



## THE EMBODIED TERRITORY AS THERAPY: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS THROUGH DANCE AMONG CHILDREN FROM DISPLACED FAMILIES

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an investigation on dance as therapy for early childhood children, considering the body as territory, in two educational institutions in Bogota, D.C. The study seeks to understand the children's experiences and perceptions of their bodies and their environment. It uses dance as a learning tool, adapting the Territorii Method to explore real, lived and thought concepts of territory, where dance therapy occupies a place in their experiences. The research employs a qualitative ethnographic methodology, using field diaries, body mapping and recordings. We developed a pedagogical project focused on folkloric dances. The analyses reveal the emerging category "body as possible territory", which enhances the understanding of how children experience their bodies in the context of dance, as well as some implications of dance therapy in processes associated with the relationship between well-being and health.

**Keywords:** body, therapy, territory, dance, early childhood.

### INTRODUCTION

Social, cultural, religious, and political trends deeply influence the construction of identity and behaviors related to the body in boys and girls. However, when students are patients and have the possibility of considering their movement skills as a contribution to a given medical-pharmacological treatment, it is recognized that their changes at the level of movement generally lead to changes in their psychological state (Schmais, 1974). For this reason, this article explores dance as therapy (Blanco, 2021.) in connection with the referents of the body as territory, considering dance to connect the real territory with the needs of the members of a group (Behrends, et, al., 2012).

There is a need to sensitize children to the importance of conceiving their body as a personal and meaningful territory, especially in early childhood, at two schools: *the Colegio Manuela Beltrán IED* and *the Colegio República de Colombia IED*. Dance is proposed as a pedagogical tool to

counteract negative influences that often impose stereotypes and taboos from religious and power perspectives, affecting the healthy development of children. To comprehend the human story, one must consider it from two interrelated perspectives: the physical and social bodies, as Fausto-Sterling proposed (2006). In the Latin American context, research on the body as a territory has focused on empowering women, leaving the role of children relatively unexplored. Consequently, it is evident that, despite advances in research on the body as territory, there is a significant gap in understanding and addressing the role of children in the construction of their identity and their learning about the body.



**Image 1.** Children from Manuela Beltrán IED School are dancing to the rhythm of joropo.

This research focuses on two public institutions in Bogotá, the Colegio Manuela Beltrán IED, and the Colegio República de Colombia IED. Although they differ in identity, they share similarities and differences in sociocultural characteristics. Both cater to a diverse population, including Colombian and Venezuelan students, some with special needs in inclusive programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced student attitudes, occasionally manifesting in abrupt and violent behaviors. Both schools have implemented the single-session model; most early childhood students are 4 and 5.

This research addresses the knowledge gap regarding children's body empowerment in the Latin American context and applies dance as an educational tool within Bogotá's school systems. The primary research query centers on examining the potential outcomes of dance-based learning experiences regarding the concept of the body. Thus, secondary questions delve into the theoretical underpinnings, educational accomplishments, teaching approaches designed for early childhood, and the incorporation of environmental territorial elements. The overarching aim is to implement an educational system that fosters self-awareness among early childhood students regarding their bodies as personal and meaningful domains. Specific objectives include crafting an educational strategy, executing it through artistic engagement, analyzing outcomes, and constructing a teaching proposal. This holistic approach aims to enhance children's comprehension of their bodies and surroundings through dance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To understand the body and its relationship with society and culture, we must consider interconnected characteristics that influence corporeality and our perception and experience of the body (Haesbaert, 2020). These factors include race, sexuality, gender, age, and socioeconomic class. By considering these elements, we can obtain a complete and more enriching picture of the body in social, cultural, and psychological terms (Di Bella, 2017). It is essential to recognize that the body is not merely an object of study for the exact sciences but is also a valid field of exploration in culture and art. These disciplines allow us to approach the study of the body in a way that goes beyond a universal approach, acknowledging that we must analyze the body within specific social, cultural, political, and artistic contexts. The body is a multifaceted concept that people can interpret differently depending on their perspectives. One viewpoint regards the body as a receptacle or container for the experiences and moments lived in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Such a perspective emphasizes the connection between the body and the passage of time, illustrating how it

can retain our life experiences as time passes.

On the contrary, one can perceive the body as a collection of material elements, including organs and visceral functions. According to this perspective, it is often regarded as a separate entity distinct from the human being, potentially resulting in distancing and, in some cases, the devaluation of specific physical aspects, like smells and sounds (Mora, 2011). This perception might contribute to discrimination and stigma related to physical characteristics. Furthermore, individuals may perceive the body as a vessel that holds intangible elements, such as the spirit or soul (Loa, 2021). From this viewpoint, the body assumes a spiritual and sacred significance, transforming into an aesthetic, inhabitable, and communicable space (Luna, 2018). Such an interpretation underscores the connection between the body and the spiritual dimension of human existence.

When analyzing the body, we also confront entrenched dualities in Euro-American culture, which often limit our understanding of this complex aspect of human existence. Body awareness is essential to understanding the relationship between the body and the mind and how culture influences the perception of the body.



**Image 2.** A student from the Republic of Colombia IED School created body mapping

Deeply rooted dualisms are found on the Euro-American side, understood as opposing pairs in meaning. People frequently employ these dichotomies to establish hierarchies and construct arguments. This approach has profoundly impacted our conception of the body and how we understand it in various dimensions, whether in the social, cultural, political, or artistic spheres (Fausto-Sterling, 2006). The process of hierarchizing the body is also evident, especially concerning the male and female bodies, often under strategies of segregation and discrimination (Haesbaert, 2020; Marchese, 2019). Understanding these dualisms and associated dynamics requires addressing the concepts of sex and gender. Sex refers to the physical attributes determined by anatomy and physiology, while gender relates to identity and behavior expressions. However, this dualistic view simplifies the understanding of the human body and perpetuates conservative and heteronormative structures based on hierarchies and hegemonies. The body is much more complex than a simple dichotomy. From a physical perspective, it manifests as tangible elements influenced by social constructs of masculinity and femininity.

Additionally, the body can be considered from a social perspective, denoting identity and connections to the environment, including elements such as clothing (Di Bella, 2017). Understanding the human body requires a deep and multidimensional exploration considering social, cultural, psychological, and physical factors. This approach allows us to appreciate the complexity of how we conceive and experience our bodies in a diverse and ever-evolving world.

The concept of territory is fundamental in the study of society and politics, and its understanding goes beyond being a mere physical space. According to Bozzano (2009) and Marchese (2019), territory is a deeply rooted social construct in history, intrinsically linked to political power, and susceptible to being shaped by internal conflicts. This approach acknowledges that territory is more than a physical substrate; it is a space of encounter and coexistence where individuals attribute meanings and individual experiences intertwine with collective experiences (Luna, 2018). In the Latin America context, territory assumes crucial political value and has become a historical point of

conflict due to its political and economic significance. However, it has also been a stage of struggle and resistance by social movements seeking social transformation and defending the rights of local communities with territory.

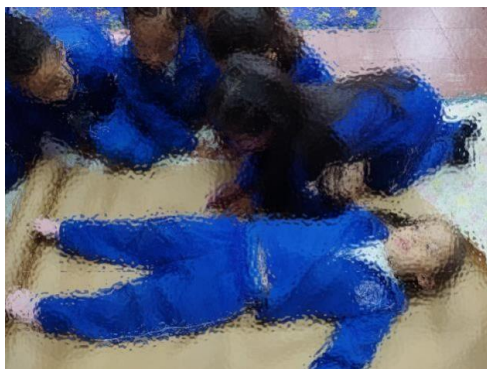
From an etymological perspective, territory can be analyzed from two complementary angles: as a place of possession and a stage of conflict and power (Marchese, 2019). The Latin word "territorium" connects us with the idea of land possession, where the physical space and its inhabitants are considered an integral part of the territory. Conversely, etymology also guides us to the word "terrorism," linked to "terror." The connection implies that territory can serve as a space where conflicts surface, authorities exert their power, and fear emerges in specific situations.

It is essential to understand that territory is not an inert geographical space but a concept socially constructed through interactions between society, nature, and other relevant actors. Like the various perspectives regarding the body, territory encompasses physical geography and the lives and experiences of those who occupy and use it. Despite the persistent influence of power and hierarchy on the body and territory, social fabric emerges as a critical factor in establishing constructive dialogue. The social fabric, encompassing relationships, rules, and exchanges within a territory, seeks to influence decisions that affect the community. In the Latin American context, this concept becomes particularly relevant when addressing common urban issues such as spatial segregation and urban expansion. Furthermore, civic culture and coexistence are essential for strengthening social relationships and promoting well-being within the territory (Ferretti & Arreóla, 2013).

Therefore, territory is more than a physical space; it is a social construct encompassing history, political power, and the diversity of individual and collective experiences. Its multidimensional understanding is essential for addressing the ever-changing world's political, social, and cultural challenges.

It is essential to understand how children build their identity and embrace behaviors influenced by various cultural, religious, political, and social factors through a series of body-related experiences. These experiences are fundamental in children's formation and significantly impact their personal development. As Vygotsky (1978) emphasized, children receive their education in the diverse settings where they engage, encompassing social and individual contexts. They acquire and internalize behaviors through interactions in various environments, such as their household and the community.

These early experiences profoundly influence their personal development and their perception of their bodies. From an educational standpoint, it is crucial to understand that children consistently engage in a learning environment encompassing all facets of their existence. According to the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2010), art education does not aim to create artists but rather to develop competencies that can be integrated with other areas of knowledge, recognizing the uniqueness of each child and adapting educational approaches to their individual needs.



**Image 3.** Children from Colegio República de Colombia IED engaging in body mapping.

The Zone of Proximal Development, in line with Vygotsky (1978) and Corral (2001), represents the space where children acquire new knowledge with the help of others through everyday activities and play, which historically has fostered human communication. Dance, viewed as a form of art and

play, is related to anthropology (Loa, 2021) and allows students to learn through affection and emotions, following the guidelines of art education and early education in Colombia (MEN, 2000; SED, 2019). Furthermore, bodily techniques in dance are culturally specific. They can promote communication and the recognition of diverse identities, enabling children to construct new meanings and develop autonomy and empowerment, both in their bodily territory and within their bodies. The study of bodily techniques involves considering biological, psychological, and social interactions and the need to create spaces of sensitivity in the school (Duarte, 2003). Through social interactions between students and teachers, it is possible to promote various learning experiences based on enjoyment, fun, and pleasure without neglecting the importance of discipline and commitment required in dance (Sastre, 2007). Thus, children's identities and behaviors develop through bodily experiences influenced by various factors. Art education and dance play a crucial role in the educational process, enabling meaningful and emotional learning that encompasses all areas of knowledge and promotes diversity of identities in an environment of sensitivity and play.

Hence, we perceive the body as a complex realm where both natural and spiritual elements intersect, and it additionally acts as a canvas that registers messages and significances linked to the real world, the external environment, and social engagements. In this way, the body can play a significant role as a medium of liberation for both the natural and spiritual elements residing within it, allowing a connection with reality, the external environment, and relationships with other people. This connection can be planned or emerge spontaneously, regardless of the multiple interpretations attributed to it (Barnsley, 2006). Moreover, the viewpoint that regards the body as a map, a repository of memories, and a historical expression is introduced (Marchese, 2019). In this sense, the body is considered a surface that records messages and meanings, like how maps guide our actions and social configurations. For instance, one can mention macro-maps, advertising images that influence behaviors, and how society constructs perceptions about the body.

In this context, as previously mentioned, the "body as territory" concept encompasses three fundamental perspectives that explore the complex interactions between the body, aesthetics, and politics in Latin America. Haesbaert (2020) emphasizes how these approaches transform and manifest a living, creative, unique, and historically significant territory characterized by deep sensitivity and a life-oriented orientation. In the meantime, we examine the environment from a broader viewpoint that includes various cultural, political, and social dimensions, all of which play a role in shaping the Latin American territory as a complete entity. It is important to note that, despite the fundamental nature of these perspectives in discussing the body as territory, there needs to be a research gap related to how this concept applies in the context of children and the art of dance. This area requires deeper exploration and could provide new insights into the relationship between the body, territory, and identity in childhood.

In the context of geography and various scales of analysis, the body and territory do not merely serve as subjects of investigation but actively interconnect, playing a role in delineating boundaries and constructing identities. In this regard, it is essential to view the body not only as a component of space but as a crucial factor in influencing the experience of dwelling within the territory through the body itself. Furthermore, the body becomes a manifestation of the world, not just a part of it (Marchese, 2019; Luna, 2018). In other words, the body is not limited to being a scale of analysis but acts as a tool to verify and give meaning to these scales. It becomes a meeting point where different perspectives and concepts emerge through interactions in bodily and territorial spaces. This perspective highlights the difference between physically experiencing and knowing space through digital media and the importance of intensity in theoretical and practical learning processes. The distinction between living in a space and simply observing it (Luna, 2018) is relevant in various scenarios. On the one hand, it pertains to knowledge of space, where the experience of visiting and experiencing a place differs from merely seeking information online. On the other hand, it relates to learning processes and the relative value of theory and practice based on the desired intensity in the knowledge acquisition process.

In this research, this perspective also applies to children's learning concerning their environment, specifically in the context of learning folk dance. Children can perceive and construct different

meanings depending on whether they are natives of the region or country associated with the rhythm of folk dance or if they are foreigners in that context. Their experiences and perspectives can vary significantly, highlighting the importance of considering the interaction between the body, territory, and identity in children's education.



**Image 4.** Children from the Republic of Colombia IED School are dancing to the beat of the ambora.

The Territorii Method (Bozzano, 2009) shines as a versatile tool suitable for interdisciplinary research related to territory, even in projects that do not exclusively focus on territorial matters. Research on the body extends beyond the exact sciences and encompasses fields such as art and culture. It explores the construction of the body's social, cultural, and psychological image (Di Bella, 2017), a perspective that transcends disciplines and delves into art and culture, as mentioned earlier (Haesbaert, 2020; Barnsley, 2006). Similarly, the Territorii Method is useful in the context of dance in three categories: real territory, lived territory, and thought territory, to understand how the body and dance connect with the concept of territory. Meanwhile, in bodily techniques, the body is the primary instrument of work, although in genres like folklore, cultural context, and specific traditions are also fundamental because each culture has its own customs and bodily techniques, reflecting both the physical and social aspects of the body in dance (Fausto-Sterling, 2006). *Dance* is an art that involves not only physical expression but also culture and society. By focusing on real, lived, and thought territory, this approach seeks to enrich the understanding of the relationship between the body and dance in constructing territory. Therefore, the Territorii Method offers a valuable perspective for exploring this relationship from various dimensions and interdisciplinary approaches. Within the framework of the Territorii Method proposed by Horacio Bozzano (2009), three fundamental categories stand out: real territory, lived territory and thought territory. These categories provide a solid framework for understanding the interaction between territory and the body in the context of dance and the social and cultural construction of the body.

Real territory focuses on the recognized and analyzed realities of a specific territory. In dance, the body acts as the medium to manifest interactions between nature and culture. Dance emerges from the fusion of natural and cultural elements in space, influenced by perceptions and experiences residing in the body. The evolution of dance derives its sustenance from the ideas and principles contained within the body and from trends that emerge through the interaction between a specific time and a particular context (Barnsley, 2006).

Lived territory is closely related to individual and emotional perceptions of a specific territory. In dance, this category allows us to understand how each experience and feels dance from an emotional and subjective perspective. Each person can have a unique connection to dance due to their experiences, highlighting the importance of considering the diversity of experiences in analyzing the relationship between the body and dance.

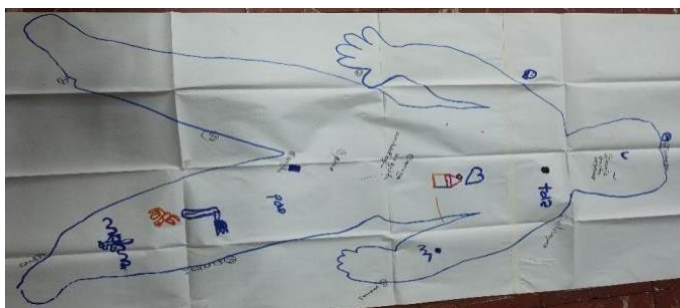
Thought territory delves into understanding the social and natural elements that shape a particular territory. In the context of dance, this implies analyzing the social and cultural processes that influence the perception and meaning of dance. It also seeks to understand the individual and collective perspectives of the actors who have a relationship with dance, which can enrich our understanding of how the social and cultural construction of the body relates to dance.

In conclusion, these categories of the Territorii Method offer a comprehensive perspective for exploring the relationship between the body and dance in territory construction. By understanding real, lived, and thought territories in dance, we can enhance the appreciation of how the body becomes a space of meaning in dance's artistic and cultural context. Therefore, the categories of this research are:

1. **Body:** This acts as a supercategory encompassing all constructions, theories, processes, and elements related to the conception of the body as territory. Instead of limiting itself to a purely physical view, the body is considered a complex entity influenced by nature, the environment, territory, and culture. This expanded perspective seeks to transcend binary and discriminatory perceptions, recognizing the diversity of constructions children can develop concerning their bodies and surroundings.
2. **Body as Real Territory:** This category explores how children's experiences and context affect their perception of the body as a real territory. We use the concept of real territory to examine how incidents within a child's body, occurring in time and space, shape their perception of it as territory. This category analyzes the components contributing to constructing this notion and its relationship with social and community interaction. It highlights how territory becomes a means of exchange that conditions development and transforms social relationships.

The third category, "Body as Lived Territory," centralizes the idea of the body as a territory that children experience and inhabit. This concept aligns with the "lived territory" notion within the Territorii Method, which delves into individual perceptions by encompassing sensory experiences, intuitions, artistic encounters, and emotional dimensions. This category connects art, education, and dance as ways children experience their bodies as spaces filled with affective and symbolic meanings. It promotes the understanding that learning occurs through active, cooperative, and self-directed processes, influencing interaction with other children and the construction of social networks.

The fourth category, "Body as Thought Territory," seeks to understand the reasons behind the existence of the body. Building upon the previous analysis of the body as real and lived territory, as well as other relevant elements that may contribute to the understanding of the body as a territory with meaning and purpose, it explores why the body is as it is, considering physical and emotional aspects as well as other factors that may influence its configuration. This category delves into the role of the body in constructing social fabric through interaction with other individuals and the transformation of the child's body.



**Image 5.** A student from Manuela Beltrán IED School created body cartography.

These theoretical categories reveal the richness and complexity of the relationship between the body and its perception as a territory in dance and early childhood pedagogy. They provide a solid foundation for exploring how children experience and give meaning to their bodies in a cultural and artistic context and for developing pedagogical strategies that foster a deeper and more respectful understanding of this relationship connection between the body and the passage of time, illustrating how it can retain our life experiences as time passes.

## METHODOLOGY

The research in question is framed within the qualitative paradigm and adopts an exploratory approach, using ethnography as the primary methodology. Data collection techniques include participant observation, creating mind maps (through drawings and words), and developing body cartographies. The data-gathering instruments include a researcher-maintained field diary and recordings of interactions with children, specifically centered around early childhood dynamics related to the body as a territory theme. This research is conducted in the context of dance activities with early childhood children in transition grade at Colegio Manuela Beltrán IED and Colegio República de Colombia IED.

These activities are carried out inside and outside classroom spaces, requiring group and individual work with the children. The research problem is related to the Territorii Method (Bozzano, 2009), which explores the notion of territory with the body and the body as territory. The primary goal is to uncover the connections between the body and territory within early childhood dance education. The researcher uses field diaries and recordings to interpret the data and access the children's viewpoints and encounters. The study employs hermeneutical and ethnographic approaches to scrutinizing, comprehending, and construing the context and the children's perception of their bodies as a territory in dance education. The collected information is organized, systematized, and triangulated in the subsequent stages of analysis with the support of the qualitative analysis software MaxQDA®.

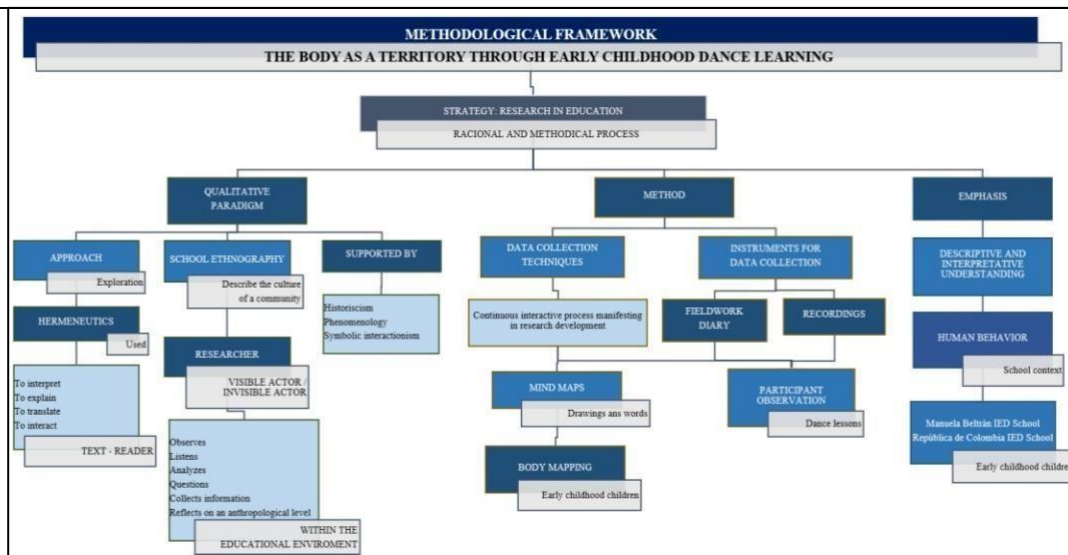


Image 6. Research Methodology Process

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examination concentrated on the pivotal role of didactic planning and execution in educational practice. The organization of field diaries and the analysis of session recordings facilitated the identification of critical components associated with the children's learning and their degree of mastery of the instructed rhythms. These elements encompassed many factors, including focus and engagement with dance, inventive expression, and appreciation of aesthetics. When it came to grasping different rhythms, it became evident that most students displayed eagerness and actively took part, although a few encountered instances of distraction. Furthermore, children demonstrated their creativity by suggesting spontaneous movements influenced by their encounters, occasionally drawing inspiration from dance steps they had come across on social media platforms. Variations in control and skill among the children were noticeable when addressing specific rhythms. For example, in the *Mapalé* rhythm, jumps generated enthusiasm and energy, and a difference in approach between boys and girls was observed, with boys being more energetic and girls showing a more careful execution. On the other hand, in the Venezuelan joropo, coordination and fluency in performing the "*escobillado*" step were highlighted and impressed the groups. In the case of the urban drum, challenges were faced in spins and specific movements, accompanied by expressions



of laughter and shyness at certain moments.

In the section on body cartography, the children identified different parts of their bodies. They associated them with significant places, such as their homes, favorite places, and schools. They marked the trunk as an emotionally substantial place for themselves. They also expressed preferences and dislikes for certain parts of their bodies related to personal experiences and sensations. In emotional terms, they mentioned positive feelings such as happiness, love, comfort, and affection and negative aspects such as pain, sadness, discomfort, fear, illness, and discomfort. These feelings were linked to specific body parts, indicating a solid emotional connection with their corporeality. Regarding aesthetics, the colors blue and red predominated in the representations of body cartography, while white and brown were excluded. Additionally, the children used drawings, symbols, letters, and doodles to express their ideas creatively.

While triangulating the gathered information, the research has organized itself around theoretical categories that expose how children perceive the body as territory. This approach has highlighted that children's body awareness transcends the purely physiological and profoundly influences their social, emotional, and cultural relationships. The first category, "Body," is broken down into constructive, material, and immaterial components. Children primarily interact with their heads, hands, and feet, discovering sensations and emotions.

Through dance, they identify moments of attention, distraction, and enjoyment, enabling them to connect with their social and cultural environment. Reflection on the body from various dimensions is essential to its development. The category "Body as Real Territory" examines how the social and cultural context influences the children's body perception of significant places (home, school, and favorite places). The location of these places on their bodies reflects their relationship with their environment and how this affects their bodily perception. In "Body as Lived Territory," exploration is made into how family and social relationships relate to the experience of the body. Children place their family in the trunk, emphasizing the importance of the familiar in their social development. Their preferences and aversions toward specific body parts also relate to personal and social experiences.

The category "Body as Thought Territory" explores the rationale behind the body's existence, encompassing physical and emotional dimensions. Interaction with peers during the dance learning process can profoundly reshape their self-perception and perception of the world. The emerging category, "Body as Possible Territory," introduces the notion of an ideal or desirable territory in dialogue with the real, lived, and thought territory, which entails the necessity of discipline and rigor in primary education, highlighting the significance of pedagogy in a child's transformative journey. These theoretical categories provide insights into the intricate interplay between the body and territory within dance and early childhood pedagogy. It underscores the importance of nurturing body awareness, dance, play, and theatricality in children's development. Furthermore, it accentuates the imperative of addressing contextual and emotional facets in teaching to foster meaningful connections with students.



**Image 7.** Children from Manuela Beltrán IED create body cartography.

## CONCLUSIONS

The pedagogical approach effectively integrates the Territorii Method into early childhood education and dance, with the central category being "body." The childhood learning approach

considers individual and collective dimensions, establishing connections between the body, dance, and various fields of knowledge.

Body mapping is employed to gain insights into each child's unique perspective on their body. Maintaining an adaptable understanding of the body is emphasized, highlighting the significance of activities like children's rounds and games. This approach encourages spontaneity, creativity, and exploration through dance and play, fostering comprehensive child development. The proposal suggests the inclusion of Colombian and Venezuelan dances to connect with the students' cultural backgrounds. Emphasizing the recognition of childhood as a pivotal period for value formation, the convergence of dance and education enriches the students' experience by exploring the body as a territory from diverse angles. Dance transcends physical movements, encouraging students to connect with their inner self and their environment as well as the possibilities it has as a therapeutic action in their lives (Schmais, 1974) This holistic perspective deepens dance comprehension, catalyzes personal growth, and nurtures environmental awareness.

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