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THESIS PROJECT

**Thoughts of body-space awareness through
dance for pre-school children**

FRANCIS MASKENS

ABSTRACT**DATE:**

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<p>As I look back on my own education, I have come to the realisation of how dance has supported my growth and development as a human being and later as an artist and educator. I hope there can be a world where all children are met and supported in a way that best suits their needs within their education and learning.</p> <p>My question within the thesis is: how can dance support pre-school children's development in their education. The thesis speaks about how we can teach children, how dance can support relationship with oneself, space and one another. My aim is to better understand how dance could be of benefit to preschool children's development of body-space awareness. More specifically my purpose in this inquiry was to find ways dance could support motor skill and creative development in preschool children.</p> <p>The inquiry was done in collaboration with Duckies bilingual daycare in Helsinki, where I facilitated five dance classes in the spring of 2024. My thesis describes a practical section of the inquiry. This query uses qualitative research method of participant observation to inquire and log how dance could support pre-school children's interactions with space and body. I collected the data in the format of voice recordings, that I made after each session to reflect my observations.</p> <p>Through my thesis I noticed that especially dance exploration can be a way of supporting the teacher and students work, through its spontaneous and multi-layered ways of connecting with self, each other and space.</p> <p>The child as a learner, in my thoughts within this thesis, is a person to be fostered and supported. But also, someone to learn from. We are in a sense all children and dance a canvas for bodily exploration and consciousness of relation between ourselves and the world's complexities.</p> <p>The field of dance pedagogy is supported by this work through its questions. The observation of children's embodied learning and connection with the world through dance, allows us as pedagogues to better understand how learning through the body can occur. Children's reactions to movement explorational tasks allow to understand how we as educators can best support curiosity and engagement. Dance pedagogical research and working with children supports discussion on how dance can be meaningful, educational support from the very start of education.</p>	
KEYWORDS Early childhood education, dance pedagogy, body-space relationship, embodiment, play, environment, dance, responsibility, neurodivergence, childhood	

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Starting points

As I write this thesis thoughts come up of what dance in education means to me, and what it could mean for the future generations. Next to me is my young daughter, representing a new generation. How can I, as a teacher, an artist and a father make the world a little better and how might dance in education connect to that inquiry? Our connection to our environment starts in infancy. How we are introduced to the world is pivotal to our relationship with our surroundings, our sphere. We begin connecting with our surroundings through the body and all its sensory channels.

There is a significant difference between my experience of the world as an adult and that of a child. The world through a child's eyes starts blurred, seeing very little colours, shapes and bright lights. A child's understanding of their surroundings develops at a rapid pace. One of our first environments is usually home. Home is safety, and home is where we might take our first steps. For an infant everything is new. We develop in relation to and through engaging with our environment. In a sense we are all children, as there is always something more to explore and discover.

As a child develops an understanding of their surroundings, they most likely are expected to adapt to an adult centred environment. An example of this being the urban framework of a city, encompassing pathways, obstacles and pedestrian rules. Through reflecting on memories of my own childhood, I found that due to how my brain works and having attention deficit disorder I experienced city life as distracting. Much of city life is built around catching one's attention.

Cities have foundational rules such as looking for oncoming traffic, captivating advertisements and social-cultural norms especially around space. As a child I understood the concept of paying attention but not where to focus.

These same rules and expectations of paying attention can be seen within educational contexts such as a school classroom. A pre-school classroom may encompass objects and space to navigate such as furniture and learning equipment. These thoughts on what a classroom consists of makes me wonder, what would be the perfect learning space for a child? No size meets all of course but how can we meet our children's needs in this educational context best to our ability. Is the furniture we provide for children's schooling hours comfortable? For me I find a safe, trusted space with adequate spacing arrangement and tools for learning the best.

The physical environment such as the arrangement, availability and texture of space plays a role in the learning. Equally the absence of obstruction can support space for play and exploration. Within the space, social interaction and the presence of community, such as familiar teachers and children supports trust and a safe space. I see all these as important elements and choices that can create a healthy learning environment. Each child has different needs. To have a safe and comfortable environment where to explore in is important for cultivating participation, wellbeing and development. Equally the scheduling of the children's activities, such as after outdoor play can affect how the children connect to the class. Starting the day with calmer activities and then leading more physical activities after outdoor play may create more physical willingness and higher energy levels. Creating a schedule and working out where to place a more physical class such as dance may help with getting the most from that class.

In my thesis I have decided to narrow down the age bracket to pre-school age children. The reasoning for this was to find a target educational group and inquire about the possible benefits of dance within their education. I would describe pre-school as a transitional educational period. In Finland children in pre-primary education average the age of six, generally completing one year before transitioning into primary education. I chose this age bracket to be focused on, as there is a multitude of changes happening at this stage of learning.

My question is: how can dance support pre-school children's development in their education. As I write about dance in my thesis, I focus on it as an art form, as well as a versatile way of engaging with the body through movement. My interpretation of dance is that it is formed through imagination, choices, possible rules. It may also carry aesthetics such as change, rhythm and choices of movement. My thesis also wishes to stress that dance is partially a basis of movement structure.

Dance as well as movement is a whole bodied experience and not only an observed movement. There is intention in the creation of dance, there is the relationship with space and a multi-sensory, cognitive connection. The movement structure is amongst all of these, and all are connected within the frame of orientation, motion, space and time.

1.2. Purpose and aim

My key purpose and intention in my thesis study is to seek support in finding ways that could be practically operationalized within the field of dance in early years education. My thesis is not wanting to state there is no dance within early child education already, as some kindergartens in Helsinki for example, have dance within their structure of the

school week. Through my thesis I wish to inquire and discuss the possibilities of dance in pre-school learning through my own lens as an artist pedagogue.

My aim is to better understand how dance could be of benefit to preschool children's development of body-space awareness. More specifically my purpose in this inquiry was to find ways dance could support motor skill and creative development in preschool children.

1.3. Reasonings

As I look back on my own learning when I was young, I did not fit into the English state school's curriculum for learning and outcome. Schools in the U.K. generally start at around five years old. Performance and IQ tests used to start from the ages of seven and up. I was an underachiever in these performance tests which resulted in how I was viewed by the school's faculty and eventually how I viewed myself. When I turned nine, I was taken to a special education specialist who diagnosed me with attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyspraxia, and dyscalculia. I switched schools as advised by the specialist and began attending a specialist school called Stowford College, a private school for neurodivergent children. The change in schooling from an early age has led me to understand that many different educational frameworks and support systems are needed. I was fortunate to be diagnosed at such an early age and have been supported since. I realise from my years in school that I greatly succeeded in the arts and physical activities. These subjects boosted my confidence and are probably what led me to begin dancing.

Dance has been the biggest support in my learning, though it was not in my school educational framework early on. Instead, I got to go to dance classes after school. At the age of fourteen I suffered from difficulties with co-ordination, organisation, as well as

difficulties in basic motor tasks such as handwriting and typing. I found the world wasn't built for me when I was a teenager. Society had constructed a world that I had to keep up in, a world where I was expected to have high functioning cognitive skills and motor skills at a certain age.

Sometimes I feel like the world is not really built for any child or age. Children especially are expected to live in what seems to me an adult centred world, and as such the understanding of a world for childhood is dictated and constructed by adults. I have encountered little research where children are the main voice of educational studies to do with child wellbeing. In general, in my search for literature for dance in early childhood education I have not found many sources.

However, I have found sources available that are excelling the topic of art and childhood such as Tuire Colliander's writings on the practice of artistic agency for children. Colliander (2024, p. 13) states "Taking children's perspectives into account may open new worlds, previously invisible to others, especially to adults." I could not agree more.

Dance may support in revealing how different ways of learning can happen. The child's reactions and perspectives through engaging with bodily exploration, may show how they experience themselves and space, rather than framing the response to be only vocal explanation and abstract of full bodily experience. If I listen to how children perceive and experience the world, I may find new and better ways to engage, meet and teach those children.

In Dean's (2016. Abstract.) article *Thinking feeling and relating: Young children relate to dance*, they refer to Stake (2005) and Yin (2005), that bodily based learning using play is often overlooked by educators in early childhood education. Also, the study in the article presented findings that dance enabled engagement in embodied thinking,

imaginative problem solving and developed multi modal semiotic meaning. This enhanced collective agency and a stronger sense of self identity.

Such thought that children's agency, thinking and voice can be supported by dance is fundamentally important to then how we can further support them in education. I believe that the notion of children being merely learners and is an outdated approach. Children, in my view as a pedagogue, need to have agency and freedom of expression for learning to take place. Dance may offer a freedom of expression through its different variations such as improvisation, that can allow spontaneous learning to happen. This in my opinion has potential to breach the gap of the disconnect between educational rigid learning expectations and actual experiential learning.

Payne and Costas (2020. P. 297.) writes about the importance of exploring how creative dance can be framed within experiential learning, recognising its benefits and how it can help us conceptualise how and why creative dance may be taught in kindergartens. They also emphasise the difference between this and criteria and examination-based learning. (Payne and Costas. 2020. P. 297.) This supports my thoughts on how dance, can support children's conceptualisations and explorations of the world in educational settings.

Children at pre-school age often interact with the world physically as well as vocally. Through dance children may learn and discover the world in a way that is perhaps more open in practice. It allows interaction with other bodies, space and oneself in a way that makes it possible for the child to experiment with many choices and possibilities. It allows the child to express themselves, connect with emotions, confidence, creativity and agency, and with this dance can be an attribute through the ways it supports reflection, emergence and encounters. Other educational learning structures are important, however dance is not outcome based but experiential, which may support, create balance or contrast with other early childhood subjects.

Pastorek Gribson et al (2022, p. 344) states:

What stands out is that dance supports the general pedagogical ambitions of the teachers and is understood as a tool for reaching many aspects of the curriculum. Difficulties to describe what specific knowledge dance can contribute becomes visible, as dance generally is linked to other aesthetic and non-aesthetic areas.

The use of dance as a subject within education may also support the teacher's possibilities. Dance as a method for exploration can allow the teacher to find new ways of introducing and exploring subject matter. However, dance has its limitations, due to its need for active engagement and connotations as an art form with aesthetics.

In reflection on my education, the essence my prior English schooling as a child does not correspond to how I want to teach. The typical teaching I experienced involved measurements and required linear progression. As a neurodivergent child I was marginalised due to the challenge of keeping up with the pacing of education, and its drive to clear milestones. The teaching was rigid and wasn't aligned with how I learnt as an individual. Pace, timing and diversity of learning are things I consider incredibly important as an art pedagogue. In my own pedagogy do I expect the learner to digest knowledge in a specific timeframe that is unnatural. I am also speaking about the dynamic of a teacher and student. The allowance of time to digest information and the format the information is given in should be dialogical.

As an artist and pedagogue, I perceive early childhood education in Finland as an important educational stage, and a bridge to more formal education. However, I see there is a reasonable and probable cause to believe that factors such as technology and environment affect the learning processes. This is clear already with the expectation of

technological competence in early schooling. Perhaps there could be more limitation on how much technology screens are used in educational setting? In terms of cognition, I do question what could be considered the unnatural relationship with laptops, tablets and phones. In my view they are not supporting movement development nor encourage physical activity. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2016, p.14) also recommends three hours minimum of physical activity for pre-school children, and advises against lengthy periods of sitting with screen time.

In my practice I feel there is a need to facilitate engagement and create meaningful, openly dialogical and natural encounters. The atmosphere facilitated in a teaching environment is important to me due to the emphasis of which the learning environment can affect learning outcomes. A learning atmosphere can change through fluctuation of one or many learners' engagement in a subject. This engagement for a subject and the learning atmosphere can affect how a subject is learned and digested.

In my pedagogical view ways of finding connecting engagement with a subject can be through reflection, sharing and active choice. Students get to oversee their own learning processes through dialogue and sharing and have agency. Cultivating open dialogue between teachers and students through sharing and discussing allows connections and a more diverse learning outcome, I believe. To facilitate such an environment for learning I have needed to reflect on my own experiences as a learner and as a teacher.

My own understanding of development and learning resonates with the notion that I am always in a process of learning myself. Positive and negative experiences produced by being taught by others has affected and shaped the way in which I teach. These experiences are personal to me and my own learning and have shaped how I approach the morality and professionalism of teaching as well as the responsibility of it.

The stage of childhood as viewed by Phillippe Aries in their book *Centuries of childhood* (1962) is only recently acknowledged. In my view academic frameworks in western curriculums often emphasise childhood stages, but from the teacher perspective. I see little dialogue between children and adults in the framing of their learning. Children's learning and development comes at different stages. Often, I find an expectation of children to reach milestones in development and education at very specific times. If these targets aren't met, then it may be the child is considered behind. I am really against this kind of thinking and believe that children should be able to have the individual time and support they need as individuals.

2. DANCE IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

2.1. The child as a learner

I would describe childhood as innocence, constant change and development, gaining of personal first-hand experience and building identity. As a child we are dependent on the parent or guardian to guide us. When I teach, I cannot and do not expect a student to be a blank canvas. I acknowledge the students existing experiences and skills and meet them as individuals. Equally I believe children should be met with the possibility for agency, personal experiences to flourish in learning and time to explore. Children come with their own personal experience and their active experience of the subject the teacher presents. For me it's important that when children are learning there is a real opportunity for dialogue and response with the teacher.

“I take it that the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1997, p. 7). It is important to acknowledge that we all have our own lived experience, beliefs and ideas of the world we live in. Sometimes the students' previous experiences and thoughts are challenged and there may be some friction. To work through this a dialogical approach is important for something to move forward.

Childhood is now not only cultivated and supported by schooling but also increasingly by technology. As I stated before, technology is used in schools and kindergartens to support learning. As well as this, in certain formats there is the use of artificial intelligence. The development of artificial intelligence has begun to influence how information is accessed and structured. A question now is how it can support agency and the obtainment of knowledge. Whilst the use of AI may support access to information it also raises the question; how do children secure the opportunities to explore and create. AI uses framings and algorithms which then affects what information is available. With

the use of technology in educational settings how does it support awareness, development and experience. Dance can support lived experience and exploration. The use of dance may also support agency, empathy and relationship with others and self. In an age of technology perhaps dance emphasises embodiment and critical understanding of the world.

How can information and knowledge develop if it is not openly shared? Traditionally institutions hold knowledge and sometimes gatekeep access of information by holding it central to the organisation. The access to information such as dance education would be through class or lecture. Now with the possibility to access dance online directly impacts the experience of learning the subject itself. Certain dance styles may trend on social media platforms; this then impacts the interest communities have for certain techniques and styles. The use of social media also frames dance through its use of attention grabbing. Social media allows informal space where dance can rapidly be shared and circulate communities through its focus on grabbing the viewers' attention. But critically I feel the essence of dance is an embodied practice, something that cannot fully be learned from a screen. Dance education through media and online is in my view one tool for exploration and embodied experience.

To understand the future of early childhood education and how it is being affected by the world moving forward, we must also look at the past. My understanding is that we do not know much of what schooling was like in the past without documentation. Aries (1962, p. 137) states: "The schoolboy's life, in school and out of school, depended for a long time – until the beginning of the nineteenth century – on habits contracted in the Middle Ages". I believe that there is a clear historical, pedagogical change that evolves but hasn't always been noted or documented. This is different to schooling now where we can access and document information with greater precision. I can examine different schooling approaches today to see how education has evolved. This gives an idea of how education could have been for children historically. It also gives a clearer vision for me of where education is possibly going.

bell hooks (2010, p. 23) states “As leaders and facilitators, teachers must discover what the students know and what they don’t know. This discovery happens only if teachers are willing to engage students beyond a surface level.” Who am I to teach a child when I am still learning? The way I approach this question is that I have my own voice and experiences. These shape who I am, and in dialogue with a student I can share my own perspectives guided by these experiences.

A notion from Philippe Aries (1962) is that a child’s role in society has changed both amongst immediate family as well as in society. In the past children have sometimes had to take lots of responsibility within the family; take up work or aid family members in errands and tasks. We know now the preciousness, importance and innocence of childhood, but 200 years ago children sadly were amongst workers. To teach children is to offer empathy, cater wellbeing and emotional investment, to recognize that the adult is always responsible for the child. When I teach, I am aware of my responsibilities as the teacher. It’s my responsibility to listen, foster agency and allow time for genuine reflection. I try in my work to break hierarchies by inviting and suggesting different ways students could engage with the dance material I have chosen.

Henry A. Giroux (1997, p. 95) states “We live in a time when democracy is in retreat. Nowhere is this more obvious than on the current debate surrounding the relationship between schooling and authority.” My feeling is that increased expectation is placed on the teacher by society. Early childhood education teachers and teachers in general in state institutions are getting larger classes less time to prepare. Because of this there can be less time to meet students and less time for interaction.

Philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (b. 1921) in Apple et al (2010, p. 130) states: “Education can help us to understand the world we live in and can make us better prepared to transform it, but only if we deeply connect education to the larger realities in which people live.” I find that the engagement between the student and teacher is limited unless

a class is clearly focused on interaction. If there is no dedicated time for dialogue, the democracy of student voice in the classroom seems lessened to me.

When I was young, I had private schooling with the intention to be in a smaller populated classroom with more access to intermit teaching. This upbringing has developed a part of me in which culturally I favour smaller classes pedagogically. Howard Gardner (1983, p. 35) speaks of “A promise” a term used to describe how surroundings affect the learners’ chances to excel. Hypothetically If I were to be around dancers from a young age, I may have more of a chance to excel in dance than if I were not to be intensively exposed. This in some ways argues the term gifted, as in my view exposure is the key feature to excelling in a discipline. Gifted however can be argued as there are many who succeed in a subject through natural capability.

Gardner (1983, p. 35) goes on to speak of “genetic pools”, through natural selection arguably possessing talents through populated distinction and inherited knowledge. I can of course see that as my parents both were professional dancers and, I have been exposed to dance through them at a young age. This entails my awareness that dance can be a profession that I can succeed in. But as for the artform I do not see myself as inheriting perhaps what would be described as a gift of moving. I have inherited ideologies that perhaps help in the professional dance field. But a further question is how much it has impacted how I teach dance to others. I have been affected by my families’ mannerisms and choices. I feel that all people have the ability to dance and that no one has a higher capability of dancing, but that dancing is the gift all people have. Of course, there are styles and aesthetics, but these do not define dance in its principle.

Who am I to facilitate class when I have been through the inaccessible private schooling, the historical development of conservatism that favours those who speak aloud before listening? With the access to art at an early age and my own demographic of being born into a white, English speaking, middle class family, how and perhaps what should I be

teaching? This question is important to me as to be the sensitively attuned teacher I wish to become I must question what experience, mannerisms and history I am sharing. I believe that when I am teaching dance it is fundamental that I see teaching as an exchange of ideas. Most importantly it is imperative to recognize, that each person has their own realities, histories, reasonings and understandings. It is important to create a safe and communal canvas for fostering learning together. Philosopher Lauri Rauhala (2005, p26-28) speaks of holistic conceptions of a human being. He speaks of the importance that all forms of existences are essential. In practice this means that human's variety of existence and experience is what makes us complete and whole. In essence everything that I am creates who I am and how I teach. All people have their own lived experiences. The wealth of knowledge we as communities have when we combine our knowledge can be liberating and decentralising.

The child as a learner is a person to be fostered and supported. But also, someone to learn from. We are in a sense all children and dance a canvas for bodily exploration and consciousness of relation between ourselves and the world's complexities. Young children are in many ways the greatest teachers, they ask questions directly and truly. I feel in a good education system the child is valued as a teacher as well as a learner. I bring my own experiences and history I've addressed in this work but what about the child's experience as a shaping of the lesson? Can a child's thoughts and questions fully guide a movement class? How can we cultivate an educational space where children can safely and freely mould the class?

2.2. Dance, Motor Function, skills and childhood

As an artist and a dance pedagogue I see motor function as the basis of human movement. In dance motor function is the existence of anatomical movement with an engagement of conscious artistic intent. Wilmerding et al. (2009, p. 2) states "In dance, motor learning is the process that allows dancers to learn and execute basic and sophisticated skills that

are not acquired through normal human motor development”. Skill, talent and knowledge are not simultaneous in their connection to movement intent. As an example, one can already acquire the act of jumping before being evaluated or witnessed, leading to the skill being unlevelled but more attentive of the situation.

“Motor movement is necessary for the correct development of cortical networks and for consciousness to emerge” (Cebolla and Cheron, 2019, p. 8.). Motor function in early childhood ranges on an individual bases. It is also important to state that motor function is different and manifests differently in all persons as all people are unique. To say this is also to say that movement development in children is not only motor function but also cognitive connection and consciousness. This all affects the perception of body in space and the possibilities of dance and movement within space.

It’s clear to me from my own lived experience as well as my pedagogical experience with children that they are often looked at as learners. Children are questioners and see the world in different ways to adults. Imagination, creativity and play all come into how the child interacts and learns new skills within their world. Contemporary dance group improvisation uses elements of interaction, playfulness and discipline. I find myself wondering what dance improvisation’s role could be in early child education in Finland. If perhaps the chaos or improvisation could bring about spontaneous learning and attunement.

I find warmth in knowing dance can be an inspiring and useful tool for learning about one’s body. In my pedagogical view dance can go beyond the initial anatomical connection with movement and space and go into what we feel and imagine. However, whilst we look through the lens of dance on supporting motor function it’s important to determine what dance is.

Vander Elst et al (2023 p. 150.), refers to Basso et al (2021), that dance from the Eurocentric view involves the body moving purposefully for art, self-expression and meant to be witnessed. A more anthropological approach is that dance is a cultural and multi sensorial experience.

Dance can be a social activity, done alone, participated in, observed and in some cases seen as a sport. Dance can be through awareness and choice of movement. What I mean by this is not all dance needs to be entirely conscious; I interpret dance as some amount of movement, reflection and intention. In other thoughts dance is not necessarily just movement but a full-bodied experience. Dance can also be through movement that is reactive, such as falling and naturally catching oneself, but this action then sets intention and afterwards a reflection of the movement.

2.3. What feeds my pedagogical practice

Annantalo Helsinki is a house for children's art and culture. In April 2024 I implemented a solo piece at Annantalo called *The Moving Chandelier*. The pedagogical work was designed around reflection and implementation. I created the piece with the thought that through moving in dialogue with space, I could present how space shapes movement. The work made me want to foster a kind of spacial empathy in which I, the artist am in dialogue with the visited space. I am there to witness the space and mould myself amongst it. This work connects well to my pedagogy of witnessing first and then reacting due to its nature of dialogical encounter with space as a being. It also delves into how I, as a pedagogue interpret space.

Another piece in the same year I co-created and implemented was the piece *Table with no seating*. The work was created at Oulu Theatre in-between the months of June and August 2024. The working group consisted of myself, Timo Filip Salonen and Juho

Sarno. Before the work we collected material and data through interviews, written personal experiences and discussions with one another.

The discussion between me and Juho Sarno was about the embodied experience of dining tables, the cultural etiquette and limitations such a setting poses. It came clear that formalising meals at a table can be discomfoting for many in the way one is seated close to others. My personal experiences came out with in the discussion that I often felt a sense of sinking into my seat, a trapped feeling within formal dining experiences. The idea also of confined space or the feeling of confined space was discussed as a way of showing this feeling. I spoke of bodily experiences how proximity to others, the possibilities of movement and access resulted in discomfort. This thought process or memory presents how space, movement and feeling are intertwined, as the body is responsive of space and is a whole system of connections.

Later discussions with audience members presented a finding that for some with neurodivergence, there was a connection between formal table attendings and stress. The stress spoken about appeared in the negative sense with the result of “masking ones neurodivergence” or/and becoming overwhelmed. The work again links to the notion of the body and its multisensory being subjected to space and element of empathy perhaps being abstracted for social conformism.

The use of space was connective to feeling. The space between me and the other artists on stage presented mood and relationship. The closeness of bodies reflected warmth. Other times physical distance was created to produce feelings of threat and unease.

Both art creations were specifically made for children and are topical to this investigation. Both works also contributed towards the teaching practice component of my studies. In both I had the element of dialogue with space. In the making of *Table with no seating*

there was an almost tactile connection with memory, and the embodiment of touch with furniture and space crossed over also to *The Moving Chandelier*. Senses, amplification of certain childhood fragments of memory affected my movement.

Pedagogically I tested my own responses to the spaces and architecture. I covered my eyes within both creations at times to connect with something in-between the knowing and the doing. I found movement and memory collaborated in bodily exploration with space bringing emotions such as doubt and warmth. Presenting both creations, I found a strong sense that this exploration of embodiment was translatable.

Both pieces at the end had youth coming up for further discussion. They opened about their own experiences of how movements within the performances had correlated with their own memorable bodily experiences. From these performances and dialogical reflections, I want to address that as a pedagogue it is clear dance is a means for self-dialogue, understanding and memory reflection for adults and children. It is clear from these performances the connection between the relationship with space and objects, as well as empathy of space. Within these works the importance of sensitivity of movement, reflection and spatial connection was what allowed honest presentation of the performance topics.



The Moving Chandelier in dialogue with space performance for children. The picture shows Francis Maskens kneeling next to stairs, presenting a scarf of sequins. Picture taken by Emilia Kallioinen 27.04.2024.



Table with no seating performance. In the picture from left to right is Timo Filip Salonen, Juho Sarno and Francis Maskens. The picture shows them on a table closely sitting together. Picture taken by Oulu Theatre 15.08.2024.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Pedagogical framework for the kindergarten visits

I believe that the role of teacher and artist within arts education means the consequence of being expected to know what you are teaching but also be open to explore new ways. What I mean by this is the acknowledgment that there is not one way of teaching that suits a moment perfectly. I as an art teacher come to a lesson prepared with an idea of a class however there maybe change and a need to develop a class to meet needs and factors such as accessibility and availability of a student. It clear to me that I need to take on different roles within a lesson. Not only must I teach, but I must also observe, reflect and create. Creation being that of the class material, dialogue and connection.

My methodological approach has been inspired by Dr Christina Macrae's theory of the *Teacher, Researcher and Artist* (Macrae, 2013). Macrae currently teaches the master's programme in social research, childhood and youth at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is specialized in early childhood pedagogy and art-informed pedagogy. In my professional work the role of an artist and pedagogue feed into one another. In this thesis however I also took on a third role as a researcher. I used the concept of these three roles within my pedagogical work and observations. Specifically, I used the roles in pre-primary school dance classes at Duckies Kindergarten in Helsinki, Finland in spring of 2024, as well as within the pre-planning.

The importance of having different roles and the separation of them was to find different approaches for reflection, observation, and practice. Macrae (2013) describes these roles as "identities" that affect the observations, learnings, and outcomes through shifting from one identity to the other. Such roles can create paradoxes such as the teacher facilitates the dance class; the researcher seeks new approaches and findings. Equally care must be

taken as a teacher to cultivate a healthy and safe learning environment. Within the teaching framework the artist explores ways of opening creative expression.

I engaged with the framework of an artist by using methods inspired by the Segni Mossi research project (2014) and Chreotic concepts developed by Rudolf Laban (1879-1958). I used these concepts for language of the research practice as well as pedagogical and practical implementation. Segni Mossi is a project made in 2014 by the choreographer Simona Lobefaro and visual artist Alessandro Lumare.

According to Sorvari (2024, p. 1) “Segni Mossi’s playful approach challenges participants to engage in art within a social setting”. I have used Segni Mossi (www.segnimossi.net) in this practical inquiry of my thesis as a way of engaging and conceptualising space. I used large pieces of drawing paper with the children for making shapes and lines for exploring creative expression. My idea was that the lines and shapes could be visualised and walked on in the space as well moved next too. The other ways I used space was inspired by Rudolf Laban’s choreotic concepts. I used both the Segni Mossi project’s RED Training and Laban’s choreotics as a stimulus for the kindergarten sessions. I used material and movement as a dialogue and relation for exploration.

“Laban’s first choreotic concept is enlarged to include both the kinesphere and the shared space” (Preston Dunlop, 1981, p. 38). Laban’s concepts of space and kinesphere were used as an artistic framework also through working with spatial pathways. Indirect-direct, diagonal, vertical and horizontal pathways, lines and planes in the kinesphere were used for playing as well as to enhance awareness of the kinesphere itself. The use of directions was accompanied with imagery such as how animals would move. A snake would move in a horizontal line however a bird may fly vertically. This allowed the children to use interpretation, imagination and fundamentally awareness of body and space through the instruction of direction and imagery.

According to Preston-Dunlop (1981, p. 38) the kinesphere is the bodily sphere in which one reaches but does not step off support of the body. The sphere is then used as a limitation in which the children can explore how far they can reach, extend, and comprehend their personal space.

3.2. The role of a researcher

As a researcher I used participant observation as a method of qualitative research. My way of observing is best described by drawing from the book *Qualitative research in action* (May, 2002). As discussed in the book “The participant-observation researcher is the instrument for data-gathering, and thus the responsibility associated with gathering all relevant data is placed solely on the researcher. Therefore... the researcher’s personal and field-research background is very important because the information accumulated during this process will have provided him or her with the cues to more accurately decipher what is important data to record and what is not.” (May, 2002, p. 170)

Before conduction of the inquiry firstly was communication with the kindergarten. Within the prior meetings with the kindergarten there was a clear description of what the inquiry was, its reasonings and how it would be conducted. Safeguarding and ethics were also discussed together. Ethical considerations are important to acknowledge when working with people, especially children. Informed organizational and parent consent was sought in writing. The parent consent forms included opt-out clauses such as stating your child can be withdrawn at any time.

As well as this, I wrote and presented a clear justification and clarity on the project for the parents through the kindergarten's correspondence and consent form. The parental consent forms were sent out prior to the inquiry, and all forms came back positive. Equally, a research permit was created prior to the inquiry by the kindergarten for good ethical research practice.

My observations and the data were collected over a 5-week period. I collected data through observing throughout the classes and then recording the observations promptly after the class. I found that recording to track and formulate observations was like the technique automatic writing. It allowed me to be unfiltered and somewhat free from grammar or personal judgement. I have added the voice recordings to the observations; however, they are slightly edited for readability. The data I recorded consisted of participant observations, and personal reflections as a pedagogue from and within the sessions. While observing I focused on how the children navigated in a group, their responses to tasks and then my own observations of myself within the class.

I will now go into some more general observations, which will then be followed by more detailed observations in the next parts. As I think through the kindergarten sessions, my first and most important observation of the dance classes was how the children were affected by situations. The day of the first class the children had attended the new President of Finland, Alexander Stubb's inauguration. This attendance of such an event then affected the class as the children were stimulated from the change in daily activity and ritual. I noticed this brought excitement as well as a sense of instability, which then shaped how the dance class formulated. I used both the roles of being an artist and a teacher with the comprehension of engagement and possibility. My thought from this observation is that time is needed to allow reflective processing on what is happening and respond accordingly.

According to Anttila (2015) the sensory pre-reflection is spoken of as something that can be under observation. Such is the notion that pre-reflection is a reflective state that it can

be observed, and such can be consciously reflective. The allowance of reflection, consideration and response involves the aspect of time within class. When I observed the children there was a notion of biases such as what I paid attention to. I, the researcher am affected by my own situation and background. These all affect the outcome of the observations as well as the approach for collecting them.

What I also observed is that dance can be an outlet for emotion and group bonding. In this thesis I have named different children as different fruits, for their anonymity and safeguarding. An observation was that dance allowed negotiation as an art form. Both participant “Banana” and “Pear” discussed borders, the shape of the personal space and the rules in entering personal space. However, within the drawing influenced by the Segni Mossi project both children questioned their handwriting capabilities. It was interesting how drawing in the dance class context was viewed as a basis for levelling, but dance was open and without judgement of skill.

One observation I was told by a kindergarten teacher was that participant “Apple” had been presenting the dance we had been learning in my classes outside within their external play time. In my view this indicates further that dance in this age group can be positive as it was opened for further independent exploration. I find it also thought provoking how dance manifested not only in my classes but also within the day-to-day kindergarten activities. This for me presents that dance naturally can fall into different parts of the pre-school curriculum. If the child is dancing in a guided playtime, then could dance be brought into other sections of their daily education.

4. REFLECTION AND EXAMINATION

Before the first class there was an introduction and observation session. This session was not yet for research. The session was strictly for introducing what the dance classes would consist of and for me to gain an idea of the children's existing experience of dance.

4.1. Five classes

My introductory session included a round in a circle. Everyone would share their name, a favourite dance movement and their experience was of dance. What was clear from this round was that the children were greatly affected by what each other said. A teacher that was present at the time suggested the children could show how they dance. As the children moved in space, it was noticed how they bonded with one another through movement and established how to use the space. It was obvious the children had preconceptions of dance as a movement patterning in the round and moving in space. It was wonderful to see them express themselves through movement I felt great warmth in seeing giggling and laughing as they moved through space. From this we ended the introduction and I went off to configure my thoughts and what I could bring to this group.

4.1.1. 1ST Class

The first class began with the need for further introduction of what a dance class is and the rules of the class. The theme of the class was following. I used flocking, a term connected to herding. The flocking involved each child choosing a movement and the other children copying that movement whilst within a circle. I used the task in the first class for the purpose of observing of body space awareness of the children. Flocking involves seeing, visualising the movement from another being and then expanding that

movement to fit the body. This exercise involved higher levels of cognition and attention due to being copied and being the copier individually. It created a different type of awareness as the children moved within a line following the leader in front of them. There came a situation where the child as the leader wanted to run. Running was allowed within a framework where we allowed physical space to run safely. I asked the question at the end of class what is your favourite animal? A child answered dogs because dogs run. It was clear that the movement we had done in class impacted the children's interpretation. I wanted to develop into this discussion and asked what other movements does a dog do other than running?

I understood that this dance class gave a structure to think how other beings may move in similarly to my own movement. We finished the class in a circle, I asked the children how they felt; "Banana" stated the class was boring whilst "Apple" was very excited about moving.

Post session reflective memo of Voice recording:

So, I've just done my first class. There was a clear sense that the children wanted to run. They were very excited about the aspect and anticipation of dance. I began but first bringing in the silent fox, a hand gesture we all do to show we are listening. This helped me from the beginning to get their attention. We sat in a circle on the floor together and went through our names, and the question if we have danced before. I especially found from then on in dance tasks I gave that there is a sense it was a little challenging today to get them motivated to listen. They were intrigued to move and excited to move, however they had their own expectations perhaps of the class and wanted to test running and crashing.

Also, we did a leading game coming from flocking where I lead a movement then someone else does. There was a sense of being a part of a group and being lead but also an interest in pushing physical possibilities. If I said let's turn together, they know how to turn

around at this age, but in the way they know at this point in their lives. And that's the important thing from this class that I observed, the need to clarify the limit. How far can I go with movement? what kind of movement is this? What does this mean? Some turned on their toes, others turned on the floor like a kind of turning pendulum.

Final mentions on observations and recordings

The theme of this class was to connect with the participants, build trust and engage with how they interpreted the tasks. I was especially curious in how important running was in this class. Running came up many times and though I wish I could allow them to openly run, I felt it was safer to ask them to engage with the task by running together in a controlled way. Running often meant they wanted to sprint and then crash to the floor. This surely is important for motor development and risk taking, but as I did not know the children so well, I chose to restrict this action to keep everyone safe. I recognized that I was quite nervous attending this first class as I felt I was coming into the kindergarten's world. A world I was not familiar with and wanted to be able to engage with properly. The class went well and the children engaged with the tasks; I observed that the children often tried the tasks with full force first and then tried after with less energy.

4.1.2. 2nd Class

The children were excited within this class to explore balance. We again revisited the question of what the rules of a dance class are, now that we are meeting 3rd time together. It was clear that movement phrases were for this age group challenging at first to connect with. We quickly moved into follow the leader. I incorporated the use of different planes, animal characteristics such as flying over water like a bird, and qualities such as melting. The planes allowed the children to explore the space through levels. We tried together

each plane and characteristic resulting in different manifestations and explorations of movement in and out of the levels.

We chose together to move into copying each other's movements using the flocking method again. I asked one child at the time if they could present a movement, then pause, and then do it again while we try to copy. Witnessing this task today I noticed how emotions were often greatly attached to the movement; giggling was often done with spinning, whilst slicing the air was done with impactful excitement. There was clear indication of participation and interest in both, the witnessing and doing.

Post session reflective memo of Voice recording:

This was the second class. The children were more open for this class. I began incorporating a phrase for them to learn. I did partly so the children felt they are learning some "new moves" as they had requested. But it was also to observe the children's interpretation of the movement language I gave.

I think that the children's connection with space is often through at least from what I've observed in connection with one another. They automatically went into a lined formation to learn the phrasing and were very cautious of having their own space to move in.

Final mentions on observations and recordings

What I've taken from this class was that the relationship the children have with one another affects how they interact with the tasks. One child was missing and their friend was less confident to jump into the material compared to last class. I feel that there is

quite a tight bond between the children and that space and dance movement are both deeply affected by interaction.

4.1.3. 3rd class

Whilst dancing in space we used the game “Simon says” also know also “Kapteeni kaskee”. Within the game I observed the embodiment and response of the children. In the game the children looked and turned to places in the room using whole body movements. This is different to older age groups that may turn first with the head.

Within the session my teaching practice supervisor Tuire Colliander also observed, the children making statements on space. Statements I observed were personal space or drawing with in this class being seen critically. In one task I used a large sheet of paper, that I placed on the floor to draw on. I asked the children to draw any animal of their choosing, which led to organising quickly amongst themselves of how space on the paper was allocated.

It was clear that they were more familiar or perhaps more prepared for this task as they had more to say about their drawings in an evaluative manner than dance or movement. I decided to bring the idea of the drawings being alive through movement. I drew a long meandering line across the paper. Using the idea of Segni Mossi’s RED training as inspiration we moved along the line in our animal characteristics.

The children moved using the drawings as a visual for quality and concept. I noticed that through using drawing as a visualisation the children were able to focus on the task and it created more movement levels.

Post session reflective memo of Voice recording:

It was an interesting class we used the paper today and added animals to the paper. I gave this task of being in a space by themselves to turn.

One child (“Orange”) said in the task “This is my border”.

It’s so interesting, the exploration of physical boundaries, because it indicates the children are using and determining agency and assertion. This I think is an important and useful skill and shows that they are aware of the need for space to move spontaneously. The paper drawing also had so many things going on. Some children were addressing their drawing skills which after moving and know comments on skills I found quite curious.

I was thinking if dance was implemented more in early childhood education could it be that it would have criteria that would flow down to more self-critic. But yes, very interesting also with the Simon says game we played before this paper exercise. The full bodies movement was involved in most actions such as when I said “Simon says look to the left they don’t just move with the head but the whole body. How can dance maybe support engaging with space in this embodied way at this age?”

Final mentions on observations and recordings

I was aware in this class how the children are affected externally by society, and how this impacts the children’s perception of space. At the time of the class there was a lot on the Finnish news about the Finnish border, this seeped into the class in the children’s conversations on border and proximity. This is an example of how society can affect movement and children relationship with space.

The Segni Mossi drawings allowed a limitation for the children to engage with. This created a different kind of movement, through the walking and following of lines on the paper. The children interacted with the task by crouching, and walking which I did not expect as with other tasks they would often spin, dash or jump.

4.1.4. 4th Class

From the last session I moved my approach to add games into the beginning. One feedback from the kindergarten was to push the energetic content to the start of the session for extra focus. One teacher had observed that the children had been dancing in class and showing a dance to the teacher.

I had thought before the class how to bring a sense of different movement variations. The children of course moved wonderfully in different ways but often would fixate on the one movement with quantity over quality. I brought to the class one task, the game moving or musical statues. I would press play with different music genres such as Jazz and Pop, and the children would move in space and then pause when the music stopped. This involved often crashing to the floor and then freezing within the silence, however it did allow the children to pause in one shape. This led to them often coming back to that shape when pausing again.

Pedagogically the children were investigating recurrence of shape through embodied movement memory. After the session the teacher told me that the children had been presenting their movements they had encountered from the previous sessions. This brought me great joy; it presented that the children had been reflecting on their own experiences and there was overlap between these movement sessions and the days continuum. It showed their focus and interest was also on the physical experience of the sessions.

Post session reflective memo of Voice recording:

I found the children to be quite restless today. This is the fourth class and interestingly when they came into the room they knew the rules straight away of the dance game musical statues. They were engaged especially with the music and there was embodiment where they were doing dance movements they had done before. "Pear" was especially fascinated by the crash mat pushed up by the side of the room. I observed that they were especially engaged with the space today. The children were interested in how to be in the space such as pushing against the walls or observing the cracks in the floor. As I said earlier there was an element of restlessness, today they wanted to push boundaries a little.

The energy was different as last week they weren't so interested in pushing boundaries in the same way. I think it's possible that they picked up that the class frame was looser. But then I found this controlled chaos allowed them to be more curious. I found today that the children were trying to find more within the class and were exploring. It's interesting as a researcher what energy my class gives, it seems to influence how the children instigate dance. How I meet the children in the beginning and what energy is first given seems to affect then how they connect with materials and dance.

Final mentions on observations and recordings

The game musical statues seemed helpful for addressing self-regulation and impulse. I also found that the game through its auditory rules of listening whilst moving allowed body awareness and concentration. The children had to be able to listen as well as navigate one another's movements in the space. The stopping of the music allowed a quick response and control of movement, such as balancing and freezing.

4.1.5. 5th Class

In this class the children were in general tired. I placed the large piece of paper we had used before and invited two children to unravel the paper. As I went to my bag to access my pens the children began to jump in the paper and scrunch it. My first reaction as an artist, and researcher was to say, “no! that’s not what we are doing with that”. But as a pedagogue I looked through the lens of a pre-school child. This paper had already been explored one way, and the movement explored by them now was to interact through a different physicality.

This was and is one the most crucial moments in my inquiry. We went on to play with the paper and then move into a new task of learning a movement sequence to some music. I did this because I wanted to see how they interpreted a dance sequence with steps, levels and turns. The sequence was met with excitement and enthusiasm but even more so the children enjoyed adding their own dynamic to the movement. There was sharpness when we turned and crashing when we went to the floor.

Post session reflective memo of Voice recording:

Not all the children were in for this class due to the holidays. The children came to the class and noticed very quickly that there were other teachers in the room, including my thesis supervisor Eeva Anttila and two thesis examiners. This may have made them a little shy but with me supporting them by moving with them they were able to connect with the dance task. It was clear throughout the class that the children stayed close together and made a community. This was different to previous classes I think because most of the time they enjoyed their own space for moving. For me it shows how this situation of having

other people in the space changes the dynamic of dance and space. Situation is of real importance to how the children interacted.

The whole process of these sessions leading to this one I've noticed my class feels like a transition. Perhaps from one class to lunch or coming from somewhere and this dance space is a place to output. To gives a sense of breath between the different experiences or places they are coming from or going to. I do think that the children sometimes found my classes "boring" at times partially because there were times of focus. I could say they engaged the most when they had a lot of agency, but this is subjective to how I perceive their engagement.

Having the idea to step back and observe at times, letting them to explore at their own pace, allowed new choices to emerge in relation to space and dance. All in all, this shorter class was a different dynamic, and I believe the children were just getting to grips with the idea of weekly dance classes, and the structure they may have. The classes could have been longer I feel and we would have gotten deeper into connecting with dance and space.

Final mentions on observations and recordings

The children were slightly shy of being witnessed. Because I began the observation with the game musical statues, I felt they quickly were able to connect with space and movement through the game and its music. This seemed like a safe task to the children. We presented our movement material with the music we had been practicing later into the class. I felt the children were really affected by the change in the space due to external observers being present. There however were the typical giggling and bubbling excitement. But also, reservation and less response to the tasks. I observed the children were taking the movement tasks in a different manner, there was a level of exploring how it feels to be moving whilst witnessed. They often through the observation looked at me and one another for dialogue and social support within the moving.

4.2. Reflecting on the process

I found the process of the inquiry challenging. In many senses all inquiries have the potential for bias. With this thesis I focused more on myself and my witnessing of the sessions. I found the children came into the class very eager for dance and the kindergarten was delighted to permit the classes. However, I am not an early childhood specialist, and so my lens was through being an artist and dance pedagogue focusing on dance in pre-school. I had not had a lot of previous experience in data collection and participant observation, so the challenge was to find way that worked for me to implement the observations after class. As well as this I found challenge in being able to note down or remember all the observations and wealth of the classes.

For me dance has supported my development with my dyspraxia. Helping me to write, catch and run with efficiently. I believe there are others like me that could benefit from dance. I went into the artistic and pedagogical process thinking this however learnt so much more. Within my own pedagogy witnessing is important but also allowing in a safe environment. It's clear that this process has taught me that I do not need to command a class through complete structure or targets. The children taught me that dance can be explored through interaction of space in different ways and it's up to me to listen.

The language I used in the kindergarten was English. The children understood a lot of what I was saying however I defaulted to choosing words that were clear and translatable. There was a lot of warmth at the end of the process as we finished with a circle. I gave each child a sticker as something tangible for them to take from the sessions. The process was short however it was clear the time we had the children had become accustomed to the classes.

I find myself at a crossing road where the process was short and fulfilling. But there is still much work to be done, it's clear these classes were an important output for the children. Artistically, emotionally and timely I feel ever more that dance is clearly from this process and observations an important and justified subject in pre-school education. However, only if there is leniency for children to explore within its framework.

Reflecting on the artistic component I found important to address power dynamics, agency and freedom. Within the classes it was important early on to have structure and clarity of rules. My classes were responsive of the children's needs. However, I did not know the children that well due to the inquiry's short duration. If I had more time, I would be able perhaps to better support them. Also, I am aware that even if I allowed space for exploration, I still came with my own biases and choices of tasks to focus on. Not all children always enjoyed the classes, sometimes the classes for some were uninspiring. Sometimes energy levels were down, and it was hard to engage fully with the children. In the beginning rules had to be set for safety such as explaining that when I was talking it was important to try to listen first. The group was wonderful and each child brought so much to these classes. I hope that they continue to be able to access dance.

5. CONCLUSION

I sought out this inquiry originally because I felt dance may or may not support in broad terms, a pre-school aged child's development. What I have found is far more valuable and nourishing. The inquiry's findings have presented that dance sessions can support the incorporation of emotion, movement exploration. Dance in these sessions presented to me multi-sensory and multi-layered movement. It is an important artform for expression and in its totality a way of supporting children as they develop. This is due to dance being a flexible way of exploring whilst the educational goals changes. Children came into the session after different prior events and experiences. Dance supported this by being a safe and supportive outlet for physical discovery. The aim of this inquiry was to find ways that dance could support pre-school children's connection with space and body. I found from my observations that dance can support this relationship as well as the relationships within the group. The children interacted with one another through dance and play.

In my perspective I hope the use of dance in this pre-school context allowed the children to explore movement in different ways. They engaged with one another through space and movement as we did use any touch within the classes. This means that the connection they had with one another and space was through how they engaged with movement. Although my time reading sources, writing this thesis and observing the participants was fruitful, I feel the classes could have had a longer duration. The five classes were short and if I were to do the inquiry again, I would lengthen the classes, increase the number of classes and perhaps visit many different types of pre-schools to get more variety of data. I would also work more closely with the kindergarten teachers to get a deeper understanding of who the children are and what their schedules and interests are. This was feed this artistic pedagogical inquiry more as I would know who I am teaching.

I believe dance has an important position in education. It's multi layered exploration cannot be replaced by other studies such as gym work or physical education. This is because one not only physically goes deeper into experiential movement and exploration but also develops the body, going through spaces and levels in different ways. It also connects with the brain on an emotional and reflective level as observed in the sessions. This itself presents that dance as an explorative outlet in an educational environment, gives pre-school children a possibility to develop themselves in individual and fundamentally important ways. And if dance can connect children on this level, then the question then is how does it support them into the future?

I would push this inquiry further by seeking how dance classes in pre-school may support social and spatial connection further into education. How could dance support interaction, empathy and dialogue? It was clear in the observations that dance for the children in the group can support relation between one another and the spaces they occupy.

As a pedagogue I have felt great warmth in the process and journey of this thesis work. In the beginning of planning this work I felt a need to limit and structure. However, the flexibility of witnessing, pausing and reflecting on what is happening, on how my teaching is being interpreted, has further nourished my artistic and pedagogical work.

This work confirms to me, that children are great teachers, and when the possibility is given and dialogical exchange happens within dance, learning takes place for teacher and student.

Let dance support this exchange.

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