

Are you dancing? Are you asking?

The duet between the body as a material and the environment

Peppy Hills

When entering a building or room that is new to me, I scan it. For example, I look at the polished floor which runs the length of a medieval National Trust house and visualise running as fast as possible and then skidding along the shiny surface. I can imagine the breeze I would feel as I passed through the air at speed, I can almost feel the solid sleek floor beneath my flying feet. I can feel the bend of my knees and the slight forward tilt of my body, leaning into the space. Similarly, in a meeting room I notice the run of windows and window sills and internally sense how it would feel to perch on them, nestling into the corner where window meets window sill, to hover above the meeting, curled and poised. In reality, I sit at the table during the meeting, glancing up at those window sills from time to time, wishing I was up there.

Over the years I have realised that this maybe is not a common thought process for everyone as they enter a new (or familiar) space! If I were to act on these thoughts and impulses, eyebrows may be raised, tuts would probably follow and my visits to any new places or meetings would be curtailed. If I were a child I would most probably be told off, asked to act sensibly or properly, and be told of the dangers of running, sliding, gliding and hovering. The fact that remains is that my first response to a space is movement based, a kinaesthetic one (kinaesthetic = “a person’s awareness of the position and movement of parts of the body by means of sensory organs”).

Kinaesthetic responses to a bubble wrapped floor in a nursery – movement observation

Boy A rocks on his back, his hands clasping his legs, bubble wrap popping as he rocks forwards and backwards along his spine. He hears the bubbles popping under his rocking motion, he pauses,

body still and then laughs and increases the speed of his rocking.

Boy B jumps into the air with a yelp, lands and rolls onto hands and knees, then drops onto his tummy. Lying face down he examines the bubble wrap then presses his face into the floor covering, he rolls his face from side to side.

I recognised these children’s delight in exploring and experiencing a material physically. My childhood consisted of exploring spaces and environments by climbing, scrambling, balancing, leaping, running, falling, rolling and every other movement I could muster. These experiences have given a solid basis to a career within community dance, and I am committed to seeing how we (the adults) can create and co-exist in environments which are movement rich for our babies and children, and of course ourselves.

Whilst I am committed to the impact dance and movement have on the neurological, emotional and physical development of a child, in this article I will consider ways in which materials and the environment can invite and hold the development of the artistic voice of both child and adult. I suggest that the body when moving and dancing is in fact a material itself. I view the child and practitioner’s bodies as materials in partnerships with the environment. The environment, adult and child bodies each suggest, invite, respond, impact on, speak to and interact with each other. Perfect dance partners.

It is well documented and evidenced how important physical exploration and experiences are for a child’s healthy development. The work of Sally Goddard Blythe (2004) amongst others, shows how crucial physical experiences are for

sensory integration to be achieved within our complex bodies. The importance of varied physical terrains and ongoing physical experiences for young babies and children is championed by the work of Penny Greenland (2000) and Jan White (2015). Movement and dance activities enable the vestibular, proprioceptive and interoception processes to be developed, and such activities are fundamental to a child (and therefore latterly an adult) being able to make sense of the world, to feel secure in their own bodies and the world around them, and to ensure healthy brain development. The evidence is plentiful and clear that, movement and dance are a vital part of healthy development.

Adrienne Sansome warns that many early years practitioners have a lack of confidence and sometimes interest in dance and movement (due to little past experience and training). This can result in dance and movement experiences either being restricted to a specific dance style that is selected by the practitioner, or that “dance is devoid of any adult attention” (2013:43) within settings. Hence, children may be overly directed or simply ‘left to it’. Joseph Tobin suggests that the daily lives of adults and children in early years settings are becoming “increasingly disembodied” (2004:124), due to a number of influences including the focus on educating the “head” and not involving the whole body. By providing movement-rich environments within a setting, we can create an opportunity for babies, children and adults to move together, or individually, and to interact with each other and the space around them using movement and dance as a shared language. Each will be using their bodies and physical language in a natural and authentic way (ie learnt dance steps are not particularly relevant). No previous dance experience is needed, but the interest in valuing and therefore using



movement as an accepted shared language is crucial.

Movement installations

I was commissioned by an early years setting in an economically disadvantaged area of the West Midlands, to create a series of spaces that would get the children and staff moving. My first move was to be still and observe, to see what was happening movement-wise, and also what was not happening, what was missing. Over a term I co-devised and actioned a number of interventions, including focussed dance and movement sessions which were opportunities for staff and children to work physically individually and also alongside and with each other, building knowledge of their bodies, movement vocabulary and confidence in their own abilities to physically explore, invent, create, share and witness. We also initiated a number of dance/movement installations which were designed to interest children and staff and to evoke movement and dance responses. A space was set aside to be used as an installations space. We set it up in a variety of ways over a term. Different materials were used at different times including; hoops, textiles, overhead projector, bubble wrap, elastic, ribbons, mats, carpet & floor covering samples, coloured tape, large paper, chalks. The movement installations became a space that was on offer alongside other spaces within the setting. Children chose whether to engage or not, the nature and duration of their engagement was their choice.

The key point to these installations was that there were no pre-determined responses or outcomes identified. They were set up as spaces of experimentation and possibilities. When creating and setting up the installations my role was that of an initial curator of children's ideas and movement interests, as seen in the setting. The ideas

for the various set ups came from watching children's movement interests, spotting patterns and pinpointing opportunities for children and staff to extend their individual and collective movement vocabulary. Each installation was designed with a starting point, such as "pathways" or "floorwork" in mind, but the space was handed over to the children and staff with no directions as such and no sharing of the starting point. As choreographer Twyla Tharp states "... it's only after you have let go of your plans that you can breathe life into your efforts." (2004:119) In this context I would suggest it is the children, adults and materials combined who made the space come alive.

Children and staff were free to physically respond to and exist within the installations as they wished, to move in their own ways, with their own movement and dance responses to the materials within the installation space.

The premise of these movement/dance installations is four-fold:

1. Babies and children are natural movement and dance explorers and creators
2. There are no pre-set responses or outcomes
3. The role of materials within the child/adult/environment encounter is a dynamic and relational one
4. Babies, children and adults are co-dancers, co-creators and a mutual audience for each other

Natural movers, leaders of learning

Within the context of movement/dance installations the child is seen as a strong and capable individual who can lead their own learning and engage with others and the environment in reciprocal social, emotional and physical relationships. This view of the

child draws on the work of Reggio Emilia and practices such as Te Whariki which regard the child as an instigator and the adult as a partner, a witness and a co-questioner and learner alongside the child.

Therefore, the child was regarded as a dance/movement explorer, capable of leading, collaborating and following; a natural dance partner. Given a positive and supportive environment for movement exploration, I have yet to experience a child who cannot explore movement, develop their own movement signature, their preferred ways of moving. Different learning preferences and a particular condition of a child may require an alteration in the way support is offered, but the view of the child as a capable movement explorer remains. Within a movement installation, we need to consider and understand the role of the adult and where the decision making and choreographic power lies in the relationship between child and adult.

The most fruitful experiences (for children and adults) have occurred when there was no expectation of a final outcome as such; no rehearsed or performed dance/movement piece was necessary. Therefore, there was no pressure to choreograph or perform as such. Within a movement installation each moment, each meeting of bodies is an informal dance interaction. Each body responds to the presence of another perhaps by moving with or past each other, borrowing and mirroring each other's movements, or maybe by moving away from each other to continue individual exploration of movements – dance solos. These spontaneous dances are improvised, created within the moment and often last seconds or minutes. They do not need to be rehearsed and repeated, they are purely "in the moment", and then

they have gone and a new movement interaction or solo dance emerges.

Working with the unknown

With the absence of pre-defined themes or dance steps, and no repeated or rehearsed movements, we, as the adults are required to work with the unknown within movement installations. There is no detailed lesson plan as such, no step by step practitioner-led choreography. Tharp suggests that “Unknown is a fearful place, and anything new is a step into the unknown.” (2006: 23)

I would suggest that as adults we need to have no plan, but be alert to the altered movements within movement/dance interactions, the opening of movement possibilities that are created by accidental or unforeseen “sparks”. With a spirit of generosity, adventure, and a commitment to honouring a child’s movements, we (as the adults who are involved in movement interactions), can be willing dance partners, attentive viewers and witnesses and receptive co-explorers. We need to be willing to observe and mirror children’s movements, create our own movements at times, join in, pause and watch and above all value our young dance partners by being present. In this context I see being present as “... showing up with the fullness of your being to meet whatever is happening in the moment.” (Greenland, 2000: 251)

Installations and the role of materials

Art installations are a way of sharing artwork where the viewer is immersed in the work and becomes part of it.

The role of materials in movement installations is key. The materials are not there to be looked at and treated as a separate piece of artwork that might be explored, they are there as an active ingredient. The work of Laurie Kocher and colleagues poses the question ‘What if materials shape us as much as we shape them?’ (Pacini-Ketchabow, 2017:4) Kocher’s research investigates a deeper relationship between the child and materials. Rather than a surface exploration of “what is the function and look of this material” which commonly covers the colour, tactile and functional properties of a material, Kocher encourages us to view materials as proposing possibilities themselves. Within a movement installation, I believe that materials can impact on the way children, and adults think and respond, if we let them. When faced with a space full of differently sized fabrics hanging at different angles, some fabrics opaque, some

translucent, this image will elicit different feelings, images, memories and ideas from each of us. These materials and associated feelings and memories will impact the way we move within those spaces. It will impact on and prompt our:

- ▶ actions of creeping, striding, rolling, curled, extended movements
- ▶ levels of high, medium, low
- ▶ speed of fast, slow, stillness, interspersed fast and slow, medium pace
- ▶ dynamic of smooth, jagged, flowing, sharp, fluid, staccato etc

Once we move, the installation will respond to us and further ideas and feeling based responses may occur to us. The way a piece of fabric reacts in relation to our body may suggest a movement, or give a sense of a chase, or being touched by or engulfed in soft fabric, equally it may prompt responses and ideas that are beyond words and themes, and create movement responses that are linked but hard to describe. Instead they are felt and danced. There is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between children’s bodies and the environment within a movement installation. The child’s body as a material interacts and intertwines with the installation materials, both literally and metaphorically as movements prompt further movements. There is a collaboration between the installation material and the child’s body. A dance of possibilities emerges.

2 Girls and 2 Hoops – Movement Observation

Girl A skips towards hoops on the floor, closely followed by girl B. Both momentarily look at the hoops and each bend to pick one up.

Girl A places a hoop on her wrist and circles her arm causing the hoop to move.

Girl B places the inside edge of the hoop on the top of her head and adjusts her body to balance the hoop hanging from the top of her head. She then moves her head and body from side to side to cause the hoop to swing like a pendulum.

Girl A watches and mirrors the actions. The girls smile.

The hoop from Girl A’s head drops onto the floor, she jumps inside and back out of the hoop and then repeats the jumps. She then jumps off to another part of the room, leaving the hoop. Girl B carefully

places her hoop flat on the floor and walks slowly around the edge of it several times, balancing carefully on the ridge of the hoop, tracing the edges of the hoop via physical means.

For each individual the dialogue and duet between the body and material will be unique. The duets that unfold between child and materials will be in the moment, and of the moment. They are spontaneous movement interactions which are not planned or rehearsed, they are not pre-themed or “taught”. They are embodied experiences that are created, experienced and made tangible through the body. The body is a material which is rich in creative possibilities and relational potential. So, my question is “Are you dancing?”

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