living together through shared experience. In a Lebanese society fragmented by confessional

affiliations, dance could become a symbolic space of reconciliation, where differences cease to function as boundaries and instead become materials for creation.

The civic dimension of contemporary dance thus takes on its full significance. By inviting students to explore the relationship between the individual body and the collective, it initiates them into plurality. Each improvisation becomes an act of dialogue — dialogue with oneself, with others, and with space. This corporeal process prepares for citizenship not through the transmission of values, but through their enactment. It cultivates tolerance, listening, and shared responsibility. Citizenship, in this framework, is no longer a content to be taught, but an experience to be lived.

However, for such a transformation to be effective, it requires institutional recognition and appropriate teacher training. It is not sufficient merely to introduce dance into curricula; it must be granted disciplinary legitimacy, with its own objectives, methods, and forms of evaluation. Teachers must be trained not only in movement technique but in the pedagogy of the sensitive body. They must understand the aesthetic, symbolic, and psychological stakes

of the dancing gesture. This profile exceeds simple athletic competence; it entails an integrated artistic and educational posture. In the Lebanese context, the establishment of university programs in dance pedagogy would constitute a necessary prerequisite. Such training would enable the development of a teaching body capable of assuming the dual mission of art and education.

The integration of creative contemporary dance into schools also raises cultural and identity-related issues. The question is not only how to teach dance, but which dance to teach. Dialogue between contemporary dance and traditional forms — particularly dabké — could constitute a model of cultural continuity. By articulating ancestral gestures with contemporary exploration, one would avoid the sterile opposition between modernity and tradition. This hybridization of forms would open a pedagogy of movement rooted in the Lebanese context while situated within a universal perspective. Dance would thus become a mediating language between past and future, between local and global.

Far from diluting identity, such hybridity strengthens it. It allows students to recognize themselves within a living, evolving culture.

Rather than imposing a Western model of dance, the aim would be to adopt its philosophy: a philosophy of the free body, inventive gesture, and recognized subjectivity. It is this philosophy, more than form itself, that could transform Lebanese schooling. It would teach students that knowledge is not external to them, but inscribed in their bodies, perceptions, and capacity to feel.

Finally, the integration of creative contemporary dance responds to an anthropological imperative: restoring continuity between body, language, and thought. In modern societies marked by dematerialization and fragmentation of experience, dance offers a poetic resistance to the loss of the real. It reaffirms the primacy of presence over representation. In this sense, it echoes Valéry's (1957) conception that "dance is thought expressed through the body." In the Lebanese context, where the body is often an object of suspicion or censorship, this rehabilitation of gesture as language constitutes a major political act.

Creative contemporary dance, introduced into schools, could thus become a model of integral education. It would form subjects capable of linking the sensible and the rational, the singular and the

collective, the local and the universal. It would teach students not merely to move, but to think movement — to perceive the world as a space of interpretation rather than submission. In this perspective, the school would once again become a space of emancipation and creativity, faithful to its primary vocation: forming thinking, sensitive, and free individuals.

### \* Conclusion

Promoting creative contemporary dance within the Lebanese school curriculum affirms a renewed vision of knowledge and of living together. It recognizes that arts education is not a luxury, but a necessity for any society that aspires to freedom. It also restores to the body its dignity as a thinking subject, capable of expression, invention, and transformation. As Louppe (2000) aptly summarizes, “to dance is to inscribe within movement the consciousness of being in the world.” In this sense, each danced gesture within Lebanese schools would already constitute a political and poetic act — a step toward a society that is more open, more conscious, and more humane.

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