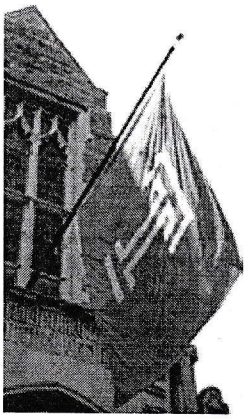
# Visual Impairment

*We published a Literature Review from David Eckel's research, Darkness in Motion, in the last Quarterly together with some preliminary information on visual impairment. In this edition we continue with two more articles on visual impairment. We are delighted to receive one from Karen Bond, drawn from her Doctoral thesis about dance with children with dual sensory impairments. This is followed by another article from David's research. In this, a brief overview of his project on dance in special education, is followed by a wealth of strategies that emerged from his work, which can be used teaching dance to this population. David's findings are relevant to all of us dealing with visual impairments, either primarily or as an added complication to other problems.*



## Love is Blind: Musings on Research as an Art-Science Duet

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It's been a decade since I completed a doctoral thesis through La Trobe University on the influence of dance on young children with impairments of vision and hearing (Bond, 1992). The last issue of *Moving On*, with its feature on children, including David Eckle's review of dance for young people with vision impairment, inspired me to share the research vision, methods and findings of this empirical study.

One thing I remember quite clearly is that the study had a grand purpose. As with many research initiates, I was keen to show that dance could save the world (I still think so actually – love is blind!). I also had the 'research bug' – I felt compelled to find out more about how and why humans dance and to examine my own professional practice as a dance specialist. All these motivations led me to undertake an in-depth study that examined the dance experience of six nonverbal children (ages 6 to 9) with dual sensory impairments. The inquiry took place in a residential unit that was part of a school for children with vision impairments. I chose to work with children in the deaf-blind unit after a year of running dance sessions throughout the school's early childhood centre. I reasoned that if dance could be shown to have a beneficial influence on these unique human beings, this would be powerful evidence of dance's ability to enhance life experience for many children.

Since my interest was to establish proof of the value of dance, my only methodological option was an experimental design. Because I was personally conducting the dance program, a kind of qualitative action research process was also taking place. But, interestingly, I did not consider that to be the 'real' research at the time. The intention of the study was to conduct a systematic, objective evaluation. I think one of the dilemmas we face in dance research is that at a body level many, perhaps all of us, have experienced dance as a causative force. We know in our bones that dance 'causes' change and our desire to prove this, and to universalise it, is an embodied one. It can be very hard to break out of that way of body-level thinking to take up the challenge of a post-positivist paradigm which suggests that there are no universals and that all meanings are constructed through individual interpretation and social-critical negotiation.

I still find myself saying to graduate students, "If in your heart of hearts you really want to go for 'proof', draw on the epistemology of science." Even though we've over-valorised reason at the expense of intuition, and we've made it a masculine function, at the end of the day we are human

beings who possess certain common structures of cognition, regardless of our cultural (including our gendered) location. These structures allow for both reduction and synthesis; and these processes can be complementary.

The experimental research design was very tightly constructed. Scientific research is rule bound, with a plethora of built in controls that purport to isolate the phenomenon of study. Briefly, the six children were divided into two groups of three, both of which went through a 5-week (20 sessions) dance program and a second 5-week program based on play. Children had adult partners in the sessions, so there were really two groups of six. The programs were documented systematically on video and later analysed by independent observers using a system based on Laban Movement Analysis and other motivational criteria. Video analysis took almost two years. Statistical procedures were applied to generate comparative numerical results that were displayed in tables and computer-generated graphs. (For further details of data collection and analysis see Bond, 1994).

I found the experimental process very pleasing aesthetically; the symmetry and stability of a classical experiment has a certain elegance; and I enjoyed working with the statistical software package and designing the graphs. I feel the whole effort kept me in line, from being overly 'romantic' about what I had experienced dancing with those amazing children. Given that I had embraced the epistemological values of quantitative evaluation, the tight structure was necessary, but actually quite hard for me. I'm the sort of person who tried to learn Laban's diagonal scale in Passion Drive!

About halfway through the analysis, I made a significant shift into extended interpretation. I'd had an inductive "aha" experience when I began to identify patterns in the numerical results that gave me a launching place for qualitative inquiry. Particularly exciting was the discovery of 'personal style' as an important determinant of children's engagement. I started to see that personal style –the unique ways in which children used rhythm, gesture, space, and physical mannerisms, mediated their engagement in dance. Furthermore, when personal style was affirmed, engagement was high. This finding has had far reaching influence on my teaching in all contexts. This key outcome took shape in the numerical results.

Just about the time I was churning out tables and graphs and identifying clusters of meaning, I discovered a lecturer in the sociology department at La Trobe University who was offering a course on qualitative research methods. This was Lyn Richards, the inventor of *Nudist,* a well-known qualitative analysis software package. I listened bug-eyed as Lynn declared that where human behaviour is concerned, an experimental design does not release one from the responsibility of qualitative interpretation. So back into the data I went, which included an audio-taped running record of all dance sessions and a 30,000-word field journal in which I had allowed myself unbounded poetic and subjective reflection. I had also conducted and transcribed interviews with school staff and made qualitative observations down the side of all the coding sheets used in the behavioural measurement process. Through a synthesis of the numerical results, the qualitative data and a rewarding engagement with emergent theory, I finally finished the study after a decade of effort.

The following graphics show the key findings of the study as generated through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. These provide very different illustrations of reality.

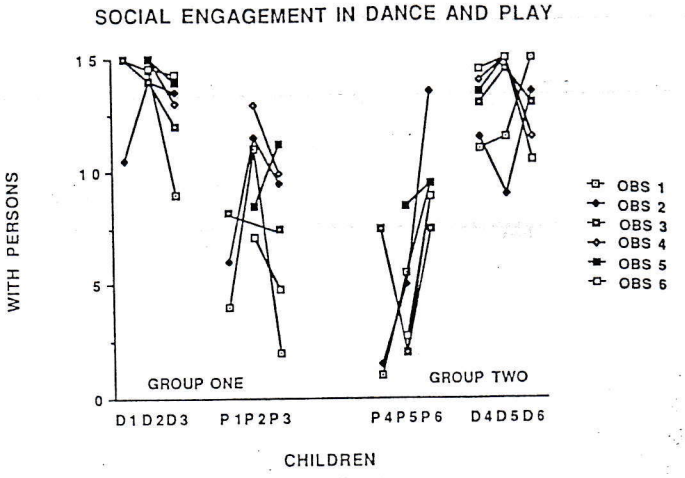


Fig 1

Here is the overall result for the broad research questions relating to the influence of dance on children's social and task engagement. I still marvel at the information contained in these lines and clusters. We've got high to low engagement on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal, with the two groups alternating and crossing over between dance and play, etc. In a holistic sense, the group configurations displayed in these graphs illustrate clearly the consistency of high social and task engagement in Dance as compared to Play.

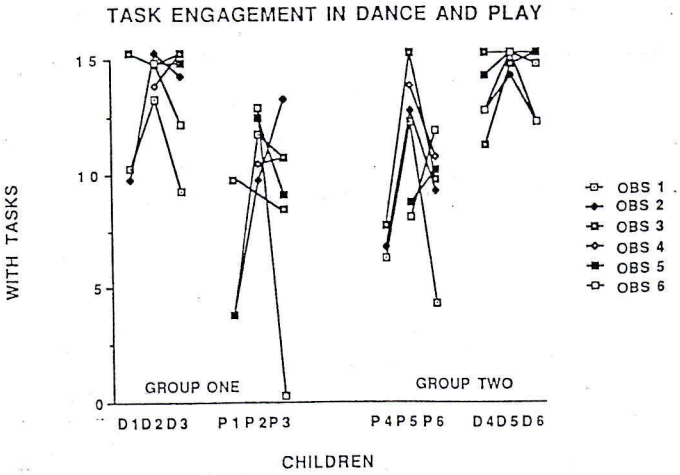


Fig. 2

This is the graphic that emerged through qualitative synthesis: a spiral showing the developmental process of

the research and my interpretation of children's high engagement in dance. Starting at the center of the spiral and moving outward, social and task engagement in dance was associated with an affirmation of personal style, which I see as a reflection of 'aisthetic perception,' our capacity for direct multi-sensory perception unmediated by cultural norms (after Maletic, 1982). This is our unique direct response to the perceptual field, observable at a body level. Thus, when the environment provided the right kind of dance, children's engagement was enhanced, as evidenced in observable self-transformation and also in a group phenomenon that I call 'aesthetic community.'

The journey from 'aisthetic perception' to 'aesthetic community' was shaped by the human capacities for multi-sensory awareness, dynamic excitement, whole body engagement, hard work, commitment, and inter-subjective appreciation of others' movement, including social group accommodation of individual differences. For the six young children in my doctoral study, these capacities were facilitated through a ritual process. From the findings of the study I developed a prototype of 'Right Dance' for children with sensory impairments (Figure 3).

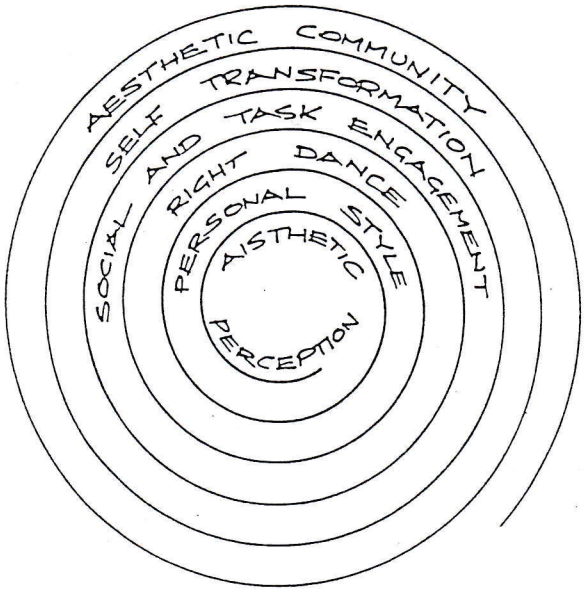


Fig. 3. A Path to Aesthetic Community in Dance

In terms of my continuing development as a researcher, the study generated an enduring interest in biological, bio-aesthetic, ritual and community theories of dance. I continue to follow the work of anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake, who suggests in her latest book, *Art and Intimacy* (2000) that dance and other arts fulfil a genetic predilection to 'make special,' and that the first emergence of our aesthetic sensibility occurs in the nonverbal relationship between carer and infant. I remain committed to rigorous examination of young people's engagement in dance, so that their voices and values may contribute to dance theory and practice. Sue Stinson (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) and I have recently published stage one of a large-scale study of young people's perceptions of dance (Bond and Stinson, 2001). Stage one, which focuses on what we are calling 'the superordinary' in dance, will be of interest to dance therapists in its illumination of dance's powers of transformation and self-making.

Overall I have enjoyed and continue to enjoy a rich life as a researcher. I remain grateful to my mentors in Australia, notably Hanny Exiner, Warren Lett, and Wynelle Delaney in the dance therapy realm. My post-PhD work has become progressively more qualitative, collaborative, and multi-modal. For me, researching is a creative, improvisational process. I have also embraced a more conscious phenomenological perspective in teaching and researching, conceptualising dance and research as multi-sensory lived experience and as windows into essences of human being and relationship.

**References:**

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Bond, K. (1994). Personal style as a mediator of engagement in dance: Watching Terpsichore rise. Dance Research Journal, 26(1), 15-26.

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Maletic, V. (1982). On the aisthetic and aesthetic dimensions of the dance. A methodology for researching dance style. University Microfilms International.

**Ed. Note:**
The DTAA library has access to an Examiner's copy of "Dance for Children with Dual Sensory Impairments." Contact the DTAA librarian, Naomi Aichison, via the usual channels.