

THE *TÁNCHÁZ*-METHOD IN FOLK DANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

In our study, we present a plan for folk dance training and its methodological background within the framework of a larger interdisciplinary research program. Our aim is to provide a brief overview of the *táncház*-method (also known as the dance house method), discuss its practical pedagogical antecedents and describe the teaching process used in the approach, which consists of 32 sessions. In doing so, we provide guidance for implementing the *táncház*-method in the folk dance classroom.

Keywords: *táncház-method*, folk dance education, neurobiology, reading difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

The beneficial effects of music and dance on the development of motor skills are well known, but the neurobiological mechanisms underlying this process remain to be elucidated. Scientific efforts to fill this gap have the potential to present significant benefits to the field of education (Lukács & Honbolygó, 2021). Such efforts include a pioneering experiment in the field of folk dance education (Fügedi, 2006), which investigated the effect of using a dance notation method (i.e., Labanotation) as a movement cognition tool: “the research... focuses on the cognition in relation to the dance movement, the function of the intellect in relation to dance motion, and the potentials for dance pedagogical applications of the dancer’s conceptual framework of the movement.” (Fügedi, 2006, p. 109)

In our study, we present the foundation of the interdisciplinary research in folk dance pedagogy that is introduced to address the above-mentioned problem. “*ÚTON - Új Technológiák az Olvasási Nehézségek felismerésében, és a korszerű fejlesztő módszerek kialakításában*” (in English: “PATH - New Technologies in the Detection of Reading Difficulties and the Development of Advanced Methods for Improvement”), a 4-year research program which began in 2021 at the ELKH (Eötvös Loránd Research Centre for Natural Sciences), which is made up of the Research Centre for Natural Sciences, the Brain Imaging Centre, the Kodály Zoltán Musical Pedagogy Institute at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, the Institute of Psychology of Special Education at Eötvös Loránd University, the Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education, and the Hungarian Heritage House (<http://uton.ttk.hu>). The first phase of the research identified students with reading difficulties by means of tests and measurements.

Afterwards, the selected pupils participated in various music training sessions, one of which was a series of sessions using the *táncház*-method (also known as the dance-house method) which is the subject of this paper. By comparing the input and output measures from the music training sessions, we can see the effect that the program had on the participants' reading skills. The results will be used to inform the development of prevention programs in the final phase of the research.

The results obtained from evaluating the impact of the *táncház* sessions contribute to filling the above-mentioned research gap. In the following sections, we will outline the pedagogical history of the folk dance training method and present the *táncház*-method's pedagogical characteristics as well as its adaptation in the present research. Lastly, we present the foundations of the content and methodology involved in the training. In the later stages of the research, we will report on the training experiences in a further study and, as a conclusion to the four-year investigation, will present the final results of the study and their implications for folk dance pedagogy.

2. FROM "CHILDREN'S DANCES" TO THE TÁNCCHÁZ-METHOD

The first manual for children's folk dance pedagogy was published in 1959, as previously "there was not enough material to be taught in sufficient quantity and quality" (Sz. Szentpál, 1959, p. 5); as a result, children were previously taught using adult materials, presumably with undifferentiated methods. The multi-authored curriculum is based on principles that are timeless even by today's standards: the primary nature of movement, the collectivism of folk games (and folk dance), and the prominent role of rhythmic movement exercises inspired by the methods of Dalcroze are the mainstays. Of course, by now, the fixed sequences of movements used in teaching "folk dance" (e.g., so-called circle dance exercises, etudes, or choreography) and stylized performance methods have become obsolete.

After the development of the first folk dance curriculum, it took more than three decades for the *Games and Dance (Játék és tánc)* teaching series to appear, which is both a continuation and a renewal of the basic concepts presented above (Foltin et al. 1991). The methodological aid, which consists of several booklets accompanied by audio and video appendices, represents a special transition from the dance pedagogy point of view, as it blends the methods and approaches (e.g., what is a folk dance, and how should it be presented) of early children's folk dance and neo-folklorism movements that developed in the 1970s, especially those of dance houses. The folk game as a rhythmic preparation is also very important in the material; at the same time, there was the emergence of regional approaches, and with it, a greater awareness of dance folkloristics.

The name and personality of the next dance pedagogue, Sándor Timár, intertwined with the *táncház*-method, and therefore we will talk about him in more detail. He published a book summarizing his dance pedagogical ideas in 1999 under the title *In the Language of Folk Dance (Néptáncnyelven)*, but his work and charismatic personality had already begun to influence folk dance education decades earlier. Timár expresses his folk dance pedagogical principles using the metaphor of "dance and movement as mother tongue". He emphasises the primacy of local tradition in the choice of a curriculum as a basis for acquiring the folk dances of other regions.

In his methodology, the acquisition of the “language of the dance” plays an important role, and the teaching is based on the structural analysis of traditional dances, primarily the transmission of particular dances and regional variations of motifs. The scientific basis of this approach is mainly tied to György Martin (Martin, 1964).

Timár describes the starting and ending points of the pedagogical process, from small morphological units (the motif) to the independent dance composition referred to as speech (dance improvisation): “in the case of spoken language, we first learn words and then the order in which the words are connected according to the grammatical rules of the learned language. We must do the same in the case of dance” (Timár 1999, p. 10).¹ Timár illustrates the process outlined in theory with the example of the *ugrós* (springing) dance (ibid., p. 45).² The motifs are acquired by imitating direct teacher demonstrations; however, due to the improvisational character of Hungarian folk dance, Timár was especially concerned with how to teach the ability to recreate a dance spontaneously, that is, the skill of improvisation or, as he puts it, how to transform the imitating child into the independently-acting individual (Timár, 1999, p. 77). Timár was also credited with the development of the successive didactic units of imitation and re-creation: “First, the dancer should practice with the dance steps he has seen or received from the teacher, and when he is very confident and knows the basic forms of the dance well, he should start ‘innovating’, developing the dance naturally” (ibid., p. 107). The student, who transitions from imitator to creator and knows the dance in all of its variability, is a key element in our *táncház* -style sessions.

After the turn of the millennium, Péter Lévai came forward with a call to renew the folk dance pedagogy. His analytical approach draws from Martin’s research and the teaching practice of his former master, Timár. He contributes to the development of folk dance pedagogy through the meticulous study of archival dance recordings, dance notation, and his modular curriculum arrangement (Lévai, 2010, 2016).

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE TÁNCHÁZ-METHOD AND FOLK DANCE PEDAGOGY

The Hungarian *táncház* (dance house) movement, started in 1972, adapted folk dance and folk music heritage to a socio-cultural context other than its traditional rural oral context. Since its beginnings, it has developed a radically new relationship with folklore heritage: its aim is to provide community entertainment that is available to anyone regardless of previous experience or talent. Participatory, factious, active involvement as well as joint and communal creative artistic activity are still among the basic principles of dance houses, and these fundamentally determine their pedagogical approach. The essence of this method involves the learning of music and dance from archival material, a focus on the entertainment function of folk dance, and the presence of live instrumental music. As already mentioned in connection with Sándor Timár’s dance pedagogy, the teaching of dance motifs and

¹ Ildikó Sándor discusses the analysis and critique of Timár’s mother tongue metaphor in an earlier paper (Sándor, 2022).

² In our article, we use the original Hungarian terms for dance and game names indicated in italics but for a clearer understanding, we also write their English equivalent.

movement sequences is based on a morphological approach, specifically movement analysis. With this as a starting point, the participants first learn the elements of the dance through direct presentation and imitation methods both individually and in pairs. Improvisation and variations of the motifs are encouraged during the learning process, as the aim is to achieve independent dance creation, and in this way, the expression of the self through dance. The outcome of each individual learning-practice process is its own dance creation (though variation and improvisation), thus fitting in with an action-oriented, procedural pedagogy.

The aspects clearly show how dance teaching in dance houses combines traditional forms of indoctrination (e.g., demonstration-imitation) with modern pedagogical and folkloristic methods. The Hungarian *táncház*-method is a good practise for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and is also recognised by UNESCO (Csonka-Takács & Havay, 2011). The folklore concept and teaching methods of dance houses have also influenced institutional folk dance education: the knowledge and precise application of source materials and an approach that aims for free and improvisational dance creation have found their place in primary and public art education in the past decades. Our goal in the “ÚTON” research program is to implement our activities in the spirit of this methodological approach.

4. APPLICATION OF THE TÁNCHÁZ-METHOD IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE “ÚTON” PROJECT

In the framework of the research described at the beginning of this article, our project implements a series of activities based on the dance house method for pupils with reading difficulties in Grades 3 and 4 for 4 months in 45-minute lessons that take place two times per week. The material used for the activities is adapted to the age-specific characteristics of the children in terms of scope, music, and movement, using folk dance motifs (e.g., *ugrós* dances) accompanied by live music as well as folk games featuring singing and movement. The essence of the teaching process is the experience of playing and dancing together with the instructor and the joy of natural motion and movement. The discovery of the inherent (re)creative and improvisational possibilities of folk dance (Jakobson, 1969, p. 335) which are created through the medium of pair and small group dancing. In our work, we utilize a complex pedagogical toolbox, including active, participatory vocalization, verbalization, movement, and “passive” auditory reception through instrumental music.

A variety of games were included in the program; these included *vonulós játékok* (progressing games), *leánykérő körjáték* (courtship games in circles), *néven nevező-kifordulós körjáték* (name-calling and rotating circle games), *párvo拉斯ztó körjáték* (girls’ circle dances with partner selection), *fogócska* (the tag game), *láncszakító* (chain-breaking), *páros szökdelés* (pair hopping), and *páros forgás* (turning in pairs). Such activities aimed at establishing dance skills and the experience of collective creation and artistic expression. The most important of these skills are steady walking, jumping, turning, a sense of metre, basic rhythmic and plastic movements, and awareness of the relationship between the body and space in

dance movement. In addition, through collective play, singing, and movement, folk games provide a positive experience and a sense of joy to the participants. Live instrumental music, as opposed to the conventional recorded music often used in classrooms, is able to adapt to the changing needs of the group and is also a significant motivational factor. The instrumental accompaniment is provided by a so-called one-man orchestra with bourdon instruments (e.g., the zither, bagpipes, or the *tekerő*, called the hurdy-gurdy in English, a four-stringed Hungarian folk instrument) and with cost-effectiveness in mind. Dance tunes and vocal games are learned indirectly, most often in combination with movement, by ear, and with the accompaniment of instruments that provide tonal security for the students. All sessions are based on singable, age-appropriate *ugrós* tunes, folk game music, folk songs, and dance traditions.

4.1 The structure of the sessions

The pedagogical process, consisting of 32 sessions, is divided into 4 major units: 1.) the foundation of dance skills, 2.) adaptive, collective dancing, 3.) dance creation, and 4.) dance improvisation.

Sessions 1–8.

We are skilful – laying the foundation of dance skills and dance experiences

In the first session, all children are made aware of the fact that they can achieve a dance experience in a short period of time through playing and learning the simplest forms of movement and with constant accompaniment as well as their own singing. From the simplest movements such as stepping, walking, jumping on both or alternate legs, ankle and knee bending followed by springing and gamboling are acquired. Without explicit instructions, during rehearsal participants come to develop the skills of *toppantás* (tapping) and *dobbantás* (drumming),³ while it is the dance teacher's job to explain the difference between the two. The students learn how to use the main parts of the foot (i.e., to coordinate heel and toe movement). The movements are paired with speaking activities, counting games, and other children's games accompanied by folk songs; these activities are used to develop a sense of metre and rhythm among the participants (e.g., being able to recognize quarter and eighth rhythmic values). Instrument demonstrations, listening to music, and singing together are also part of the sessions.

Selected folk games: *guggoltató* (a game involving squatting), *ki-*, *betekeredő* (a game involving outward and inward rotations as a group), *leánykérő körjáték* (girls' circle dances with partner selection), and simple *fogócska* (tag game) (2-3 types).
Dance moves and motifs: ankle and knee springing, stamping with the same or alternating feet, tapping with alternating feet, *sarok kitevő* (putting out the heel), and spread *bokázó* (heel click).

³ In *toppantás* (tapping), both feet are on the ground, i.e., weight is on both feet, in *dobbantás* (drumming), one foot is in the air and the other one is on the ground - the weight is on one foot, and then on the other.

Outline of one occasion

- Session-opening ritual: greeting each other by holding hands in a circle.
- Going around in a circle while chanting (this is an invitation to play), initial singing game. (5 min)
- To ugrós tunes played on a zither, we try to introduce students to movements such as the heel lift, knee bend, and half rise to the floor. This is followed by making contact between the heel and toe in front and diagonal directions, then by jumps on both feet, one foot, and alternating feet. (15 min)
- The instrument demonstration is paused, and the participants listen to music (the instrumental contributor introduces the vocal melodies used for the dance). Sitting on the floor, we listen, hum, clap, and sing the folk song played on the zither. (10 min)
- Together, we repeat the new steps. (5 min)
- The session ends with children's folk games. (10 min)
- Similarly to the greeting, a handhold in a circle signals a farewell.

Sessions 9–16.***Being together is good – dance moves, cooperation, and community experience***

Through working together and being in physical contact, a communal dance experience is created during each occasion. The further development of basic movement forms is facilitated through encouraging human contact, such as physical touch in pairs and various interlocking forms of contact throughout the folk dance practice. Through the action of the handhold, communal experience comes into existence as well as the participants' collective observation of each other; this communal harmony can be effectively achieved even without the learning of specific dance steps. Children's folk games involving singing are performed in chains or in pairs which act as a vehicle for experiencing collective movement with the goal of educating and socializing all of the participants. The collective creation of dance movements learned individually in previous sessions is an obvious next step in the pedagogical process. In this phase we expand the folk song repertoire and deepen and stabilize the participant's familiarity with rhythmic durations of a quarter and eighth notes.

Chosen folk games: *páratlan párválasztó* (an odd-numbered game involving partner selection), *páros kapuzó* (an even-numbered game involving the formation of a "gate"), *hidas-kapus játék* (a game involving bridge- and gate-like formations), *dramatikus (énekes-felelgetős) fogócska* (a more theatrical version of the tag game involving singing and answering), *páros rejtő-kereső és kitalálós* (hide-and-seek with a partner and a guessing game).

Dance moves and motifs: repetition of what has been learned so far, followed by the *csárdás* and *toppantós csárdás* (*csárdás* with a tap), *kereszt toppantós* (crossed tapping), *három toppantós* (three-time tapping), *három lépés* (three-step), and *háromugrós* (triple-springing) motifs.

Outline of one occasion

- Session-opening ritual: greeting each other by holding hands in a circle.
- To our own singing and with accompaniment, we walk around in a circle and chain form while holding hands and taking quarter and eighth note steps. With the guidance of the dance instructor, we move like a snake around the space (an example of a meandering-walking travel game); the instructor then gives the lead and choice of direction the child behind him. After a short while and at the instructor's request, the child in front, like the teacher earlier, gives his or her place to the child behind and moves to the back of the line. This game continues until each participant is able to experience guiding the others. (10 minutes)
- Repetition of learned movements and motifs by singing already known folk songs. After that, we will learn the *toppantós* (tapping) dance and become acquainted with the *kereszt toppantós* (crossed tapping) and *három toppantós* (three tapping) motifs. (15 minutes) This is followed by listening to music, singing together, and expanding our song repertoire. (10 min)
- The session ends with children's folk games. (10 min)
- Similarly to the greeting, holding hands in a circle signals a farewell.

Sessions 17–24.***My dance, our dance – dance creation individually, in pairs, and in a circle***

In this phase, the participants can choose their favorite games from the previous sessions to play. In addition, they also become acquainted with the basic motifs of *ugrós* (springing) dances, accompanied by an instrument and the participants' own singing voice. Collective and then independent dance creation is fostered with the aim of facilitating individual dancing experiences. Individual dance creation exposes children to the unspoken principle that there is no wrong move, only something different. Dance motifs are performed in an interlocked fashion, alternating between the different types of linking, such as the one- and two-handed handhold, holding by the shoulders, and their variations. Such movements allow for new dance experiences both in pairs and in small or large groups. Dancing in pairs further develops the participants' sense of mutual attention, as well as their adaptability, tolerance, and harmony: students learn to control their partner and also accept their partner's guidance. Developing smaller independent, individual choice-based dance groups gives participants the opportunity to develop sympathy. In order to achieve the spatial arrangements required by the activities, dancers need to adjust their location by using the most appropriate steps out of those they have learned.

Chosen folk games: páros szökdelés (pair hopping), *páros sergés* (fast turning in pairs), *mozdulatutánzó párválasztó* (movement-imitating game with partner selection), *fészekfogó* (tag game in which children hold their hands like a "nest"), *páros fogó* (the tag game in pairs), and *szobrosdi* (a game in which players are required to stand like sculptures).

Dance movements and motifs: steady-paced steps, single and duo csárdás and háromugrós (triple-springing), *lengető* (leg swinging), *keresztező* (crossing), and *légbokázó* (aerial heel clicking).

Outline of one occasion

- Session-opening ritual: greeting each other by holding hands in a circle.
- The session starts with a pair of movement-imitation and partner-selection children's folk games. (10 min)
- Using the songs we already know, we walk steadily through the space. (5 min)
- Based on the previous sessions, we form a large circle with instrumental accompaniment using the steps most of the students have learned. From the large circle, with steady walking, the pupils form a circle smaller in number and then even smaller circles. The small circles of 3-4-5-6 people then break up into pairs, and still keeping the pace, they reach the position in which two children are facing each other. Folk games are played between the formed pairs in order to practice pair dancing, improve listening skills, establish physical contact, and develop adaptability. (10 min)
- Participants then guide and lead each other at the pace of a steady walk without handholding, followed by handholding with one and then two hands; folk games may be played in pairs. (10 min)
- Similarly to the greeting, holding hands in a circle signals a farewell.

Sessions 25–32.

Dance, creation, joy – deepening and applying what has been learned

The aim of this phase is to synthesize and apply the knowledge that has been acquired so far. The participants engage in recalling memories and experiences of the past sessions through movement and speech. Each lesson includes the application, repetition, stabilization, and improvisation of free dance that was learned in the first three stages. The acquired basic motifs of the *ugrós* (springing) dance are now linked and varied independently. The spatial use of motifs (e.g., in place, in progress, or dancing around each other) is also the result of individual choice. At this stage of training, in addition to the continuous repetition of the motifs, participants are also tasked with recalling folk games and folk songs that are inseparable from dance and have been introduced and learned in previous sessions.

Chosen folk games: game in a circle with partner selection; participants can choose their favourites and play again.

Dance movements and motifs: polynomial complex motifs (e.g., *elől kereszt lengető bokázás*, a front cross with leg swinging and bouncing, and *háromugrós*, the triple-springing motif), as well as asymmetric motifs (e.g., leg swinging with a *háromugrós* triple-springing motif).

Outline of one occasion

- Session-opening ritual: greeting each other by holding hands in a circle.
- The session starts with dance moves in a circle without handholds, which also warms up the ankles and knees. These include quarter and eighth-note knee bends and ankle bounces. The present instrument accompanies the movement from the first minute. (5 min)

- For the springing motifs, participants are only allowed to dance movements that include some form of jumping. Everyone is free to choose from these and, of course, to vary them. (5 min)
- The circle loosens, and we dance in a group in the direction of the space of our choice, which anyone can change during the action of dance. (10 min)
- We conclude the previous intense movement by walking steadily in a circle without holding hands and singing a familiar folk song. (5 min)
- The next activity is a motive imitation game accompanied by music, during which we stand in pairs; we then change directions and move in space by walking in csárdás steps with a shoulder-waist grip. (15 min)
- In closing, the children play a children's folk game. (5 min)
- Similarly to the greeting, holding hands in a circle signals a farewell.

5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This research will examine and make comparisons between the measured effects of musical training (in our case, the application of *táncház*-methods during folk dance sessions) on learning skills, with primary focus on their impact on reading skills. The results of the neurobiological impact assessment, which will conclude the series of sessions, will allow for a better understanding of the developmental impact of folk dance. At the same time, the implementation of this series of activities also represents a step forward in folk dance pedagogy. We will have more precise knowledge about the adaptability of the dance-house method in schools, its limitations, and its possible applications in the classroom. By the end of the series of sessions, we plan to publish our experiences and present the results of our analysis, which will highlight the changes needed. Understanding the neurobiological mechanisms of singing, making music, and dancing, can lead to the development of support programs to improve learning skills.

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