

## **Really Moving: Dance Therapy Activated in a Special Developmental School Setting**

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### **Introduction**

This dance therapy program was introduced at Sunshine Special Developmental School (SDS) in January 2008. The school is situated in the suburb of Sunshine West, part of Melbourne's inner west area, and caters for approximately 100 students from Preparatory – 18 years of age with a range of moderate to profound intellectual disabilities and other special needs. A considerable proportion of the student/ parent population is from non-English speaking backgrounds (mainly Vietnamese). The program is offered to students ranging in age from 14-18 years, within the context of the facilitator's full time classroom teaching role. The program is held in the general purpose school hall and is based on body awareness exercises and structured movement improvisation. Its purpose is to engage the students in creative body exploration that assists to define 'who I am'.

### **Dance Therapy Described**

As a field of contemporary professional practice, dance therapy originated in the United States in the 1940s. Its roots lie in the therapeutic functions of dance as evidenced throughout human history, the specific development and form of modern dance, and the field of psychology (Schmais 1985).

Dance therapy is a form of creative arts therapy, which utilises the experiencing of creative acts as a means by which to explain and better understand the gamut of human experience (McNiff 1981). Recognition is given to the therapeutic value of nonverbal forms of communicating thought and feeling, as well as the benefits of being immersed in the creative process, which houses the potential to shed new light on personal knowing and being (McNiff 1981; Johnson 1987). Creative arts engage the senses and provide media through which the participant may find safe expression of painful or difficult to verbalise memories and life associations. This engagement with the symbolic representation of life experience affords the participant a safe viewing place from which to better observe themselves and find new meanings for their experiences.

Dance therapy has been developing in Australia since the 1970s. Specifically in Victoria there has been considerable energy and commitment since the early 1980s to establish a professional association (incorporated in 1994) to support and give cohesion to the field.

Dance therapy operates on the premise that dance, as an embodied art form, is intimately connected with the self, as individuals live their world through their body in relation to others (Fraleigh 1987). Dance therapy is a process

oriented therapy with the basis that mind and body are inseparable (Schmais 1986; Exiner and Kelynack 1994; Bond 1994, 1999). What is experienced in the mind is also experienced in the body, and vice versa. Dance integrates mind-body qualities, creating a connection between the physical and the psychological aspects of experiencing (Schmais 1986; Exiner and Kelynack 1994). It provides a tangible means by which the participant can express consciously felt life experiences. It also provides a way in which the participant may gain access to feelings that are difficult to verbalise. It involves an inner awareness of moving as well as the more external experience of feeling moving (Exiner and Kelynack 1994). This offers the participant an opportunity to find heightened awareness of and sensitivities to their own particular state of well being, and their interaction with others and their environment. In particular, dance therapy acknowledges the expressive and aesthetic self.

Dance therapists are qualified to put into action a therapeutic program based on an understanding of dance; an understanding of movement observation and analysis; and the function of the mind-body. A dance therapy session focuses on the expressive movement of the participant as they engage and interact with the therapist. The participant moves independently, either individually or with others if in a group, with or without the support of music. It is a participant's specific movement pattern as it exists at that moment to which the therapist attends. The therapist encourages the participant to pay attention to their experiencing of moving. This includes observing how their body feels and any associations and/ or emotional states which may be present. Discussion following the movement should incorporate what the participant locates during their experience as well as what the therapist observes. As dance therapy deals with personality made manifest in the participant's movement behaviour (Schmais 1986), any change is directed to the physical level. The focus may be to intensify, clarify, expand or reduce the movement of the participant, engaging body parts or whole body movement. Similarly, change may be directed at the quality of the movement as well as its relationship to space, weight and time.

### **Dance Therapy at Sunshine SDS**

The dance therapy program provided at Sunshine SDS is in the context of this facilitator's full-time classroom teaching role within the 'Pathways' cluster of classes. 'Pathways' is based at the main campus of the school and is a stream of learning offered to the more able middle-year to senior students (ages 12-18). Three classroom units comprise the cluster. Teaching and learning in these units has a very clear focus on future life-skills needs.

Pathways One is a unit of 19 senior students (aged 14-18) who meet together in a large multi-purpose room for combined activities including at the start and end of each day; meal breaks; and special activities such as inter-school visits. The learning curriculum is made up of three distinct domains, namely Independent Living Skills; Functioning in the Community; and Health and Work Skills; and is presented to the students by way of a fortnightly rotating timetable. Students are divided into three learning groups (red, blue and

green) and attend classes variously lead by three teachers, three teacher assistants, and specialists across the three curriculum strands.

The Health and Work Skills curriculum is the responsibility of this facilitator. It aims to increase students' ability to become not only 'work ready' but to function within the wider community as a positive and active member. Within this framework dance therapy is offered to the male and female students in Green and Blue Groups on a fortnightly basis for 1 hour each. Six students and 2 staff (this facilitator and a teacher's assistant) support each session.

### **Program Outline**

Each dance therapy session consists of 3 loosely structured, exploratory phases:

1. Warm Up;
2. Development; and
3. Closure.

#### Phase One – Warm Up

Typically this phase settles participants into the dance space; orients awareness to the body and physical participation; and warms up the major muscle groups and joints. Movement cues act to heighten awareness firstly of separate body parts; then the connection of body parts to one another; and finally the relationship of body parts to whole body movement. Spatial exploration is also emphasised, and includes differing ways of travelling in space and body orientation in space.

#### Phase Two – Development

This phase flows directly on from the warm up, and frequently adds on to aspects of movement evident in the opening activities. Emphasis in the developmental phase is on drawing out in more detail the preferred movement style of each participant and includes a solo segment.

The solo segment is an opportunity for each student to move independently in an undirected, spontaneous manner for as long as they choose. During a student's solo the remainder of the group is seated to one side of the space and is encouraged to attend to the mover in a passively supportive role.

#### Phase Three - Closure

The closure phase serves to bring the movement and group experience to a close and is devised by this facilitator in the moment, in direct response to that which has preceded throughout the session.

In each of these session phases the cues provided by this facilitator work to elicit spontaneous movement responses that progressively orient the participant's intention of the movement from the initial 'self to self'; to the more relational 'self to other'; and also 'self to the environment' (internal and external to the dance space). I improvise my facilitation in sympathy with student responses. My statements and questions are directed toward the

focus of each movement segment being explored, and encourage engagement, but otherwise remain relatively neutral so that each student may respond in a self-meaningful manner. My facilitation varies according to the responses of the group. I choose to either move with the students and/ or stand to one side to observe them as they move. At times I may choose to support one specific student in their movement. During facilitation I attempt to emphasise the use of non-verbal modalities including eye contact; facial expression; and body posture to elicit responses. Specifically in the student's solo work my primary role is to observe the movement of the soloist rather than make comments on their chosen movement patterns and gestures or prompt alternative ways of moving. The role of the teacher's assistant throughout the session is to support individual and group responses to my cues, primarily by way of his own engagement in the dance and secondarily through his verbal and at times physical support of the student's engagement.

Music used during the session acts primarily as background support to the movement scores, and may be chosen specifically to invoke a quality or mood determined by myself or the participant/s.

Students are encouraged to give feedback throughout the session to identify the moment/s which resonated with them. In particular after each solo I verbally support each student to identify what they enjoyed about their movement. It is through this identification of what they enjoyed in the moment of moving that their preferred individual movement style or movement vocabulary is articulated.

### **Group Descriptors and Movement Motifs**

Since the inception of the program distinct elements are emerging which reflect each group's collective personality and engagement in the dance, as summarised below.

Green Group constitutes six students aged 14-18 years who are severely intellectually disabled with global developmental delay and other additional special needs including Downs Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Cerebral Palsy. Students in Green Group have good receptive language skills and limited expressive verbal skills, which are augmented with signing (Makaton) and natural gesture.

The students' group movement responses are typified by large, gross motor explorations in space including whole arm swinging, shaking, and reaching; jumping and galloping with arms raised and/ or swinging high in space; running in large sweeping circles in one direction around the space; and whole body rolling with the torso and limbs moving as one unit. The students move in dominantly isolated and unconnected ways to each other. Eye contact with other participants is fragmentary but more focused on the facilitator and assistant. There is a preference for close personal space gesture and shaping over the wider reach space exploration. Solos are typically defined by jumping, running and repeated sequencing of two or three standing postures and/ or gestures.

Thematic movement cues currently offered to and enjoyed by Green Group include: proximity (how close can you move to another person but not touch them?); travelling with quick changes in direction (forwards, backwards, sideways, and turning) to explore the wider space; rocking with a partner in various seated patterns; seated circle games involving choosing a person to be the next leader; travelling across the floor in a seated/ sliding posture or lying down; and seated whole-group back to back leaning. These themes are variously explored individually as well as in small groups and the one larger group.

Blue Group constitutes six students aged 16-18 years who are moderately intellectually disabled with global developmental delay and other additional special needs including Downs Syndrome. Students in Blue Group on the whole have good receptive and expressive language skills.

The students' movement responses are typified by a mix of gross and fine motor gestures and body postures. The students are largely relational as a group and enjoy typical 'tag' and 'lead/ follow' movement games. Eye contact is a heightened means of communication utilised by the group and is directed intentionally toward each participant as well as the adult facilitators. Solos are quite stylised in nature and reflective in some instances of main stream dance culture. The students invariably take turns several times over to perform a solo, independently choosing the next person to offer a response by tagging them on the hand or shoulder. Students engage readily with the internal environment of the space, and respond well to directed incorporation of the use of walls and furniture, such as a chair, in their movement.

Thematic movement cues currently offered to and enjoyed by Blue Group include: directed modulation of extremes of moving such as 'far away from' and 'close to', with and without contact; and moving with sound and moving in silence; shape making with a focus on smaller body parts initiating the shape; whole group 'follow the leader' travelling games with student initiation of when to change the lead; 'shared solos' involving the whole group working together to borrow or 'try on' one motif offered by a student as part of their earlier solo performance; and whole-group seated back to back leaning.

### **Emergent Individual Movement Motifs**

The preferred individual movement style of participants is becoming known. More diffuse when compared to each group's collective persona, elements of particular travelling patterns (such as running or galloping in continuous broad arcing loops, anti-clockwise) and upper body gestures (such as an evenly modulated rise and fall of arms extended out to the sides); as well as preferences regarding use of body parts; balance; orientation to space and relationship to others, can all be observed as consistently favoured by certain students. Analyses can be made of these individual preferences using a tool such a Laban Movement Analysis and profiled as a record of the student's current movement vocabulary. Such a profile can provide valuable information when planning future sessions and monitoring student development.

## **Conclusion**

The dance therapy program at Sunshine SDS is a highly enjoyable time for participants and facilitators alike. It is a moment in the learning week when spontaneity, play, humour and creative choice making are validated for all, and when free expression set in a safe group construct can lead towards individualised learning and awareness. Through the immediacy of their body students are afforded the opportunity to become fully acquainted with themselves, with others, and with their environment and the ever-changing inter-relationship of these elements in their daily lives. Use of a non-verbal modality provides a readily accessible means by which they can find out about and respond to 'who I am', in any given moment.

I am appreciative of the regular dance therapy sessions primarily as an opportunity to enjoy and find out more about each student in ways unavailable through other means.

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