



To learn an aesthetic language: A study of how hard-of-hearing children internalise dance

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Abstract

This article describes a study which focused on the learning of dance as an aesthetic language among hard-of-hearing children aged six to nine years. The study adopted a special education perspective, taking a life-world phenomenological approach, and was undertaken in the spirit of action research. The results show some important aspects of the learning process, which are exemplified here through particular events from the context studied. The process is similar to learning dance in other contexts, but teaching dance in groups with hard-of-hearing children puts special demands on both the dance teacher and the regular teachers of the children. The children had experience of themselves as dancers and not primarily as hard-of-hearing children.

The body is the ground for all our existence; it is interwoven with and indissolubly connected to the world. Anything we learn, we learn through our whole body. Interacting with the world, bodily habits are internalised. As bodies, we experience time, space and other human beings through perception. If one of our senses is limited, our experience becomes different, but we nevertheless experience the world as meaningful to us as individuals. What the body learns is not easily forgotten. Instead, the phenomenological body is closely connected to identity: 'I know how to do something, I am engaged in the world' (Hangaard-Rasmussen, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 1997). In this article I document the experiences of some hard-of-hearing children while they develop their identities as dancers.

Introduction

My view, as a music educator, is that human beings experience music through listening, making music, composing, dancing and reflection (Ferm, 2004). From this point of view, dance can be seen as a music education activity (Young, 1992). Time, space, cultural and social context influence the character of learning. Children's earlier experiences constitute the base for the creation of meaning that takes place when meeting the world in the music classroom. Sounds, tools, movements and other human beings constitute a whole in which the uniqueness of each individual is of importance. One starting point in this setting is that all human beings have larger resources than we are aware of. Additionally, we are all more or less dependent on, and influenced by, each other. I also believe all children of school age are worthy of being confirmed by what I refer to as 'special education' treatment.

The concept of aesthetic language in this article draws on the pragmatist theories of Dewey (1934) and later, Shusterman (e.g. 2000a, 2002) which harmonise well with the phenomenological basis of this study. Pragmatist aesthetics understand aesthetic experience as a complex phenomenon that takes its meaning from a social context and is recognised as a fundamental necessity for human beings. Aesthetic experience is therefore seen as relational, since its potential changes according to the society, time and place in which they occur. However, in a pragmatist sense, aesthetics are not only relational but also deeply rooted in the body. As communicative beings, we interact with the total self. Aesthetic experience is therefore constituted by a combination of the relational, the communicative and the personal, through the body as the experiencing and communicative centre (Ferm & Thorgersen, 2007).

The current study was developed as part of a Swedish national project, in which teachers worked together to improve learning situations for hard-of-hearing children (Wennergren & Brändström, 2003). From a life-world phenomenological perspective, the initial aim was to investigate how hard-of-hearing children participate in dance activities. My starting points



were, firstly, that all children have the right to participate in music and dance activities, and secondly, that hard-of-hearing children develop their communication abilities through this participation. It was also important that the interests and the initiatives of the children were taken catered for and given space during the activities. Hopefully, the results increase knowledge about how hard-of-hearing children participate in dance activities, knowledge that could be used to offer such children a way to develop their communication abilities (Ferm, 2004b; 2005; Ferm & Wennergren, 2005).

The study was undertaken in the spirit of action research, which involves allowing actions and reflections to influence and change research questions as well as content. At the same time, it engages more individuals than the researcher in the research process: communication with the educators involved deepened my curiosity regarding the children's prerequisites and participation. As a result, the complexities involved when hard-of-hearing children internalise dance as an aesthetic language became increasingly clear during the investigation.

Dance is an aesthetic language that hard-of-hearing children internalise in diverse, individual ways on the basis of their prior experience (eg Whatley, 2007). To be encouraged to handle dance as an alternative language, or simply to be in an aesthetic sphere as a hard-of-hearing human being, is controversial to some degree. Hard-of-hearing children are not traditionally supposed to participate in such activities, even if it is becoming more and more usual (*ibid.*). This study aimed to describe how these children's learning of dance could be shaped. The focus of the research evolved from the children participating in dance to their internalising it in an holistic way.

The complex context of the study

The general context studied was shaped by several forms of power, which were recognised, to an extent, by the people engaged in the context. The specific field in which the study was conducted could be seen as a place where the areas of compulsory schooling, dance education and schools for hard-of-hearing children overlapped, and within this, the particular school where the activities under study took place was a small and explicit part of those inwardly overlapping areas. The traditions and curricula that were constituted within these three different areas influenced both what happened and the ways things happened. My location within the field was defined by two groups of hard-of-hearing children aged six to nine, their general classroom teachers and a specialist dance teacher. In spite of these particular limitations, I was still aware that the context studied was a part of the larger field.

What constituted the complexity of the context described? The heart of the study was the children in a communicative and learning setting, in which they interacted with the classroom space, the dance teacher, the class teachers, their classmates and the music. All these factors were closely interwoven and influenced the learning and the communication of dance. Additionally, the setting was shaped by the children's earlier experiences of dance. Learning and communication are built on perception: in this case one of the senses was limited, which contributed to the complexity. The function of verbal language was challenged directly, as the hearing sense was limited, and indirectly, as, in several cases, the children's verbal language was disturbed in different ways. However, it should be stressed that spoken language was their first language, even if it was sometimes completed by sign language or other clear expression. Some of the children had cochlear implants and needed to have the sound amplified. The class teachers, who actively participated in the activities, translated when needed.

Hard-of-hearing children are, as mentioned earlier, not often introduced to musical activities, and when they are, the contexts are constructed according to their difference from other children (Whatley, 2007). However, the school where the study was undertaken is progressive and innovative, and had worked hard to promote aesthetic activities. The principal wanted to enable the children to take part in these activities, which he saw as alternatives to traditional speech-based training and other physical activities. Whilst the focus



of this study was on dance, music was always present and an objective of the learning.

Communication, learning and dance from a life world perspective

Within the complex context I have described above, bodies internalised dance through being in the social, musical and intentional setting (e.g. Hefferson & Ollis, 2006). Dance education can be based on different views of knowledge, both conscious and unconscious. One fundamental issue is whether dance is something we know by nature, or whether it has to be learnt. How those responsible for dance activities answer this question, results in different educational activities, aims and outcomes. Is dance education about letting human beings develop and use their inherent ability to dance, or is it about teaching them how to dance? On the one hand, traditional methods for teaching dance technique are inclined to emphasise the development of bodily control and aesthetic virtuosity (Foster, 1997). Wigert (1999) on the other, states that children dance without any connection to a teacher, in the sense that their way of moving can be perceived as dance. This view influences this study to a great extent, since it is based on a pragmatic view of aesthetic education. The challenge for the dance teacher is, then, to offer children opportunities to dance and move in interaction with music and their classmates.

One primary task was to let the children use and get to know their bodies and their movements, so that they could develop the strength to be in their own bodies in different settings, as well as to conceptualise their learning (Chappell, 2007). The dance teacher functioned as a role model at the same time as being responsible for the entire learning situation, in which both practice and reflection are important. For the dance teacher to be able to do this in a way that offers meaningful creative experience for the learners can be a great challenge, as Chappell (ibid.) points out. The overall aim of the educational experience was that the children would learn to dance, and thereby to experience an 'I can' feeling by internalising an aesthetic language. This is well put by Kjölberg (2004, author's translation):

To dance is a good way to get to know one's body, to become aware of the body's communicative abilities – in other words to express oneself in several other ways than through text and spoken language (p. 22).

From a life world phenomenological perspective, human beings exist in an inter-subjective world (Merleau-Ponty, 1997). In other words, we share the world with other human beings and are dependent on, and influenced by, other human beings and their actions. Language, in its broadest sense, constitutes the basis for meaning creating in the world, via communication (Ferm, 2006a). Through learning a language we learn to live in common worlds; language develops in, at the same time as it also develops, specific social and cultural settings. Inter-subjectivity, which is built on subjects' openness to each other, is also the basis for communication, and languages in different forms constitute prerequisites. To make communication possible, at least two human beings have to be directed towards each other and be 'visible' to each other. In communication, meaning-creation is based on a common understanding of language (Ferm & Thorgersen, 2007) so that the horizons of the subjects are changed (Gadamer, 1995). It is a question of trying to understand the experience of the other through sharing his or her being-in-the-world (Bengtsson, 1993).

As mentioned above, perception is the basis of learning and communication, and is always influenced by context. Thus, learning does not take place in a vacuum. When human beings are directed towards each other, time, space, culture, and, not least, other human beings, always influence relationships and produce more or less equal roles. As becomes obvious in educational settings, people have different power and responsibility depending on the quality of their communication skills (von Wright, 2004). This power is also connected to the content of the communication. What were the children offered?

The form of communication that the current study focuses on was dance. What constitutes the content of dance, and how is that content internalised from a life-world, phenomenological perspective? One starting point in the project was that dance, both as art and as a means of



expression, should be offered to the children¹ in a playful way (Lindqvist, 2001). They were expected to internalise dance both as art, through perception and reflection, and as a means of expression, through using their knowledge of it. To extend this notion:

In conclusion we will once more stress the following – to make learning of dance possible it is important that human beings get the opportunity to come close to all dimensions of dance. This process can take place individually or together with others, based on earlier experiences and different ways of learning. The dance must be embodied. (Alerby & Ferm, 2004).

Therefore dance, as a means of expression, becomes incorporated through dance and reflection in a specific context. Movements become internalised in the body, often in close interaction with music, as human beings get the possibility to copy and to move independently. The goal, according to Sjösten and Wigert (2004) is to receive knowledge about the different components of dance, i.e. body, room, energy and interaction, and to be able to see, create and value dance. These abilities are developed through different forms of technical practice, choreography and configuration.

Aim and research questions

This research aimed to study and develop the process whereby a dance teacher, together with some general class teachers and a number of hard-of-hearing children, worked with dance in school. On the basis of the theory given above, the following research questions were developed:

- How do hard-of-hearing children internalise dance as means of expression?
- What constitutes the children's 'I can' feeling in relation to dance?
- What aspects are important in this process of development?

A study in the spirit of action research

For me to step into the life-world of human beings, in order to undertake and be responsible for research in the spirit of action, was connected to specific prerequisites and circumstances. One presupposition was that change or, ideally, improvement was the goal of the activity. Another was that the participants, in this case a specialist dance teacher and two general class teachers, were involved in the process of change. These circumstances provided the researcher with another form of responsibility, compared to a situation where observation is the only research tool: I was responsible for how, and to what extent, the participants should be active in the research, as well as in analytic work, validity work and writing. In the current study, the teachers were active in the planning, and had opportunities to influence and evaluate it during the time it was carried out, by means of written reports and informal talks. I was responsible for continuity and for making certain that the reflections of all the participants were recorded and interpreted. In addition, I was responsible for ensuring that the whole process was harmonious and scientific, and that my ontological thoughts were visible in all phases. Finally, I was responsible for developing the knowledge accrued through the study and making it practically useful.²

How the study was carried out

Over the period of the school year 2004-2005 I visited the school five times, and recorded

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- i. Together with NCFF, The Ministry of Culture, The Student Organization and The Sweden's Student Council SVEA, we have initiated joint work in developing dance in school as a part of promoting physical activity for children and youth. The work is long-term and is intended to be active through to 2009.
 - ii. For a further description, see Ferm (2005).



dance lessons with two different groups.³ The younger group contained children aged six to seven, whilst those in the older were eight to nine. The number of children in each group varied from 10 to 15. The camera was placed in a position so as to capture as much of the activity in the room as possible, except once when I held the camera on my shoulder and focused on between 1 and 4 individuals instead of on the whole group. I wrote field notes when the camera was placed on a stand. In these notes I tried to include as much as possible of what took place, along with my first interpretations. Immediately after the lessons the notes were written out, and when I returned home I looked at the video recording for a first time. I made a rough analysis based on the children's opportunities to take initiatives, forms of expression, and their ways of participating, moving and communicating. All the time I was aware that the room, the camera, the classmates, the music and the teachers, together constituted the environment in which the activities took place.

I sent my field notes and transcriptions with rough analyses to the teachers by email in order for them give me feedback, which I received well in time for the next visit. In the meantime I transcribed the video recordings in a more detailed way (see Ferm 2004; 2006b).

Process of analysis

The analysis of the collected material of the study is based on Fink-Jensen's (2003) interpretation of Alrø et al.'s (1997) model, and my earlier use of Spiegelberg's 'seven steps' phenomenological model for text analysis (Ferm, 2004a; Spiegelberg, 1982). The phenomenon described is the process whereby an aesthetic language – in this case dance – is internalised by hard-of-hearing children:

First stage:

- Notes were taken during the dance class whilst the activities were recorded on video.
- The notes were divided into experience and interpretation.
- Informal conversations were conducted with the dance teacher.
- The notes were written out and the interpretations were organized as reflections on the dance event.
- A first review of the recording resulted in a description with related comments.

The teachers' reflections on notes and comments were primarily a confirmation of my observations and reflections, but they also contributed towards deeper understanding. These first steps were characterized by intuition and the original starting points of the study, ie. participation, interest, movement and communication.

Second stage:

A second analysis, before the next visit, resulted in a transcription which described the events word for word. A perusal of the field notes and the first of the video recordings resulted in some new questions, and aspects of the process started to appear. Those two steps were to a great extent characterized by 'light epoché', ie. my pre-understanding is suspended and I study the material with 'pure eyes':

- I completed an initial attempt to thematise the material.
- Perusals of the transcriptions developed the themes of the work.
- I looked at some recorded sequences again in order to build holistic descriptions of various themes.

Third stage:

I shifted my perspective between close and distanced approaches towards the material, between parts and whole, to be able to catch the essence of the phenomenon:

- Descriptions of holistic settings which made the themes and aspects possible to understand were developed.
- The themes and aspects were related to the aim of the study and other theories and studies.

iii. Before the study was started the children received a letter in which their parents were asked for permission to allow their children to participate in the study.



Interpretation became more straightforward in those two final steps.

Results

The collected and analysed material showed that the children had developed their ability to dance during the year I studied them. This was more obvious in the younger group, as they were more or less beginners when I met them the first time. By the end of the project the children had more control over their bodies, were moving more precisely to the music, showed more variation in their expressions and picked up movements that the dance teacher showed them more quickly. In my view they were able to say, 'I can dance'.

The results showed that the process by which an aesthetic language, dance, was internalised by hard-of-hearing children was in accordance with the themes set out below. These are not totally separated from each other or in a fixed order; most often they took place at the same time, in the complex context I described earlier, in which the body was the starting point for learning as well as for communication.

Table 1 shows these themes as they became clear during my last visit to the school. This is followed by three examples of lessons which I observed and analysed. At the end of the results section I offer reflections related to the fact that the children in the study have a limited hearing sense. Nevertheless, I already want to stress at this stage that all children in the study were active, and that the class teachers translated when necessary in order that everyone to be involved in the communication.

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Specific Aspects

Themes	Aspects
Awareness of own movements	Training controlled movements, value movements, becoming aware of patterns in movements, looking at yourself in the mirror, reflecting, answering questions, be given metaphors, relating to space and things, showing to others, putting concepts to movements, and be challenged.
Perception of others' movements	Being inspired by others, watching the teacher, imitating the teacher and classmates, responding to instructions, and being attentive to others' movements.
Understanding how a body can be used for expression	Becoming aware of the parts and functions of the body and others' movements, 'playing' with other's bodies, naming movements, such as ' <i>How can you look like a penguin?</i> ', ' <i>How do you sneak?</i> '.
Testing own expressions and using internalised movements	Showing to others, taking own initiatives, using the body in one's own way, moving freely to the music with or without frames, with or without artefacts, and being encouraged to vary.
Awareness of part in communication	Communicating with others, being visible to others, leading movements in couples, and being aware how the body works with other bodies, being a mirror.
Interacting with the music	Being invited to listen and count, letting the music inspire the movement - ' <i>How fast do you have to move to make it suit the music?</i> ' through clapping games, in the whole context, reflection.



Pleasure, joy and engagement

The atmosphere in the room,
confirmation,
curiosity to be counted in on the dance and in the
educational communication,
being in the room,
aesthetic experience.

1. A warming up dance

I would like to begin by describing and reflecting upon a dance that the children learnt during my fifth visit to the school. They had never danced it before and the dance teacher encouraged them to look at her and do the same as her: *First you look at me and then do exactly the same.*

The children were instructed to start with their toes on a black line on the floor and their noses towards the mirror on the wall. The teacher was quiet, and showed the children her physical movements clearly, and the different turns flowed. The first time they danced it was obvious that most of the children imitated the teacher by looking at how she moved, not least by way of the mirror. They did the same moves rather quickly.

Description of the dance:

Eight large steps forward, eight jumps with both feet together on the spot, eight large steps backwards, eight steps with both feet together on the spot.

One arm is stretched towards the ceiling and is then drawn down again in four beats. This is performed twice with each arm alternately.

The legs are bent and stretched out again with the knees outwards in four beats. This was performed six times followed by stretching the arms and legs in four beats (repeated from beginning).

Each arm is stretched once.

After the first dance through, the teacher asked the children how the steps at the beginning of the dance should be performed: ie. if they should be large or small, and how they should be related to the room and the music:

T *You guys, that was rather good, I wonder about just one thing, when you go forwards, like that, go go go, do you think you should make small steps, or large?*

C *Large steps!*

T *Should they be done very large?*

C *No, just large enough.*

T *Large enough? What do they look like?*

Immediately some of the girls got up from the floor and showed how they meant the steps should be performed. The teacher encouraged the boys to try to feel the steps as well.

T *Can you do steps in the same size backwards? Can you show me how the steps are made the same way backwards!?*

Good! Can I see the boys as well? Good Andrew! Let's do it like that once more, come on! Together! We can do the steps rather big backwards as well, do you remember? Let's just practice this dance now.

The children were also given the opportunity to reflect upon how the steps should be done backwards 'to be the same'. After that they were asked to think about the positions of the fingers when the arm was stretched, and what the eyes should be directed towards:

T *Can you look at my hand now?*

If I lift it up, what happens with my fingers? You draw it as far as you can. My arm is a bit strange. It is bent in the wrong direction. But you stretch it as far as you can, it can't be like this (shows it in a wrong way) it should be long, and you should look at it as you hold it up. And when you draw it down again, you look at it all the way till it comes down, and then the other arm is coming up. You look at that instead all the way through, and so it continues. And the jumps around are done like this. (The children tried that.)



The children asked about how many steps they had to jump to come around themselves and were told that there were eight steps.

The second time around, I registered that the eyes of the children were less directed towards their classmates and the dance teacher. It was evident that the clear modeling of the teacher, with some excitement interwoven, was infectious – this time they experienced and remembered most of the things they were asked to reflect upon. I was struck by the development of the definition of the children's movements during the year: they now seemed to have more control over their bodies; some of the steps in the dance were tightly synchronised with the music; the children were quickly imitating and performing new moves.

Comment

The theme that became visible in this activity was mainly *perception of others' movements*. It was obvious that the children registered the dance through looking at the clear modeling of the dance teacher. They studied how the teacher moved both directly and through the mirror, and tried to do the same. They had been encouraged to do this all the time I studied the group. The children had been asked to study the teacher and their classmates in different settings with different aims. At the same time they started to *internalise the movements* through direct use. This process continued, as they were made aware of what the movement looked like by reflection encouraged by the teacher's questions.

The children understood how they related to the room. They also *understood how a body can be used for expression* by thinking about what kind of moves, such as the width of their steps, suited the room. This kind of reflection influenced the teaching I have studied all the way through. The children learnt established concepts, but, to a large degree, put their own words to movements. Similarly, they reflected upon how the arms and the eyes should be related to each other, and the discussion about how many steps were needed. The second time that the dance was performed the children got an opportunity to *try their own expressions and use internalised movements* at the same time as they *interacted with the music*.

The music was inseparable from the context, but it was experienced in different ways by the participants, not least because one of their senses was limited. The interaction became tighter and tighter, and probably more conscious, during the year. The children experienced music in dance settings, non-reflective as well as reflective. They had been encouraged to listen and count, and to a great extent they had been in settings where everyone was moving to the music, despite the fact that not all of them could hear everything.

Pleasure, joy and engagement were visible among them all, children and teachers. Everyone was generous to each other, and there was an atmosphere of excitement. The children were encouraged to take initiatives.

2. A session of communication and improvisation

The children were divided into couples, boy and girl. The dance teacher told them that they were to dance two by two, one dancing while the other stood still. After a while he or she would invite the other by stopping abruptly. The dance teacher showed the group with one of the girls, taking turns to dance to the music:

Well, it is like this you see, if I and Cathrine show you. One of you has to be still and let the other dance, and now it is me who is dancing. But suddenly I will stop, and directly when I stop it is the other's turn to dance. So now you can find out by yourself how you want to dance (directed to the girl). So when I stop you start and I dance like this ...

... and now it's your turn. Did you see what you are supposed to do? (directed to the group) It is good to have in mind that you have to stop at a place where it is possible for the other to see you, otherwise they won't know when to start.

The children seemed to enjoy seeing the improvisation, and the girl was praised even by the class teachers. Then it was the children's turn. Everyone seemed to be satisfied with their partners; the girls were encouraged to start dancing, and the boys to watch. They changed on



their own initiative. The dance teacher encouraged the clear movements of the girls. She requested that the children watch their partners. They were given a lot of praise at the end.

The teacher wanted to make the children aware of how they danced and showed them different styles to encourage them to value what is beautiful and what is not:

You were very good and it all went very well. But I would like you to look at me now: I am going to put on some music, I would like to know if you think I dance nicely.

The dance teacher dances with low intensity and little variation.

Was it good?

The children answer in one voice: *No.*

The teacher dances again, now with high intensity and variation.

T Was it better now?

C Yes!

T Why was it better?

One of the girls shows some moves.

C There were more movements.

T Were there more movements?

C Yes!

T Is it all about doing as many movements as you can?

C Yes!

T If I do like this, is it good then?

Dances hysterically.

C No!!

T But there were rather too many movements.

One of the girls imitates the hysterical dance.

T Was that good then?

C No!

Some more of the children try.

T Look at Richard here, he has got it. Does he do the same all the time?

C No!

T No, he changes movements now and then. Very good Richard!

The dance teacher asked the children about the difference and was given varying answers. They all agreed that it was the variation between movements that made a dance look beautiful. The teacher offered the children some advice about what they could have in mind to vary their dancing:

One small piece of advice is to vary between dancing up in the ceiling and dancing close to the floor. Sometimes you dance very fast and sometimes you make soft movements, sometimes hard ones. And then you have to mix. Imagine a bag of candy: you want to have a mix, some different tastes. It is exactly the same with the dance.

When the children tried the activity once more, the patterns of movements did become more varied. Possible another reason for this was that the mirror was taken away. The teacher acknowledged some of the initiatives.

Before the third time through the game, the teacher told the children that the music would change character, and encouraged them to dance in a way that suited the music. She also asked them to look at and be inspired by others' statues:

Now you were very, very good. When I start the music now it will sound a bit different, and we will see if you can dance to that kind of music. Then...if I shall stay as a statue, I can make one up myself, or I can look at the others' and get inspiration from them. I dance over here, and I see Eva's statue, it was nice, so I do the same, or quite the same, or I do the same but on the floor, or I do the same I put myself behind Eva like this. It should be the same to some extent.

Finally the activity was developed to train the children's ability to change their dance according to the character of the music, and to 'borrow' ideas from each others' statues. I noticed that the movements were changed, and that the children actually inspired each others' statues. The activity included many aspects. The teacher asked the children to reflect



upon their dancing, their body and their movements, which was important to make the children aware of how the body can be used as means of expression.

Comment

That the children were now articulating their movements more clearly and individually was probably a consequence of many interwoven factors, in which all their senses and powers of reflection were involved. The improvisation training made a lot of things possible. The first two themes that were actualised were *awareness of their part in communication* and the *use of incorporated movements*. Several kinds of communication became visible in this activity: the children had to take the initiative to hand the dance over, to make contact, and be visible to their partner. They had to decide how to dance and how to look like a statue. They used and challenged their own internalised movements. When I compared this activity to earlier improvisation training, I saw that they had a lot more movements to choose from, and that they had better control over them. They also had opportunities to *incorporate* movements better through reflection upon what they did and what they could do. A metaphor, the candy bag, was used, which functioned as a symbol for variation. Reflection was interwoven together with their dancing, and I imagined that their knowledge of dance was more aware and better incorporated than earlier. The children became aware of how they moved their bodies, and how they could be moved to express something specific in accordance with the theme: *understanding how a body can be used as expression*.

The *interaction with the music* was further developed when the children were encouraged to change their movements according to the music when the activity was run through a third time. The difference was noticeable, even without modeling, and it was obvious that they were inspired by the nature of the music. At the same time it was clear that they *perceived* the others' representations of a statue and developed them. Even this strengthened the communicative abilities of the children. As the dance teacher commented:

To try to put the character of the music into dance is important and is also what gives a strong jittery feeling of dance joy: to be as one with the music, to exist as a streamlined object in symbiosis with its surroundings.

3. 'Form a work of art' dance

After the warming up dance it was time for the 'artist and lump of clay' game. The children paired up, and whilst one of them pretended to be a sculptor, the other pretended to be a lump of clay that the sculptor was moulding. The 'sculptor' forms their imaginary clay as a dance to music. One child moulded a rock singer, another a begging child. When they had finished there was a 'vernissage' (artists' showing) in which the 'sculptors' were encouraged to explain their expressions of art. In this exercise the children developed their awareness of the possibilities of dance. How can you make your body mediate a message? Co-operation was needed too, for example to keep a stable position. The children also learnt what was *not* possible to do with their bodies. It became obvious that they progressed by trial and error, and formed their friend gradually; one thing led to another. The 'clay' dancers' actions also served as role models for others. The teacher introduced the children to the vernissage activity in an engaging way: the 'sculptors' walked around the viewing with drinks and snacks, and were asked to explain what they tried to express with their friends' bodies. The teacher encouraged the children to respect each other's thoughts and expressions. They all went into their roles with some empathy:

T *What can this be? You are to stand up in a proper way! Look here, when you are a sculptor you look at the art with great seriousness. What can be said about this work of art?*

C *He is diving, or drills in the ground, close to nature.*

T *What did you think about when you made it?*

C *I just did it!*

T *Next time I want you to have some thoughts behind your work.*

T *What do they represent?*

The children give different suggestions.

T *Let's look at the next statue. You walk with dignity, calm and still, we approach the next object. What do you think it represents?*



C He sings and has cool clothes. He loves everyone.

The 'sculptor' had an opportunity to communicate in words what their statue meant. They were offered the chance to reflect upon what they meant with their statue. They were also encouraged to listen to the spectators to see if they had understood the message. Everyone had to imitate the last statue, then the teacher made the transition to lunchtime.

Comment

I would like to take the themes *initiatives, joy and engagement, and awareness of part in communication* as starting points for commenting on this activity. The game was characterized by the joy and engagement of all the participants. The children were encouraged to take initiatives and to be creative in many ways: the statues became quite different, and the participants lived in a fantasy world. The children were also made aware of how they communicated at several levels in their performance, in their expression of the statue, and in their reflections on these. In the sculptor game they had much space for using *their bodies as means of expression*. It became obvious that a body can express several things and emotions. The children chose individual versions, had the chance to reflect upon what characterised a special expression, and how a body could be used for that. Also, the teacher used her body when modeling the vernissage world.

4. Hard-of-hearing children—or dancers?

'There are no children, just human beings...' von Wright (2000) writes with reference to Janusz Kurczak⁴. This way of looking at human beings implies that there are no hard-of-hearing children either, which is what I understand the children experienced in the dance setting: they were dancers. This is important to underline, as disabled dancers tend to be defined by their difference (Schwyzer, 2005) which provides an interesting and clear basis for the specific context of the study: a school for children who were deaf or had limited hearing. Whilst they all had impaired hearing, they were primarily children in a focused setting where dance was the primary activity. They experienced the situation, participated in communication and learnt the dance in different ways - maybe even more individually than children in other groups *because* one of their senses was more or less impaired. One aspect that was made clear was how complex the functions of our senses are. According to Merleau-Ponty (1997) perception is an holistic activity in which our senses are mixed and inform each other. Sometimes I noticed that a child used eyesight to learn new movements, such as waltz steps in the right tempo, but I cannot say to what extent the sense of hearing was used to do this. The learning of dance is constituted in the holistic context, in this case a classroom with other children, a dance teacher and two regular teachers. These last were participating in the same conditions as the children, but as role models, dancing partners and signers. They were very keen to help whenever signing or interpretation was needed for learning and communicating.

The regular teachers also had a deep insight into how the children functioned, and into what role the dance activities had in school. For example, the teachers told me that some of the children were very reserved in sports and music, but participated actively in dance. Additionally, the teachers' attitudes to the dance activities was crucial for the interest and engagement of the children. This point was underlined by the dance teacher when she said that it was *'incredibly important for the dance development that the teachers were sincerely engaged'*. The following paragraphs represent some of the teachers' thoughts and their reflections regarding the participation of the children:

We have read through your last reflections about the dance. What you describe feels just the same way for us. We agree and confirm what you have seen and written. The dance was very much appreciated by the children (and the adults). We also see that the children develop. We also see how some children might have some troubles in other subjects (reading, writing, mathematics) had the chance to shine in the dance activities, and felt that it was their 'thing' and become very capable. Great!

(Written reflections from the teachers in the younger group)

iv. *Hur man älskar ett barn. (How to love a child)*. (1992). S. III. Stockholm: HLS Förlag.



I think your reflections are exactly like mine. The complicated steps in the polka dance that they worked so hard with, they learnt really well after your visit. The dance teacher is so good, pedagogic and persistent so they managed everything she wanted in the end. The dance is a very joyful and developing activity for the children. It has been a pleasure to have you visiting our school.

(One of the teachers in the older group)

5. Summarising comments

In this section I want to summarise the results by connecting them to the complex context in which the dancing children interacted with their classmates, teachers, the music and the room. Through being together with others in the music education room they became aware of their part in the communicative situation. They developed as communicative beings by using dance as an aesthetic language. At the same time as the body was the starting point for movement, communication and learning, the children also became more and more aware of the body's functions: they took control and could conceptualise themselves in its terms. This also strengthened their ability to use verbal language, which is important, given that hard-of-hearing children are, for obvious reasons, not offered an equal vocabulary to that of other children.

Through dance activities the children became accustomed to the room they existed in, as well as to the fact that their bodies lived and interacted with it. Everything took place in the music education room in which the music and its structures became incorporated and reflected. The teachers were, in different ways, responsible for what happened in the room, and how it was in interaction with the children. The dance teacher changed between acting as an art inspirer, 'story-teller', instructor, listener, fosterer and facilitator. In this dedicated education room the children's communicative ability was spurred on in accordance with the basic ideas of the study. They experienced an 'I can' feeling when it came to being themselves, and found themselves engaged in different forms of communication. They had the opportunity to make choices that were confirmed by teachers as well as classmates. They were able to 'show themselves', and were encouraged to 'be directed towards others in a playful way'. As the dance teacher said, '*movements get the body and the joy going*'.

Another aspect of the dancing was taking the opportunity to become inspired, by developing different expressions then choosing your own in a social context. The teacher commented on this in the following way:

Variation is often hard to manage. To have incorporated a large repertoire of different steps, tried different tempos and dynamics, got to know the character of different parts of the body and the possibilities for the room are preconditions. Then there has to exist some sort of guiding frame or reasoning. I think I will work further with different clear frames. I have to think for a while ...this is an important goal for the school, to let the children express themselves independently in movement.

Discussion of the method and further thoughts

The study answered the research questions in a broad, rich way. And whilst the method and approach that were chosen worked satisfactorily, I still want to discuss some aspects of how the study was carried out. Firstly, I want to comment on how the study was not just pure action research, but a phenomenological study in the spirit of action research. The study shows that a phenomenological approach harmonises very well with action research. These two approaches share the basic assumption that readers must be able to hear the voices of the participants, and that the activities are studied in their normal settings (van Manen, 1997; Winter & Mun-Giddings, 2001). When it came to the analysis, I tried to move between close proximity and distance from the material itself and the study as a whole. I think that phenomenological analysis has enabled this to be done properly. In the process of writing I have tried to take into consideration the experiences and thoughts of all participants, and to communicate them in a way that is possible to recognise and justify.



Secondly, to strengthen the reliability of the study I want to discuss some aspects of action research: engagement, dialogue and usefulness (Bradbury & Reason, 2001). So far as engagement and dialogue are concerned, to begin with I want to make my own role clear: I was open with my aims, invited others to engage in dialogue, and shared my reflections and thoughts about the study and the project. All the time and responsibility for the development of the research has been mine. Next, the general class teachers were fully engaged in the activities, according to an agreement with the dance teacher. They communicated their reflections in e-mails, even though not to a great extent. Their thoughts strengthened my observations and contributed to my knowledge about the children outside the dance room. This communication has taken a large role in the validation. Lastly, the dance teacher reflected more thoroughly, both in speech and writing, which influenced the development of the study. Our conversations and written communications contributed to a deeper inter-subjective knowledge about the intentions and consequences of designing and running dance activities, which I hope is communicated in the text. Turning to usefulness: the results of the study seem to be very helpful insofar as they can be used in aesthetic activities which focus communication in special educational settings – not only with hard-of-hearing children – as the different themes can inspire the development of new activities. I imagine that they could also be used in the education of dance teachers, and perhaps other educators who combine aesthetic activities and education too. Finally, they can be used to legitimise hard-of-hearing children's participation in dance activities.

There is still a lot of research to do about dance activities with hard-of-hearing children. All the themes of this study could be studied in greater depth: how the children improvise; which internalised movements they use and what they try to express; how they internalise movements and music; and how they experience participation in the activities. The latter questions are all about moving from focus on a child to children's own perspective.

The study might also inspire new studies of special educational settings. How can dance be used in settings where children with other impaired functions are participating? Whatley (2007) draws attention to some of the challenges of providing a meaningful dance experience to disabled students in higher education. She focuses on how the performers and their work is viewed. The research underlines the notion that lack of aesthetic education and performance opportunities reinforce their position of being 'other'. This demands further studies from participants' perspectives. Other questions might be: how are disabled dancers incorporating dance as means of expression? What is specific to children with low attention spans? How can dance strengthen the self-esteem of children with reading and writing problems? The combinations are many and very interesting. Then there are questions concerning the education of dance teachers: what do institutions communicate when it comes to offering children an aesthetic language such as dance? What dilemmas are highlighted (see for instance Chappell, 2007) and what do student teachers learn in relation to them? What conceptions are communicated? How are they applied and how do they influence children over a longer perspective into the future?

There are two last reflections that I want to share. Firstly, in work in which children are told to internalise an aesthetic language, artistic role models are needed in the form of teachers who are interested in the learning processes of the children, which can be a great challenge (Chappell, 2007). Secondly, I want to stress that it became obvious that the children in the study had opportunities to identify themselves as dancers, and not primarily as hard-of-hearing children.

About the Author

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