

Working with Elizabeth – Reminiscences of 1974

Jane Guthrie

I first met Elizabeth in 1974 at Noah's Ark Toy Library (NATL) for Handicapped Children, which more latterly became Noah's Ark Family Resource Centre, in Windsor, Melbourne. That meeting, and working with Elizabeth, changed my career direction totally.



At home at the time with young children, I was asked by the Director of NATL, Annetine Forell, who had won a Churchill scholarship for her work in setting up Melbourne's Toy Library based on a model from Scandinavia, if I would volunteer my time to work with Elizabeth. As a creative dancer and social worker, she was running a movement and music group based on ideas from creative dance. She was looking for someone to assist her who had experience working with children with neurological movement problems.

I was pleased to be asked. My previous employment had been as a physiotherapist in London at a school for handicapped children that outreached to a special care unit for children classified as profoundly handicapped. On arrival back in Australia I had undertaken a couple of interim locums at Kew Cottages in Melbourne, which now no longer exists.

My memories of management of the problems with the children (thinking particularly of those with cerebral palsy) are rather sad. I remember looking around a couple of centers in Melbourne when I was investigating physiotherapy work

options - hoping to be able to return to the work that I had been involved in (in London), and was upset to be shown several rooms where many children were lying on the floor, really looking at nothing, certainly comfortable and warm, but with a total lack of stimulation either visually or aurally. The lights were dimmed. It was, of course, all done with the best of intentions because of the effect that any stimulation might have on increasing 'spasticity' (increased muscle tone) - a rather feared word at that time. Spasticity, was not then so well understood and its presence rather a governing factor in therapy. The words that rang in my ears on leaving the centres were, "At least we can keep them quiet and comfortable"! But my thoughts were that it wasn't living. Thank goodness that, due to advances in neurological knowledge and understanding, it has become rare to see severe spasticity problems and that the thinking and management of them has changed.

The focus on movement from a physiotherapy perspective had to be achieved through play to a certain extent, but I personally felt ill equipped at that time to develop all I needed in this way. Working through play was certainly not a part of my training, but I had of necessity started to develop it in my previous experience with children. So imagine what a joy it was to have my first encounter with Elizabeth and also with NATL.

Firstly a word about NATL. Their whole ethos was to achieve therapeutic aims, education and development through play – so what a learning experience it was to be for me. It provided a feast of ideas to reach therapeutic aims through play using toys and colourful children's play equipment.

And my first encounter with Elizabeth at NATL? How different it was to work with her. Not only was it my first encounter with bringing creative dance into therapy but it was also the first group in Melbourne - in fact probably in Australia - where parents could share enjoyable therapy experiences with their disabled children – many of whom were profoundly disabled with little motor control or movement ability. The group consisted mainly of mothers or carers with babies and young children from one to seven years old. In Elizabeth's creative dance approach there was an excited atmosphere – always an air of

expectancy and engagement. What was going to happen next? There was always something hidden that emerged just at the right moment to re-captivate interest when needed. There was always pleasure and that element of surprise that led to glee and laughter, from the children and their carers – usually parents. Elizabeth's aim of introducing dance and movement as a joy to be shared between parent and child was fully achieved; starting to build a structure for relationship where this was needed. It was a time to be together, a time to just have fun, to look at each other and smile, to relax together and/or a time to just 'be' and forget the pressures of rushing from one appointment to the next in the hectic average weekly routine of therapy and medical appointments. It was exciting, colourful, stimulating and relaxing.

Imagine laughter and a way to actually enjoy movement for those who were reluctant to do so. Colourful props were everywhere: scarves, balls, bubbles, ribbon sticks and balloons were part of the array of props used; and there were many others – all there to stimulate all the senses. And as a part of every session we were bathed in such beautiful music to support the movement and dance. The ethos of the toy library pervaded throughout with its emphasis on therapy through play. There is no doubt that we did trigger even more 'spasticity' at times, particularly when it was noisy and hectic. But did that matter when it was so joyful? How can you deprive children of joy – particularly when children are learning and developing through sensory motor stimulation.

And there were equally as many quiet and relaxing activities in contrast for a balance – gentle, billowing, beautiful, soft sheets of silky material for example, caressing the body and assisting the child to let go those tight muscles, and assist them do what I would now refer to as 'yield' their bodies and give in to gravity.

To reach the children's and carers' needs by approaching them through creative dance was innovative at that time and a pleasurable experience for all involved. The children rolled, slithered, bounced, were swung, or traveled on cloth from place to place.

They did not have to be coaxed into being cooperative about moving – in fact became so engrossed in the colour, sound and other stimulation offered that it was often hard to hold them back. But this then became the beginning of bringing in such things as social skills training in

encouraging turn-taking within the group, and the wait for the turn built up even more anticipation and excitement.

When we worked together all that time ago it was creative dance used therapeutically and complemented by the understanding of the emotional needs of both mother and child which Elizabeth brought from her social work training. Then as Elizabeth's work developed in the studio setting she went on to train as a dance movement therapist. Since that time she has become the renowned specialist in the field of mother-infant relationship using dance therapy in the psychological and psychiatric setting.

That work with Elizabeth was an incredible influence in my life and in my own development as a therapist: the beginning of seeing another way of working – a way that used a range of movement qualities, colour and beautiful sound. It turned me around to face in a different direction and move forward on another path. A path that led me towards dance movement therapy.

Note: This early ground breaking work at NATL was really the beginning of mother and child dance therapy in Australia. And when Elizabeth moved on from NATL in 1981 to have her third child I continued on with a group there for many years, no doubt developing it differently, but drawing on what I had learned from Elizabeth.



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and
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wrote *'Come
and Join the
Dance: A
Creative
Approach for
Children with
Special Needs'*,
about her group

at NATL, published in 1988, in collaboration with Jan Roydhouse (now Deans). This book is still available from DTAA books. See DTAA Publications at www.dtaa.org.au

Photo credit:

p. 18, Elizabeth, Teacher Mangala Studios, 1986, by Michaela Rost