

Creativity Action Research Awards 2005



# Creative Movement and Communication in Special Educational Needs Key Stage 1

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Nottingham (5-19 Special School).



Report written by Liz Clark and Claire Summers

## 1. Title of the research

What is the impact of dance and creative movement on communication skills in particular the levels of interaction (pupil to pupil and pupil to adult) looking at:

- Eye contact
- Physical contact – length, intention and type
- Negotiation of resources and space

## 2. Identification

Claire Summers, Teacher - Foxwood Foundation School and Technology College, Nottingham (5-19 special school)  
Liz Clark, Independent Dance Artist  
Steph Crawford, Dance Worker - Dance 4, National Dance Agency  
Nick Hamer, Intrepid Media  
Sara Giddens, Creative Partnerships Mentor

## Key words

Dance, choreography, creativity, Key stage 1, SEN (severe learning disabilities), autism, communication, confidence, self-awareness, interaction, relationships, challenging behaviour.

## Intended audience

This report has been written to provide fellow teachers and interested parties with insight into the way creative practitioners can work with schools to enhance pupil learning. This particular project offers insights into how creative movement can be used in SEN settings with children with severe learning difficulties and complex communication needs.  
Contact details are provided at the end of the report, we welcome all enquiries.

## 3. Aims of the research

To use creative movement and multi-sensory props to encourage interaction, communication and the development of relationships

To develop a progressive and child centred approach to the sessions, engaging the children in decision making about the content of the sessions.

To build upon the confidence of the teachers and pupils, building an environment where trust can be fostered, allowing for creative innovation and empowerment of both parties.

#### 4. Dimensions of the study

Foxwood School is an LEA 5-19 Special School with approximately 100 pupils and approximately 35 members of staff, situated in Nottingham. The project was undertaken with the key stage one complex needs class (J1). 6 pupils took part in the project during the Summer Term starting in April 2005, every Wednesday morning for 15 weeks.

Liz Clark is an independent dance artist specialising in working within education and community settings. She worked as a Dance Development Officer for a Local Authority and then pursued a freelance career teaching, choreographing and facilitating dance projects with all ages and abilities.

#### 5. Summary of main findings

##### Within the sessions:

The children displayed less repetitive, obsessive and challenging behaviours.

Children isolated themselves less from activities and other people and displayed enjoyment at being in the same space as other children and more readily shared resources.

Children played spontaneously and imaginatively, contradicting information on their official statements of special needs.

Children sought less attention from adults and gained confidence in moving independently and creatively

Levels of eye contact increased.

Staff developed confidence in working with children 1:1 and in their own ability to move creatively.

##### Within and beyond the sessions:

The children interacted with other children and adults for reasons other than to satisfy their basic needs.

Staff developed a more flexible approach to working with the children, which has impacted on their teaching beyond the sessions.

## 6. Context and Background

The children in J1 very rarely actively engage in creative play with their peers and other children in school and the majority have difficulty making eye contact with children or adults. The children find it very hard to share, interact and build relationships.

“Emily... will play alongside other children... rather than playing with them. Emily has difficulties sharing... Emily’s stress levels increase in close proximity to other children”

“Jake does not seek to interact with his peers”

“Mia is reluctant to interact with her peers and prefers to play on her own or alongside other children...eye contact is generally minimal”

“Simon generally plays alongside other children”

“Georges special educational needs are to do with social skills... George will need help to build appropriate social relationships with his peers”

### STATEMENTS OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The children have severe communication difficulties and use mainly non-verbal means of communication, single words or 1 or 2 word phrases. Within school Makaton signing is modelled and encouraged and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is used.

The children tend towards repetitive verbal and behavioural patterns and individual education plans (IEPs) prioritise the children’s need for increased communication. For this reason, this research project was important to the school as it sought to develop means of communication through movement and inclusive approaches that the teachers could embrace.

The sessions were planned and delivered by the teacher and the dance artist working collaboratively. The sessions were supported by another teacher, teaching assistants and a dance development worker from Dance 4, the regional National Dance Agency. The planning and research process was supported by a Creative Partnerships mentor.

## 7. The Intervention: processes and strategies

As part of the planning process, the teacher and dance artist visited Rosehill School, Nottingham (SEN for children with autism) and observed the artist in residence delivering a creative science lesson. They were inspired by the hands on approach of the session and the way the artist used multi-sensory equipment to engage the children.

In developing their own particular approach, the staff team drew from a body of knowledge of different practitioners and educational projects, including;

- “Development Movement for children ” by Veronica Sherbourne
- The Reggio Emilia approach to early years education
- The early years resource pack “Small Steps Big Moves” from Dance 4.
- The work of Jabadao, a centre for the study of movement, learning and health.

Together the teacher and dance artist created a structure that would be used for each session. (For detailed explanation of this structure, see Appendix 1). The children tend to feel more comfortable with a routine and structured activities and some find change very distressing. The dance project developed a structure that was very clear and ordered but also had a great deal of flexibility to allow for celebrating the children’s own creativity.

The approach adopted during the session was grounded in the belief that allowing the children to have the freedom to explore their own movement, whilst gently and carefully encouraging them to extend their movement vocabulary, would have a greater impact on their engagement with the activities. The adults often took a step back to give the children space to be autonomous in their decisions about the content of the dance session, giving the children permission to leave the space for a short time to have “time out” if they needed it.

The staff team worked hard to build new ways of communicating for example through touch, sensation, sharing space, making eye contact from a distance, mirroring children’s movement in a non-intrusive way and using body contact. Throughout the work the adults were encouraged not to rely on speaking to the children but to use their observational skills and their bodies as tools to create a movement dialogue.

The adults were encouraged to model innovative and creative movement, responding to the music and the props themselves and becoming immersed in the activity.



Teaching Assistant and George exploring scarves, session 7

## **8. The findings**

The following examples of evidence are taken from interviews and discussions with the staff team and from journals where staff wrote anonymously at the end of each session, commenting on their observations of each child during that session. Each child had their own journal. Our findings are also supported by an accompanying dvd.

**As the session developed the children displayed less repetitive, obsessive and challenging behaviours.**

“Jake will follow his own agenda when playing, often reverting to obsessive behaviour, which involves collecting toys up and sorting through them”

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

WEEK 1 “Jake sat in the corner and watched”

WEEK 5 “I was really shocked by Jake’s willingness to engage in copying and contact today. He rarely stayed in his corner from the previous weeks”

WEEK 7 “I was creating unusual shapes against the wall for support. I particularly chose Jake’s ‘chosen’ corner. At first he was shocked by the shape but was happy to look, walk under and even move my limbs to pass by.

WEEK 8 “Jake didn’t switch any lights off today!”

WEEK 8 “Jake explored the large lycra with enthusiasm – moving in, under, through and on”

WEEK 12 “At the beginning of the session Jake began spinning around the main dance space.

FROM JAKE’S JOURNAL

**Within the sessions the children engaged in interaction with other children and adults for reasons other than to satisfy their basic needs.**

“Mia came over to Jake and I in the corner and reached for both our hands, momentarily Jake made contact before Mia yelped with joy and skipped off”

“Simon was copying George and Carole so that all of us were doing the same actions with the scarves... rolling them up and throwing them up into the air and watching them float down again.”

“Emily was spotted having a ‘moment’ with Simon. They were facing each other, holding the scarves and jumping together. It was lovely to watch”

FROM CHILDREN’S JOURNALS

**Children isolated themselves less from activities and other people and displayed enjoyment at being in the same space as other children and more readily sharing resources.**

WEEK 1 "Simon quickly made a bid for freedom"  
WEEK 3. "Simon finds it difficult to be part of the group"  
WEEK 5. "Simon made eye contact with me for the first time ever. He seemed to enjoy being copied and it was a long time before he tried to leave the space"  
WEEK 6 "I copied Simon's movements, mostly waving and smiling, he made lots of eye contact, smiling, shaking his legs in the air, he always kept checking I was watching and copying."  
WEEK 12 "At the start of the session as soon as dance was introduced Simon took his own shoes off and helped the other children and adults to take theirs off and came straight into the dance space."  
WEEK 15 "Simon knows what he likes and totally engages physically, having complete trust with the people he is dancing with."

SIMON'S JOURNAL



Week 14

**Each child's statement of special educational needs highlights their difficulties in communication and many of the children's statements points to their inability to be creative and spontaneous.**

"Emily does not often spontaneously play imaginatively although she is beginning to respond to adult support in this area." Statement Of Special Educational Needs, Nottinghamshire County Council Education Dept.

During the sessions we have seen Emily develop a greater confidence in movement play.

WEEK 3 "Emily loved the white scarves, instigating swinging, spinning, blowing and rolling"

WEEK 9 "Emily dived onto the Lycra of her own accord and spent many minutes enjoying the feel of the cloth on her face huddled in a crouched position"

WEEK 12 "Liz commented on the 'fantastic tunnel' that Emily had made"

WEEK 13 "Emily spent the first part of the session dancing a beautiful solo"

EMILY'S JOURNAL



LIZ "What do you think of the dance Emily?"

EMILY "It's beeeaaauuufitul... It was brilliant".

WEEK 13

### Children sought less attention from adults and gained confidence in moving.

This was mostly the case with Emily and George. Both developed in moving independently of adult support.

WEEK 2 "Emily wanted the attention of adults throughout the session. She tended to wait for an idea to be suggested and then constantly asked what shall we do?"

WEEK 8 "Emily was very happily engaged in her own moving, completely independent of anyone else".

WEEK 9 "Emily began spinning on the spot with her hands out to her sides. This was completely independent and spontaneous, she tried to get Caroles attention to show her what she was doing"

EMILY'S JOURNAL

WEEK 1 "George enjoyed adult contact and direction on his terms...he dominated the elastic ring by wrapping people in it."

WEEK 4 "George shared Carole during the relaxation where as he would normally push other people away."

WEEK 5 "George was less forceful this week and spent ten minutes exploring, making and resting under tents by himself."

WEEK 15 "Within a few minutes George had accepted involvement in the session and came over to me to move more independently, yet together."

GEORGE'S JOURNAL

### Levels of eye contact increased.



During the project the children's levels of eye contact increased. This image shows an interaction between the dance artist and Isobel (severely autistic), where the child initiates and maintains eye contact for a considerable amount of time.

## **9. Partnership**

The teacher and the lead dance artist developed a strong partnership during the course of the project. This built upon an existing relationship where they had worked together developing a dance and movement resource pack. Trust was an important element in this relationship as it allowed each partner the freedom to be innovative within the sessions and to push the boundaries of their work. This trust was developed by both partners being open about how they go about their work and through having a constant dialogue about the how they felt the work was progressing.

With this honesty being modelled it was easy to draw the rest of the staff team into a culture of exploration and enabled everyone to have some degree of ownership over the content of the sessions.

## **10. Reflective Practice**

### Liz Clark : Dance Artist

I have learnt about building long term relationships with a school leading to a quality project and strategies on how to maintain the project focus, impetus and enthusiasm. This included being part of the staff team and involved in the school timetable for the whole morning prior to the session. This proved to be an important part of the work as I gained insight into the children's behaviour on that particular day. Often in the morning the group would have struggled with group work, there may have been challenging incidents where children had to be excluded from activities and interventions put in place to stop them hurting each other or a staff member. Dance sessions often began with a sense of impending doom, not knowing how the children were going to react to each other and there were often surprises at the positive effect the session had on their behaviour and levels of engagement.

In the process of the project it has been interesting to reflect on how an artist passes on the skill of being involved in the activity whilst also making decisions about the session's direction based on the responses of the children. This has been a challenge for all the adults involved but it has greatly improved with time and experience on the project. As an artist I tried to make the process during the session as transparent as possible always talking through any decision about the session at the time, if appropriate. I always allowed time for discussion with staff at the end of every session which enabled us to discuss any concerns or surprises. Claire and I also instigated a number of whole staff meetings where we discussed challenges and sought ways to overcome any difficulties together as a team.

In the latter stages of the project the staff team worked together efficiently and coherently to deliver the sessions and drew on each others' strengths and supported each other well.

### Claire Summers: Teacher

I have learnt an enormous amount about the children who took part in the sessions, on a much deeper level, noticing and having the time to appreciate and work with (rather than against) certain individuals' character traits and behaviours.

I have developed the confidence to enjoy being a participant within the sessions, rather than an obvious leader. The children have been seen in 'a different light' and the staff team have allowed themselves to have fun with the children – rather than constantly directing them towards certain activities. The sessions have given all adults involved opportunities to enjoy participating in pressure free activities with the children.

“you don't always have to be actively doing, in their faces, trying to get their attention ... you can give them more space to explore.”

TEACHER WEEK 5

In education, teachers have an agenda or a scheme of work that they need to follow to ensure that specific learning objectives are met in a certain amount of time, which sometimes makes it difficult to allow for diversion from the lesson plan within sessions or to allow children to opt out of sessions. This project has taught me to allow the children to have freedom within the session and not to 'force' the children to take part. Allowing certain children to leave the space when they chose to meant that they were more likely to come back of their own accord. By allowing this freedom, the children developed more trust in us. When staff tried to keep Simon within the space at the beginning of the project, he tried harder to leave and did not really seem to want to interact with anyone. However, after allowing him to leave and by not pressuring him to return, he gradually participated more and more in the sessions and developed close relationships with previously unfamiliar adults and children that he did not seem to notice previous to the beginning of the project. This approach has given me more confidence in other areas of the curriculum and I have adopted a similar attitude in other lessons.

I have learnt more about the concept of 'dance' in school. i.e. not necessarily being about rhythm, ability and choreographed sequences but about creative movement and taking risks. Adults do not always have to be directing children in order for them to learn. By being absorbed in our own creative movement, children have been more likely to initiate interactions with us and this has been the biggest surprise.

“We have changed from just dancing with the children to creating an exciting environment for them to move within, like with the long strips of cloth, manipulating them in the space to give the children more freedom to explore the shapes and interact with each other.”

“One session Jake was sitting in his usual corner and Steph approached him. But instead of looking at him and seeing if he wanted to dance, turned herself upside down and put her leg on the wall creating a tunnel with her body. Jake seemed amused by this and then wanted to move her leg and move in a circle round the shape she had created. It was a lovely dance that probably wouldn't have happened if she had approached him directly.”

TEACHER WEEK 8

## 11. Research Methods

We documented our findings using qualitative enquiry methods such as diaries that all staff members were invited to write in at the end of each session. Children were also encouraged to draw in their books. We also took notes from all staff meetings and planning sessions.

Staff had access to a video camera and a digital camera during sessions which they could use to capture moments that surprised or interested them. An edited dvd of these interactions is available from the research partners.

## 12. Conclusions

Based on the evidence in this research we are satisfied that creative movement has had an impact on the children's social development, in particular the forming of relationships through touch, eye contact and the sharing of resources, both human and physical.

Through the employment of child-centred, creative and flexible approaches the sessions have had an impact on the children's communication, lessening frustration of the children and staff and allowing children and staff to celebrate who they are and the unique way they move.



**Session 13**

## 13. Further reading / organisations

- Sherbourne, Veronica. Developmental Movement for Children. London, Worth Publishing
- Jabadao, The centre for movement, learning and health, [www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)
- Small Step, Big Moves Early Years Resource Pack from dance 4, [www.dance4.co.uk](http://www.dance4.co.uk).
- Creative Partnership Programme at Rosehill School. Contact CP Nottingham on 0115 9897550. [www.creative-partnerships.com](http://www.creative-partnerships.com)

## 14. Contact details

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**APPENDIX ONE**  
**Session content**

**Reason for Inclusion**

<p>Preparation of the class room space, all distractions (toys, bits of fluff, pictures on the wall) were cleared away, leaving a clear empty space</p>	<p>It was important to have enough room to move during the dance session. The children are easily distracted with outside stimulus.</p>
<p>Welcoming the children from play time Circle of chairs Orange mat</p>	<p>We scheduled the dance session into a time where they had been out for fresh air, and were then coming into the classroom to start something new</p>
<p>The hello song</p>	<p>This is the song that the children do every morning as part of their welcome into school. It is familiar to the children and introduced the theme of dance</p>
<p>Shoes off music</p>	<p>Each week the children heard the same music to which they took off their shoes and got ready for dance, they then could enter the dance space.</p>
<p>Shoes off music continued</p>	<p>Once the children had entered the space they were encouraged to explore whatever movements they felt like doing that day.</p>
<p>Themed Music</p>	<p>A range of different styles of music where the staff encouraged the group to move in different ways, such as stretching, jumping, shaking, rolling. This was the same music each week</p>
<p>Multi sensory props</p>	<p>Wherever possible these were all the same colour to help counteract the obsessive “collecting” behaviours of some of the children. A range of different tactile stimuli were introduced</p>
<p>Relaxation</p> <p>“We have finished song”</p>	<p>The session always ended with a time of relaxation although the children did not always take this opportunity to relax!</p> <p>The song was used regularly in the school to indicate a moving on to the next activity.</p>