

The Energy of Conviviality and Imagination

*Exploring and developing ideas
through dance and music*

‘The impulse and experience of dance is innate in humans, an essential part of our bodies and mental biology. Infants ‘talk’ with their bodies from birth, with feeling for movement and for its dramatic message. They can co-ordinate all their body to another’s moving, to share its purpose in a dialogue or conversation. Babies excite affectionate parents to dance with eyes, voice and hands; toddlers dance together with arms, trunk, legs and feet, overcoming gravity, capturing its power to run, leap and fly.’

COLWYN TREVARTHEN IN MOVEMENT LANGUAGES
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (PUBLISHED BY
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In order to develop this environment of enquiry and interaction, we rethought our roles as adults: instead of leading the children we could observe them and engage with them, helping to develop and explore their ideas together. Instead of using recorded music we experimented with Cath playing live, improvised music, in response to the children’s dancing. This meant that children’s movement ideas could be reflected back to them in music as they were dancing. Maria decided to dance with the children, interacting with and imitating their movements.

Most sessions were filmed by another member of staff, which meant that we were able to look more closely at the children’s dancing and also show the footage to the children for them to reflect on afterwards. Although Cath had played improvised music for adults to dance to before, neither of us had previously worked in this way with a group of children. We felt both excited and a little nervous about how the dancing might turn out.

Not everything we tried was successful but, on the whole, we found that the project was an extremely exciting and rich learning experience both for us as educators and for the children.

HOW CAN WE ENABLE CHILDREN to explore and develop their own ideas in dance? This was the starting point for our work together, which took place over the summer term of 2007. A dancing session took place each week and between sessions Maria worked with the children at the nursery helping them to develop their ideas further. Each week after working together with the children we met to discuss and interpret what had happened, and plan how we could continue the work in future sessions.

Dancing was already very popular with many children in the nursery: Maria had worked with many of the children exploring dance and movement over the previous two terms and had used a wide variety of recorded music, encouraging children to explore different movements, use of space and ways of expressing themselves through dance. She often incorporated themes which the children had shown an interest in. For example there had been a developing theme of play around aliens, so Maria used a story about aliens where children could explore different characters and scenarios to specially chosen music.

Developing an environment of enquiry

Although most children were very interested and engaged in this themed-dance approach, it meant that if a child had other ideas which weren’t part of the story then these ideas couldn’t be explored or developed easily. How could we develop our approach so that children exploring and sharing their own ideas became much more central to their experience of dancing?

The dancers

There were many children who were interested in coming to the dance sessions, too many to take along each week. We decided to keep a core group of children who came almost every week, as well as inviting some other interested children to come along to see how they got on. This enabled the children who came regularly to have a longer period over which to develop their ideas, and also helped us involve children that we thought would benefit from being included (for example, children who had an interest in movement). The group of children dancing usually numbered about twelve. Often the success of the dance sessions depended on the interaction between the children who were there: some groups interacted very easily together; other combinations worked less well.

We found that a particular group of boys (who all liked to dance) were quite aggressive with each other if they came together, and didn’t seem to want to dance. But if only one or two of them came they could engage in the dancing much more easily, some of them surprising us in the sensitive way they danced and interacted with others.



The role of the adults

Cath: I used various instruments, including violin, piano accordion and percussion, to create improvised music in response to the children's dancing. I aimed to keep the energy of the whole group in mind while at the same time being responsive to the dancing of individuals and small groups. Overall, children's energy tended to build up towards the middle of the session and slow down towards the end, but not all the children would ever be dancing with the same kind of energy. So creating the music was always a choice: which energy to follow and which direction to take it in.

Music with a predictable mood and rhythm is usually easier to dance to: if you can trust in what the music might do next it allows you to be more fully engaged in dancing; if I became interested in following the dancing of a particular individual or group I would try to keep the overall flow of the music going for the rest of the group. For example, a group of children might be dancing in a jumpy way and the music could become more spiky to match their movements, while still retaining the same rhythmic flow as before.

Maria: I saw my role as an observer and friend. I had decided, after talking with Cath, that, as a change, I was going to move with the children. Following the children's responses to the music, I acknowledged their ideas by mimicking individual's gestures, expressions and movements. I was playing alongside them and in a way, giving a silent praise and respect to their ideas. It was an honour to be moving among them because I was able to sense the fun and excitement and experience the levels of energy and the movements in relation to space, speed and position from the floor.

I do think that the children themselves loved this interaction; I'm sure that it brought trust and encouraged self-confidence in certain individuals. There are so many things to be seen in movement.

As the group formed over the weeks, managing the sessions became no problem at all. The worst that could happen was that a child would hide under a table! Most of the time I was able to be moving as part of the group; many problems were resolved by the children themselves. The more the children felt comfortable in the group, the more they experimented. The more they experimented, the more Cath and I looked on in wonder. Back in the classroom the children's relationship with me, a member of the movement group, did seem to build a deeper bond of trust.



Styles, experiments and sociability

Right from the start of the project we could see that the children were extremely attentive and responsive to each other in their dancing. Often children would observe each other, stopping to watch something they found interesting.



Children would frequently imitate each other, and sometimes an idea would spread through many children in the group. For example, a balancing position where two hands and one foot are on the ground was very popular and was explored by many different children over the course of the project.

We noticed that some children who found communicating and making friends difficult were able to develop their relationships with other children while dancing. After dancing one day, Joy said she had danced 'with my friends': her expression showed how significant this was for her.

A group of girls danced together in a circle during almost every session, holding hands and whirling round until they all fell over together. Nearly all of the children joined in with this at some point in the project. It is perhaps quite unusual to find circle dancing and games initiated by children of this age; why was it so important for this group?

The girls often mentioned the circle when talking about their dancing experiences afterwards and nearly always mentioned the friends they were dancing with. For example, while making a clay model of herself dancing, Shanelle said, 'I'm playing with Caitlin.

I'm going round and round. It's fun!' She then made another clay model of her friend Amie, saying, 'she's spinning in the circle'.

The circle seemed to be a shared joyousness and expression of friendship which the group returned to again and again. We were a little concerned at one stage that the circle would take over the dancing sessions, but after a few minutes it would usually transform into something else, perhaps to be returned to later on. Even though as adults we saw the circle as perhaps quite formulaic, to the children it seemed to be of great importance and significance. We had to revise our view of what we were expecting and perhaps hoping to see, and ask ourselves what was important to the children and why.



Co-operation and trust

As the project continued, we observed the children showing more and more trust in each other. An interest in lifting and moving one another began to develop amongst some children in the group, where children began to work together to perform sometimes quite daring moves. As adults we observed carefully what was happening, but never had to intervene to stop the children trying anything too dangerous – although their moves were sometimes daring and experimental no-one ever did anything that would have hurt anyone else. We felt that there was a growing sense of trust and co-operation in the group which enabled the children to experiment with new possibilities and ideas more freely.

Dancing in imagination

For some children the experience of dancing offered an opportunity to take on a new imaginary character, often that of an animal. David, especially, became all kinds of animals, including a dinosaur, a crocodile, an alligator, a cat, a mouse and a hamster.



Here Becky has drawn herself, and David as an animal next to her.



David: 'Those lines are the wind when I'm jumping.'



Children's graphic representations of their dancing

There seemed to be a recurring theme amongst the group of being scary and being scared, and often the animal dancing involved chasing.

Macy: 'I was trying to chase David.'

David: 'But I wasn't scared wasn't I not!'

The children being the scared animals were sometimes brave in response to the scary creature, and often the roles would be swapped midway, with the chaser suddenly becoming the chased. Perhaps by playing out these roles children were able to understand their own feelings of fear and bravery more deeply, and by doing this in character they felt safe in their explorations.

Revisiting ideas

In order to help children explore and develop their ideas further, we gave them opportunities to revisit their dancing experiences between sessions. This included watching video footage of the dancing, looking at photos and working with drawing, painting and clay. Here, three girls have, with some help from Maria, made a model of themselves dancing in a circle, alongside models that other children made of themselves dancing.



Children's representations of their bodies in clay

Often the children made comments to their friends and adults at the nursery after dancing:

Amie: 'I had a lovely time at the dining room. I was balancing and spinning.'

Caitlin: 'The music was scary, then nice, then happy.'

Continuing our explorations

After a term of working together, we have found that many new questions and avenues for exploration have arisen: how can we further develop our work with children outside of the dancing sessions, supporting them to revisit and develop their ideas?; how do children respond to different sorts of music?; how does music encourage them to move, think, feel, imagine?; how can we find out?

The experience of exploring music and dance together with the children was both a joyous and privileged one for us as educators. But really the music and dance were just media through which we could communicate deeper ideas together. The dancing provided a powerful form of non-verbal communication where the children could develop and explore their relationships with one another, observing, joining in or not, initiating ideas or perhaps imitating and developing the ideas of others. Throughout the project there seemed to be a growing sense of trust between the children and with the adults too. The children loved the opportunity to dance together and their dancing often expressed to us their feelings of friendship and celebration, they showed great interest in exploring, revisiting and developing movement and imaginary ideas, which we hope to help the children to explore more deeply in further dance and music work. The children we worked with have now moved on to primary school. New children will bring many fresh questions and challenges for us, new ideas and ways of relating to one another, a new culture of dancing and group identity; we, as adults, will be able to engage with the children with increased confidence in our shared explorations of dance and music.

Maria Mernin is an educator and dance enthusiast at Walkergate Early Years Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Cath Reding is a professional music teacher (Violin/Piano) and also works as an artist enabler colleague in early years settings.

All pictures Maria Mernin and Cath Reding. Walkergate Early Years Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.