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The Use of Dance/Movement Therapy in a Preschool Curriculum: Enhancing Kindergarten Readiness Skills

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The Use of Dance/Movement Therapy in a Preschool Curriculum:
Enhancing Kindergarten Readiness Skills

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Therapy at Sarah Lawrence College
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Abstract

This thesis will focus on an internship project designed to integrate dance/movement therapy into the Early Childhood Center (ECC) at Sarah Lawrence College. The premise was that specific dance/movement therapy goals would enhance the ECC's preschool curriculum by strengthening each child's cognitive learning, supporting their developmental skills and preparing them for the transition to kindergarten.

Activities were created addressing developmental skills needed for the transition from preschool to kindergarten. The various activities developed for the dance/movement therapy sessions focused on the development of one's own sense of self and relational sense of self, impulse control, interpersonal boundaries, social skills and coping transitional/adjustment situations skills.

The children's developmental growth was monitored through observation then assessed during dance/movement therapy sessions and regular class activities. Their progress was tracked based on each child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills baseline.

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Introduction

Movement experiences in the classroom enhance the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of learning, teaching children how to understand and negotiate their place in this world (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007). Dance/movement therapy addresses all these components of a child's growth and supports the developmental advancement of the children in preschool. Movement incorporated into a preschool curriculum develops body awareness, enhances emotional control, imparts a less stressful social integration and reinforces the academic aspects of learning (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007).

Preschool and primary school teachers started to incorporate movement into their curriculums because they have noticed when children run, jump and dance they are motivated to become better learners in all aspects in the classroom (Bläsing et al., 2010). Through their observations, teachers had realized children experience a more positive relationship to the learning process when movement is part of the curriculum. The students are able to express emotions using the body as they learn to physically interact with their surroundings and their peers, allowing them to be more self-confident (Bläsing et al., 2010).

Dance/movement *interventions*—or *activities*, since this is in an educational setting—were developed with the collaboration of the classroom teachers to support their curriculum. Creative movement activities reinforce the children's growth as learners and their potential success in school (Duggan et al., 2009). The activities developed within the dance/movement therapy context address movement behaviors of the children. Unlike dance and creative movement teachers, a dance/movement therapist uses dance and movement to directly focus on the cognitive, social, emotional and physical needs of children.

These dance/movement activities challenge the children in an organized, supportive and enjoyable environment, allowing children to develop body control, nonverbal communication and social readiness skills needed for school (Duggan et al., 2009). The addition of dance/movement therapy enhances a preschool curriculum by strengthening children's cognitive learning, supporting their total developmental skills and preparing them for the transition to kindergarten.

Dance/movement therapy activities can be tailored to meet the children's developmental needs. Observation and assessment allow the dance/movement therapist to devise pre-readiness developmental activities for the children in preparation for kindergarten that focus on their sense of self, impulse control, interpersonal boundaries, social skills and adjustment/transitional coping. Children's developmental growth is monitored and tracked through observation and assessment during dance/movement therapy sessions and regular class activities. This tracking system is based on each child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills baseline. Their skills are tracked in conjunction with the typical developmental milestones that have been established by national growth charts, such as the growth charts pediatricians use, as well as input from the preschool teachers from their understanding and knowledge of child development.

Spontaneity allows for expression of self (Nachmanovitch, 1990). Movement experiences have the potential to engage children to use their imaginations in the creative process and help them navigate situations physically and socially (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007). Affirming a sense of self at a young age with dance and movement allows children to develop a "powerful way of thinking, doing, and experiencing" (Hanna, 2008, p. 497). A strong body image is one of the most important goals to address, as it is a precursor for

confidence and other learning, especially since self-confidence in children may decline in adolescence (Bläsing et al., 2010).

Children entering kindergarten must be prepared to enter a more academic forum. Unfortunately, free play in the older grades is limited. Addressing issues such as impulse control and interpersonal spatial boundaries within the preschool classroom can support a child's success in kindergarten. Kindergartners are expected to sit at a desk, raise their hands before speaking, and line up in an orderly fashion without bumping into each other and their surroundings. They are also expected to complete written work and listen to the teacher quietly without interruption.

Dance/movement therapy sessions also address a social component as children connect and engage with others in the group. Children who are inattentive are redirected to the group by the adults present until they can relate to the predictability of the session and reinforcement of the movement (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007). Through their kinesthetic experience, the children learn there are other ways to move, to relate with each other and accept their differences.

Dance/movement therapy in the preschool curriculum can help with issues of transition and adjustment to kindergarten. Activities focused on recognizing and expressing these markers may help reduce apprehension and manage excitement. When children use their bodies in a dance/movement therapy scenario they are helped to recognize familiar emotions and to practice adaptive responses on a body level. Expressing familiar emotions through movement, children are able to address their feelings through verbal discussion, which can be empowering (Thom, 2010).

The Early Childhood Center

The Early Childhood Center, which is a preschool located on the Sarah Lawrence College campus in New York, has designed a preschool curriculum that takes into account the interrelated developmental stages of children. The interests and talents of each child and the class as a whole are recognized by the teachers who support the individual and group learning processes. The Early Childhood Center (ECC) uses a Developmental-Interaction philosophy, an educational concept developed by psychologists and educators (ECC Handbook, 2014). Founded on the ideals of progressive education, the ECC encourages a child-centered and play-oriented curriculum rather than one academically based. Studies have shown that children who attended academic preschool programs were no further ahead academically, had higher anxiety, were less creative and held more negative attitudes toward school in general than did those in a play-oriented setting (Elkind, 2007).

Curriculum

The ECC curriculum focuses on the interaction of the children as much as possible. Through creativity in play, the children develop language, art, movement and imagination skills, which provide a platform of cognitive, emotional, social and physical growth that prepares for a healthy, stable and productive future (Tsao, 2002). The director of the ECC decided to add dance/movement therapy in the fall of 2015 to enhance the preschool curriculum for four-year-olds that had been developed to prepare the children for kindergarten.

Dance/movement therapy activities for the ECC were designed to address specific goals needed for kindergarten: a sense of self in one's own body as well as in relation to

others, the capacity for impulse control, interpersonal boundaries, social skills, and adjustment/transitional coping mechanisms. The activities gave the children opportunities to move and to fully embody the goals while reinforcing that movement matters.

Demographics

The children in both of the dance/movement therapy groups at the ECC are preparing for kindergarten, and they range in age from four and a half to just turning five. The ECC seeks to “reflect the world community” (ECC Handbook, 2014) when admitting children into the program, meaning that there is socio-economic, racial, cultural and ethnic diversity. Children who attend the program come from Bronxville, Yonkers and other surrounding communities in lower and upper Westchester County, Riverdale and the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The Preschool Classrooms and Their Similarities/Differences

The morning group meets in Boulder, a house next to the campus library, which has been converted to a preschool on one side, a kindergarten and first grade on the other side. Upstairs are classrooms for the Sarah Lawrence College Art of Teaching students. The class is taught by a master teacher, a graduate assistant teacher and several student assistants. The morning group has four boys and nine girls. The teacher’s dedication to the children is apparent in her approach. She has utilized the space to create a cozy and warm environment. With large windows and a carpeted floor, it feels more like a home than school. Large play furniture, a round table and chairs leave only a small area for the dance/movement activity. Nevertheless, the children have acclimated to the limited space and creatively found their own place in the room for the different activities throughout the school year. We gather for

our warm up in a semicircle instead of one large circle because of the small space, but the children eventually use the entire room by navigating around the furniture as we explore the activity for that morning.

The afternoon group meets in Kobert, a building on the west side of campus. This space looks more like a classroom yet it is just as inviting. The class is taught by a master teacher, a graduate assistant teacher and several student assistants. The afternoon group has five boys and six girls. The area is large and bright. Adjacent to the main classroom is another big room with large windows. This room is spacious enough for the children to gather in a circle for the movement warm-up and to jump and run easily. Sometimes we meet on the red carpet for certain activities in the main classroom to contain the group.

Devising a Dance/Movement Therapy Program

Through observation and collaboration with the classroom teachers, a dance/movement therapy program was devised to track cognitive, social, emotional and physical typical and atypical developmental milestones of the children in preparation for kindergarten. Most of the children were developmentally within a few steps of each other.

As a dance/movement therapy intern, I had only a few hours twice a week to observe the children as they participated in classroom activities set up by their teachers or during time outside on the playground. Dance/movement therapy sessions took place after story time and before snack time. The sessions lasted thirty minutes, which all the children attended. A different approach was devised for the afternoon group, which was in the adjacent room of the classroom. Here, the children could choose among several activities going on simultaneously, so the children were free to participate and leave the dance/movement

therapy group as they wished. This structure was not conducive to providing a cohesive, uninterrupted experience needed for the development of the group and the growth process of the individual children. There were some children who did not choose to attend the dance/movement therapy sessions, so their kindergarten readiness skills could only be observed and tracked in their classroom activities.

Ten-minute increments of dance/movement therapy sessions during the three-hour class were introduced for afternoon group. Children had to complete a ten-minute session, which included a warm-up, theme and closure. After a few weeks it was apparent this structure was also not conducive for individual and group goals. The afternoon group was not progressing with as much success as the morning group. Therefore, a specific time, before snack, was established for the group session. Sessions were still optional, but the children who did not participate sat off to the side of the space and observed. No talking or playing was allowed and they were asked by the teacher to quietly observe the children in the session.

Understandably, several of the children actively participating in the dance/movement therapy session were sometimes distracted by the observers and then did not want to participate themselves, creating an element of disconnect. The decision was made that all the children would participate in the dance/movement therapy sessions, which resolved the problem. The children's attention in the sessions and connection to the group improved.

Over thirty dance/movement therapy activities that focused on the students' transition to kindergarten were devised for the preschool program. Each activity was a unique combination of the overarching goals which focused on any given intervention when needed.

It is essential for a dance/movement therapist to be prepared for any scenario—especially a session involving young children. For example, if an issue or conflict arises involving the children during class, the planned activity that coincided with the curriculum may have to change in order to address the situation. Being ready to accommodate for the unknown, referred to as *planned emptiness*, allows yourself to be open to restructure your ideas (Middleman and Goldberg, 1990).

Tracking the Children’s Progress through Movement Observation

A chart was devised to keep track of the children’s progress during sessions and regular class activities. This tracking system was based on each child’s baseline, which had been determined by information and understanding of child development shared by the ECC preschool teachers, and of classroom observations by the dance/movement therapist, using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), the Kestenberg Movement Profile, and Movement Qualities based on the Fluid Systems of the Body from the Body-Mind Centering approach.

Assessing each child individually using the different movement observation techniques helped determine the children’s baselines. Using these techniques, such as LMA, provided a better understanding of how each child moved aesthetically and kinesthetically (Dell, 1970). The assessment tools offered clues to a clear perspective regarding each child’s movement as well as whether developmental milestones typical of four-year olds were met.

A scale of 1 to 3 was established—with 1 being below average, 2 being average and 3 being above average. Sometimes children score a 3 one week and a 2 or 1 another week. This scale can be used to pinpoint if something is either developmentally or emotionally “off” with the child from week-to-week. A plus sign or minus sign can be used with the number

score to determine a more descriptive score, for example a 2 minus indicates the child is not quite average but is not a score of 1 which is below average. (See an image of the Assessment Chart in the Appendix.)

During the dance/movement therapy sessions, the following developmental ranges were being tracked in the movement during the activities: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, language, and creativity. Children were also tracked during their classroom activities and playing with their peers. Observation of their small and large motor skills in a social environment, as well as their cognitive, social and emotional skills offered important clues to the developmental growth of the children. Table 1 illustrates the different areas of what was observed and assessed in the classroom. Table 2 illustrates the different areas of what was observed and assessed during the dance/movement therapy activities.

Using the assessment chart to keep track of progress on each child individually also provided information on how the group was progressing as well—not only by the number scale but from the notes in the individual column of each child and the progress notes about the group from observations during the day.

The chart has gone through four metamorphoses. The reason was to narrow down to what was relevant to the ECC curriculum and the growth of the children and the group. Color coordinated columns differentiating classroom and dance/movement therapy observations were eventually added as well.

Teacher input was essential, so including the teachers in the dance/movement therapy activities and providing them with information that explained the dance/movement therapy

Table 1

Classroom Observations and Assessments on a Weekly Basis: Individually and as a Group

- Physical—large motor skills: jumps; balances; catches; hops; walks up and down; throws; passes. Small motor skills—draws lines; draws circles; builds blocks; cuts paper; completes puzzles
- Laban Movement Analysis: Flow—free/bound; Weight—light/strong; Time—sustained/quick; Space—indirect/direct. Effort Elements in Combination—float; wring; press; glide; dab; flick; slash; punch
- Cognitive—sorts; recalls; matches; selects; knows gender; knows concepts; understands questions
- Social Skills—interacts with peers and teachers; asks permission; greets others; helps clean-up; takes turns; attentive during story time; interactive play; appropriate with peers; minimum conflict
- Emotional—able to recover from anger; separates from parent without reluctance; verbalizes emotions; expresses displeasure with words; knows consequences; appropriate temperament; knows difference between fact and fantasy; recognizes emotions in others
- Language—verbally expressive; communicative; understood; sentences; purposeful questions; sings a song; tells a story
- Creativity—pretends an action; assign or takes roles; takes on a character; uses props for play; can pretend/imagine; art creativity

Table 2

*Dance/Movement Therapy Sessions Observations and Assessments on a Weekly Basis:
Individually and as a Group*

- Physical—large motor skills; small motor skills; coordination and balance; strength and endurance; breath
- Laban Movement Analysis: Flow—free/bound; Weight—light/strong; Time—sustained/quick; Space—indirect/direct. Effort Elements in Combination—float; wring; press; glide; dab; flick; slash; punch
- Cognitive—focus/attention spans; maintains engagement; follows verbal and nonverbal cues; completes activity
- Social Skills—participates in DMT sessions; personal space; proximity of group; eye contact; takes turns interacts socially through movement; demonstrates ability to follow/lead
- Emotional—expresses emotions bodily; uses facial expression; impulse control
- Language—nonverbal actions are expressive, communicative and understood
- Creativity—demonstrates creativity in movement

language being used, helped create a coherent dance/movement therapy group for the entire class—teacher, children and dance/movement therapist.

One important intervention I used to further the preschool teachers' understanding of dance/movement therapy and how I would be working with the children was to introduce the language of LMA. Rudolf Laban created this method of observation, a systematic description of qualitative change in movement during World War II (Dell, 1970). However, the detailed LMA Effort attributes of flow, weight, time, and space can be confusing for those who have not studied Laban's work.

The Effort Elements in Combination from LMA consists of eight possible combinations of one element each from weight, space and time, which Rudolf Laban named using an everyday action easily understood (Dell, 1970). A table of these eight movement combinations offered the preschool teachers an idea of what dance/movement therapists look for in the children's movement. The Effort Elements in Combinations are float, wring, press, glide, dab, flick, slash, and punch (see Table 3).

With this information, the ECC teachers were able to use dance/movement therapy terminology in their interpretations of the children's movement during discussions in our meetings with action words they could embody. Teachers were also able to report their observations using these words on days when the dance/movement therapist was not present. I also explained what free flow and bound flow attributes were but focused mainly on the eight action words with the teachers. This strategy was important because flow, weight, time and space factors are the key theoretical considerations many dance/movement therapists use to observe and notate movement of a client (Dell, 1970).

Table 3

Effort Elements in Combination

FLOAT	WRING	PRESS	GLIDE
indirect	indirect	direct	direct
light	strong	strong	light
sustained	sustained	sustained	sustained
DAB	FLICK	SLASH	PUNCH
direct	indirect	indirect	direct
light	light	strong	strong
quick	quick	quick	quick

(Dell, 1970)

Dance/Movement Therapy Program Goals and Objectives

The dance/movement therapy activities had to coincide with the curriculum that the preschool teachers already had in place. Consequently, it was essential to discuss any dance/movement therapy activities with the teachers before introducing them to the children. It was hoped that incorporating dance/movement therapy that offered readiness skills activities would be beneficial for preschoolers' developmental growth as they prepared to progress to a full day of school in a new setting with more classmates and an academically based curriculum. The following are the basic goals and objectives focused on when creating an activity plan for each child:

Sense of Self

Creating different movement and shapes with their bodies allows for children to share their discoveries on how their body can be manipulated as well as the identification of body parts. This activity generates a discussion and allows for the children to share their thoughts about the human body. When sharing their experience, they have a sense of presentation of self, not only from a bodily felt sense as the children's ability to perceive where and how their body is in space, weight and time but also from a relational sense, which develops when children are acknowledged and seen in a true and authentic manner in a non-critical and affirming safe space by others in the group.

Impulse Control/Interpersonal Space Boundaries

A Freeze dance activity helps children regulate their impulses and maintain their boundaries. By practicing these skills through movement, the children develop an awareness to stay within their chosen spot in the room. This helps the children experience a bodily felt

sense of what energy regulation and boundaries mean—being able to stay with the group and continue to move in the space with control.

Social Skills

Circle dance is an activity used to elicit social interaction among the children. Holding hands and participating in a structured dance, such as a folk dance, in which individuals acknowledge one another, allows the children to move cohesively, express feelings with movement, and interact with each other—creating a sense of community and support for each other (Watts, 2006). This circle dance activity is a valuable lesson for children with different abilities: their individual needs are met and yet each still feels part of the group. This dance also encourages social integration, enabling children to cooperate with one another and experience the joy of moving within a closed community (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007).

Another activity promoting social interaction is the formation of dyads. This activity enables children to work with peers they would normally not play with, allowing for minor problems and differences in temperament to be confronted smoothly through cooperating together in a dyad. Learning to engage with unfamiliarity is an essential kindergarten readiness skill.

Adjustment/Transitional Skills

Movement through dance can teach preschoolers how to manage and cope with different situations, such as adjusting to a new social environment and even problem solving (Lorenzo-Lasa et al., 2007). Movement games, such as follow the leader or reenactment of a story read before movement, facilitate listening carefully and taking direction, which are

important for any adjustment a child will face in kindergarten with the many rules they must follow.

Five ECC Preschool Dance/Movement Therapy Activities

Overarching Goals for the Year:

Presentation of Self
 Body Awareness in Relation to Self and Others
 Regulation of Energy (addressing both low and high energy)
 Impulse Control
 Self-Soothing
 Spatial and Relational Boundaries
 Social Skills
 Teamwork
 Concept Building
 Problem Solving
 Coordination
 Balance
 Kinesthetic Memory
 Attention
 Imagination

1. Locomotor Actions/Body Part Identification

Goals:

Body Awareness
 Regulation of Energy
 Spatial Boundaries
 Social Interaction

Locomotor actions are how we travel through space. The five locomotor actions, which are physical milestones in child development, are known in dance education as walk, hop, skip, jump and run (Dance Education Laboratory, 2008). The activity that I have devised allows for the children to discover these five different ways we travel through space in the classroom (omit run inside classroom but introduce it when children are playing outside).

This activity gives me the chance to assess where the children are individually with their gross motor skills. The children are asked to carefully listen to the directions. A specific playlist has been devised for this activity so there is no stopping and starting of the music in the session.

Warm-up:

- Find your own spot in the room
- Isolate/wiggle their heads, shoulders, arms, elbows wrists, fingers, rib cage, tummy, hips, thighs, knees, ankles, feet and toes
- Wiggle up, starting with toes and up through the head
- Identify body parts

Theme and Development:

- Listen very carefully to the directions as these may change at any time
- Walk slowly and carefully around the room so as not to bump into anyone
- Greet each other verbally along with a movement gesture—perhaps with a nod of the head, a wave of a hand or a handshake as you walk; change the tempo of the walk to quick
- Freeze (to refocus when children become too distracted by their excitement)
- Walk backwards in slow motion
- Walk forward in a regular tempo
- Hop, skip and jump can be added directives

- Walk, hop, skip or jump while moving a specific body part, e.g. shrug shoulders up and down, or move the elbows in and out. (These directives are added as children become confident with maneuvering their bodies in the room)
- Use action words during the locomotor activity such as sneak, slither, waddle, shuffle, grow, pop, and melt
- The dance/movement therapist should be constantly moving, weaving in and out through the group, revealing locomotor action combinations so children who are shy are able to observe and mirror

Closure:

- Form a large circle
- Each child shares their favorite locomotor combination in the center
- Hold hands and take a group bow

Summary:

Many of the children are quite vocal during this activity, sharing their associations to the movement. There was also much laughter because the movement can become quite silly. Quieter children are asked to share what they are feeling, so everyone has a chance to speak. The children were not forthcoming at the beginning of the year, but as the weeks progressed, they became increasingly comfortable with movement in the space and sharing verbally. They commented on not just what they experienced during the exercise but also on what their classmates were doing, allowing for sense of self and group cohesion.

2. The Use of Props/Imaginative Play

Goals:

Body Awareness
 Regulation of Energy
 Attention
 Concept Building
 Problem Solving
 Teamwork

Props, such as scarves, musical instruments, balloons, sensory balls or stuffed animals are often used in sessions to elicit movement, engage the child's interest and help focus and channel energy. Brightly colored foam noodles, floating devises used in swimming pools, were cut in half so that each one was about two feet long. These props fit well in the children's hands and were familiar to the children.

Warm up:

- Each child is given a foam noodle prop and instructed to keep it confined to their personal space
- Quickly gather into a circle (to deter "sword fighting" behavior)
- Explore shape-making by bending and twisting the prop
- Move throughout the room and explore moving in low, middle and high levels

Theme and Development:

- Can you make letters and numbers with the prop?
- Can you work with a partner in making your shapes?
- What words best describe your shapes? Round, twisted and angular?

- Ideas to encourage exploration, e.g. create geometric shapes together on the floor by connecting the props
- Spell you name
- Group free dance with props (music introduced at this time)
- Work with your partner to create shapes with your body and prop (partners assigned by dance/movement therapist)
- Gather back into a circle when music ends

Closure:

- Take turns making a shape in the center of the circle (even a superhero)
- Connect the ends of all the noodles, raise then up and down like a “wave,” try to keep the ends together
- Sit down in the circle while the props are collected and think about a word or gesture to describe your experience
- Share your word or gesture, and the group will repeat what is shared before the next child takes a turn
- Hold hands, take a few deep breathes, and say good-bye together on the count of three

Summary:

Keeping the children engaged with a specific task eliminates the temptation of sword fighting and making poses as ninjas and superheroes—a reaction saved for the closure.

Assigning partners for dyad work encourages children to work with someone they do not interact with regularly. Teamwork is also encouraged by the dyad and group tasks.

The children's first reaction to the foam noodles was to suddenly transform into superheroes. Boys and girls alike will exclaim loudly who they are, from Superman to Ninja Turtles. By delaying this activity, the dance/movement therapist can remain focused and guide the children to participate in the activity with the goals in mind. Allowing for the children to later share their reactions in the center of the circle affirming and rewarding for them, as their creativity was recognized within a structured approach.

3. Dance/Body Shapes

Goals:

Body Awareness
Regulation of Energy
Spatial Boundaries
Concept Building
Coordination
Balance
Teamwork

The Freeze dance activity allows for learning self-control as the movement alternates with being still, both bodily felt experiences. Dyads and group interaction develops the socialization within the class. Using round, twisted and angular shapes as examples demonstrates to the children how a shape can be embodied within us and not just as objects around us or as figures drawn on paper. Children are given the choice either to mirror the dance/movement therapist or to invent their own shapes and tap into their own movement creativity as they mold their bodies into different configurations.

Warm-up:

Join in a free dance to the first song on a set playlist of rhythmic music chosen specifically for this activity and recognized by the children from popular music and familiar movies for this age group.

- Interact through movement and make eye contact
- “Slow motion” directive is used to modulate chaotic energy.

Theme and Development:

- “Freeze” when the music stops for a few seconds then call out a shape
- Have the children form into the shape announced and hold until everyone shares their shapes with the group
- Move to a new song until it stops (sequence continues using all three shapes—round, angular and twisted)
- Find a partner to create a dyad and move until the music stops.
- Freeze when the music stops and the dyads moves slowly to create an assigned shape. Hold the shape.
- The dyads create three shapes together (round, angular, twisted)
- A new song cues the children to break apart from the shape to create the next shape
- Repeat sequence together as a group
- Throughout the activity the dance/movement therapist should be moving with the children, giving them verbal and visual cues

Closure:

- Break away from the last group shape in slow motion (the last song on the playlist is slow)
- Create a circle holding hands
- One child is selected to start the goodbye process with a creative bow and sits down. Each child follows in turn, until all are seated
- Children verbally share their experiences from the activity
- Taking turns each child says goodbye as they make one last shape

Summary:

The children shared how they felt when creating shapes, what their shape looked like, and most were willing to present their shape in front of the group. The last group shape experience always ended up in a huddle-like hug before breaking apart to create the closure circle. This interaction brought the children close physically and emotionally as well.

However, the first time I did this activity with the children it did not run smoothly. It was too advanced for this age group to freeze directly into a shape. Having them freeze then move into a shape to stabilize their balance worked better. Keeping the shape still as possible supported the goal of impulse control.

The children had a hard time becoming partners for the dyad portion of the activity because they wanted to partner with a specific friend. This created chaos and disrupted the group. Quickly pairing together children physically for the dyads was a solution and kept the group moving. Offering to partner with a child who was not able to partner with a friend was another solution to reconnect a child to the group activity.

I move with the children throughout the activity, and give them visual examples with my own body as well as verbal imagery for analogies, such as “pretzels” for a twisted shape; “triangles” for an angular shape; and “ball” for a round shape. The children also share their own analogies as they create shapes with their bodies. Sometimes the group has to be gently reminded what shapes they need to be in and the changes are quickly made.

4. Social and Relational Interaction Using Circle Formation and Dyads

Goals:

Social Skills

Teamwork

Concept Building

Balance

Coordination

Kinesthetic Memory

Focus

Concentration

Learning a structured group dance with set steps and set directional pathways elicits social skill building and develops a community bond as the children move from a circle dance to dyads and back to a circle dance. This activity also addresses transitional skills as the children adjust to the different pathways they must follow.

A dance specifically created for the children similar to European folk dances offers them the chance to learn a structured and meaningful dance. Being part of a dancing group, holding hands and making eye contact with classmates as they pass one another are all intrinsic to folk dance. The subtle and strong components of folk dance unify a group. A sense of belonging, as well as experiencing the joy of dancing are instilled in the children as they participate in a unified circle dance.

The repetition of folk-like dance steps fosters concentration and focus until the end of the dance, which keeps the children energized with anticipation as they work together to create their own community dance—something danced only in the preschool space and with each other.

Warm up:

- Gather in a large circle
- Wiggle body parts in isolation (head to toes and back up again)
- Practice moving to the right, left, center and back
- Practice curtsies and bows; assign partners

Theme and Development:

- Hold hands in the circle
- Take four steps to the right, four steps to the left. Repeat
- Four steps into the center, four steps back
- Let go of hands and turn using four counts
- From facing the center turn to a partner
- Acknowledge each other with a curtsy or bow
- Dyads hold hands, step forward and back. Repeat
- Let go of hands and face center of the circle
- Clap four times
- Group holds hands, lift arms up and down
- Repeat entire dance

Closure:

- Let go of hands and with a nod of the head to the left and right to acknowledge child on either side
- Nod of the head into the center of the circle, acknowledging the group
- Curtsy or bow
- Close with a loud cheer

Summary:

Music is used that sounds like it could be from any folk dance of European heritage. Slower tempo music was used when the children were first learning the steps. As the children became comfortable with the steps and the directional pathways, slightly quicker music was used. Changing the tempo and rhythm kept the children engaged.

Having preschoolers split up into partners, or dyads, creates a more intimate connection between children who may not normally play together. The connection made during the dance can transfer back to the classroom.

We discussed how the dance should have an attitude making sure the steps are strong and proud. Role-playing fostered expressive movement and helped to take the pressure off getting the steps exactly right. The steps will come eventually. A directive asking the children to connect elbows during the dyads was confusing and only discouraged them. Simple four-count steps worked well.

5. Developmental School Readiness Skills Using Picture Storybooks

Goals:

Difference

Regulation of Energy

Making Choices

Picture storybooks are useful tools with which to support emotional and social adaptation and the preschool curriculum.

The hero of, *“Slowly, Slowly, Slowly,” Said the Sloth*, by Eric Carle, is an Amazon sloth who hangs from a branch quietly, patiently, and leisurely throughout the day and night. The sloth calmly reacts to the other jungle animals that reproach him about his laid-back lifestyle.

Through the sloth’s story, the children are introduced to new ideas about how to approach situations calmly.

Movement activities with the children explore the benefits of doing things calmly, enjoying their surroundings and feeling how good it is not to rush. Speaking slowly with an indoor voice versus an excited and loud voice in the classroom is another positive exploration based on the story of the sloth as well as developing the ability to make choices about how to respond to stress. Moving slowly and quickly in a crowded space fosters self-awareness and awareness of others through kinesthetic play.

Warm Up:

- Read *“Slowly, Slowly, Slowly,” Said the Sloth*
- After the story is read, adapt the narrative to a movement activity

Theme and Development:

- Acting like the sloth, move quietly and slowly around the room
- Listen carefully to when the music changes to fast
- Go quickly to keep up with the music
- Move slowly when the music is slow
- The sequence is repeated, adding the directive to *freeze* if some of the children start moving too quickly

Closure:

- Slowly move back to the circle and sit
- Close eyes and create a relaxation pose
- Each child shares their pose
- Still seated in the circle holding hands, we pass a gentle hand squeeze around the circle from one child to the next as our goodbye

Summary:

The student teacher read the book to the children as I sat with them on the floor. This allowed me to quickly highlight specific details of the narrative as the story finished, so I could help the children transition to the movement activity.

A playlist of instrumental music with varying slow and quick tempos was used. This provided the children with the opportunity to physically experience the difference between calm and tense as they anticipated the music's changing tempos.

Conclusion

The addition of dance/movement therapy enhanced the preschool curriculum by strengthening the children's cognitive learning while supporting their total developmental skills. Body awareness activities promoted a sense of self and impulse control. Organization of auditory and visual processing occurred when participating in dance/movement activities. Social, emotional and physical skills were fostered when moving and connecting with their peers (Tortora, 2006). During the dance/movement therapy sessions, the children focused on sequencing, following instruction, maintaining perceptual and motor skill awareness as well as coordination and internal regulation (Tortora, 2006). Dance/movement therapy for young children also released restless energy and encouraged creativity and imagination through movement—especially if music, props and other modalities were offered, such as storytelling and imagery.

Through dance/movement therapy, the therapist observed pertinent information regarding the children's cognitive processing, emotional expression and physical skills. These observations provided information about how a child perceived and interacted within the group and offered clues to their developmental range and unique style of learning.

This structure of set dance/movement therapy activities in an educational setting can apply to any child as long as the activities are relevant to the curriculum and age group. With adolescents, adding goals that focus on a positive self-image, social acceptance, peer pressure, and stress should be taken into consideration. Even university students can benefit from a dance/movement therapy program devised specifically to help them overcome

emotional and social barriers and successfully guide them through the transitions during their academic career.

I hope that the model described in this study will inspire further exploration of ways to design and integrate dance/movement therapy readiness activities both for preschoolers as well as for children at any level in the educational system.

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