

BMC[®] and children's dancing

Llewellyn Wishart in conversation with Helen Clarke Lapin

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H: I am interested in your use of Body-Mind Centering[®] work, and Developmental Movement work in particular, in your dance classes with pre-school children.

L: I started working with children over 10 years ago and in the last 5 years became deeply involved with early childhood. What I discovered in marketing of 'Developmental Movement and Dance' programs to child care centres and kindergartens was that they appreciated my dual focus of creativity, children's aesthetic development with dance/movement which had a developmental foundation. Assisting development is the essence of their programming. That's what concerns them, it's part of their job. Particularly the child care workers who work with children from birth to 2 years of age are quite conscious of the developmental movement patterns and their importance. So the patterns can be used as a foundation for planning preschool curriculum from which I can build a dance program which might segue into their programs in the 0-2 year old room, 2-3 year old room or 3-5 year old room, which is how they organise themselves.

H: And would you disguise the patterns within creative movement?

L: Sometimes and at other times it's totally obvious what we're doing. Like if we do a class on frogs then we're working with homologous patterns, and I would tell the child care workers that we were working with homologous patterns.

H: So you're actually having to educate the child care workers in the developmental movement patterns.

L: Well they understand the value of the early movement patterns from their own training but they call it 'gross motor development'. And if I'm in an organisation that I've been providing services to for 3 to 4 years, if a child has been observed as having difficulty in jumping/walking for example, (they do regular observations) then I'll actually monitor that child's pattern within the dance class. Then I can make suggestions to the child care workers as to how they can support that child. We work with the appropriate pattern and I show the child care workers what I mean and they get the idea and go off and try it out.

H: So for example, what would homolateral be useful for in a child?

L: Well certainly a sense of integrating the 2 sides of the body, so of one side is weaker than the other you could use it in that way to balance. Neuromuscular integration of the right and left sides of the body. Sometimes you'll notice in little kids that their jumping is not quite there and so we'll go back and do things with the balls like putting children's feet onto the balls and then pushing back into the pelvis with both legs, to keep working on that. And it's not like I'm there to run a therapy program - it's a dance class with a developmental foundation. So for them it's familiar territory, but at the same time it's part of my role there to work as an educator for the children and also the staff.

H: When I was teaching 3 year olds I was astounded at how many children were unco-ordinated and tended to bump into things and trip, not able to balance or jump. What seemed most beneficial was to just provide balls and tractor inner tubes for them to jump and roll and fall on without actually specifically working on patterns. Just an environment that would encourage them to play with balance. I had to scrap some of my creative movement plans because they needed much more basic 'fooling around' rather than having to refine their movement in any way, which dance often seems to require.

L: My own interest in developmental process is that children have 'enriched vestibular experiences'. So that they get

lots of experiences of what it's like to be on centre and then off centre, balancing and then falling over. So we do a lot of things like spinning, twirling and balancing where the kids don't really have the skill yet, but experience the 'pleasure' of falling over. The ecstatic, the terrifying - being on an edge and then falling over.

H: That's so contrary to most dance classes which promote balance and getting movement 'right'. Again I've been astounded at how young children were, who when it came to trying things out or trying to copy something, already had in place an inhibition of 'I'm not going to get it right'. So not wanting to dance at all and totally immobilising themselves and sitting on the side.

L: I have worked longitudinally with some children right from when they were babies to toddlers to school-age over a period of years. I watched their movement vocabulary develop to the point where I could use quite sophisticated language and they would understand. So I could say things like: "now balance into a statue/can you curl yourself up and make yourself really small? Can you make your shape change into another shape? Can you turn into a frog or into a giant?"

The process of falling over, losing one's balance, having accidents and hurting oneself is actually central to the developmental process. If you look at 2 principles: support precedes movement or stability underlies mobility, we see that children need to have experiences of moments of support and then moments of no support. So that then mobility comes from the moment of no support as well as the moment of support. It comes from both places, the 'on' and 'not on'. So children need to actually lose their balance and fall over. We play on the gymnastic balls, finding balance and giving them an experience of being slightly off balance and they go "Ooooh!" You go to the edge of these little kid's comfort zones to the point where they're constantly getting this new vestibular information that's going through all of their postural muscles. So I feel like I've done a good job when the children just climb on to the little balls themselves and balance and roll and fall of them without any hesitation.

H: So why dance? Why not just have the equipment and encourage them to play?

L: Something that I've been discovering recently is that little children have access to the ecstatic very immediately. It's something that adults have a lot of baggage around, a lot of injunctions which don't allow us to move into the ecstatic. But children of this age have access to the ecstatic and it's something about the pairing of a creative process of being and of dancing - not just doing the movements but 'I am dancing my elephant' or 'I am dancing jelly'. The thing that I think is the difference is that with little children if you say that you're going to dance like jelly the you ARE jelly. There's no difference, you become jelly and you dance jelly. Or if it's turning, the child BECOMES turning.

I don't know whether that comes through in a purely physical program because it doesn't have the meaning behind it, the imagination. Watching a class sometime ago, myself and 3 child care workers in the room with a group of 2 to 3 year olds and they decided they wanted to do part of this song (I made up a song which was based on the Navel Radiation Pattern) called the "Belly Button Song" which was all about connecting with your belly. You touch your bellybutton then you wiggle your toes, you touch your belly button then you stretch out wide, touch your belly button ...and all these things that you do. And there's this bit at the end [of the song] where you touch your belly button and wobble like jelly, and then you just go completely wobbly all over the floor and fall about. The children get so ecstatic at that moment and want to keep dancing jelly because they find it so hilarious but also ecstatic. And I say ecstatic because we noticed the children going into this ecstatic altered state. So all these little kids were dancing rhythmically as I was drumming and they were wobbling and wriggling as were the adults in the room, including a father who was having as much fun as the children. Then I asked them to stop still and make a statue and then feel what's it's like to be still after all that wobbling. There was just this electricity in the room, everybody had big wide eyes and huge grins. The suddenly 'boom-ba-doom' with the drum and off we'd go again doing this jelly thing.

The child care workers were looking around the room and they could recognise that these children were going into an altered state. That's all we did the entire class, we just did jelly. I learnt so much from that experience because my colleague Dr Karen Bond at Melbourne University would say, this is the experience of the 'super-ordinary' in dance for young children. So what we would see as being ordinary is given magic status by young children.

So when I'm working with little ones even as young as 18 months, they're like little shamans, they'll just shift from one state/shape/form in their consciousness (and I'm putting an adult frame on this) to another and there's delight in that and an aesthetic in that.

H: Certainly there'd be delight in having that shared group experience but what would be the value of that 'super-ordinary' experience for a 3 year old in dance?

L: I think because it seems to make their understanding of the world more real. And the way of processing reality at

that age is through movement and mastery. A lot of the developmental theorists, Piaget and those after him say that one's reality at that age is lived through the body and not through thinking. So that's why for me, watching the children has a lot of power because they go into an ecstatic state so quickly. Just the suggestion that we're going to do this thing next.

H: So it's putting the power in their hands/their bodies.

L: Yes. People get really interested as adults in dance states which are trance-like and called ecstatic. Look at the rise of raves which are about people just going into trance states. The Sufi whirling dervishes - same thing, trance states. So this ecstatic state accessed through dancing with children I've just discovered and has meant something to me in the past few years.

H: I think the origins of dance are in group trance...

L: Yes, and this is what I learned from working with the children is that they go into these 'super-ordinary' states. And what I've taken to doing now because Karen Bond in conjunction with Sue Stinson is doing a major international research project on 'meaning' in dance of children, They are getting children to draw after their dance experience and I've just started to do this as well and it's fascinating the material that comes out. For me as an adult I see the shamanic as being an ordinary experience in children of this age. The developmental theorists refer to this as a primitive state and I don't know whether it is primitive - I think in some ways it is quite highly evolved. The fact that the child CAN go from being big like a star to being tiny. A shift for me is that now I'm often asking the children "What's it feel like in your body when you are tiny?" This seems to create more interest and delight. I would never ask those questions some years ago because it was not the way I was trained to work with children, to ask questions of a somatic nature.

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Llewellyn Wishart is a Certified Body-Mind Centering® Practitioner and applies this knowledge of the body across a range of fields such as early childhood movement education, high performance sport, personal development programs, contact improvisation and in private practice. He has been dancing Contact for the past 13 years.

Helen Clarke Lapin is a Sydney based Dancer, Teacher and Dance/Movement Therapist. She works in professional, educational and community based settings with children and adults.

FOOTNOTE

About Body-Mind Centering® (BMC): BMC is an evolving holistic study of embodiment with educational and therapeutic applications. It is based on anatomical, physiological and developmental movement principles it uses voice, touch, movement and mind training to support an individuals growth and creative development at any point in the lifespan. BMC is the pioneering work of visionary movement educator Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen who has been developing and refining this approach over the last 25 years in USA, Europe and beyond. Both Helen and Llewellyn have undertaken studies with Bonnie.

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