

“The Treasure Hunt” – an early intervention DMT program

Cecilia Lau



Cecilia completed the Graduate Diploma in Dance/Movement Therapy at Wesley Institute and is an Associate member of DTAA.

She was previously trained in modern dance, choreography and dance improvisation using Laban Movement Analysis and Martha Graham technique during her study in Bachelor of Arts (Theatre/Dance) at UNSW.

Through her DMT training, she was given the opportunity to identify many physical, psychological and spiritual benefits that served as a source of healing through her previous and present dance/movement experience. She has developed a growing passion to promote the wisdom of embodiment through dance/movement to enhance the “living experience” for people coming from all walks in life.

The idea of putting together an early intervention program emerged in recent years when I began studying Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). During this course I was offered opportunities to facilitate creative dance groups for adults with disabilities, which eventually developed into dance movement therapy groups. At the same time, I continued my career in teaching dance to young children. Initially, I felt confused and struggled to distinguish the difference between my identity as a dance movement therapist and a dance teacher. The structure of both the dance movement therapy activities and the dance teaching had much in common. Nonetheless, I kept questioning myself as to how they are so different.

Although many articles I read during my DMT training provided information that defined the differences, it only became apparent to me after two years of engaging in these two roles. Eventually I came to understand the difference through witnessing the major behavioural changes and increased ability to regulate emotions in my DMT clients. I realized that there was a difference between the relational bond I shared with the DMT clients, and the relationship I have with my students.

My DMT clients helped me to understand how DMT impacted their psychological processes. For example, I saw significant changes in their social interaction patterns. When I began a series of DMT sessions, some clients avoided participation and stayed on the periphery of or far away from the group. However, in subsequent sessions they began not only to enter the group, but participate more fully, AND some even began to improvise rather than only mirroring my dance movement. Being able to witness such dramatic changes, I began to have many questions:
what does DMT offer to the lives of adults with disabilities,
how much could it offer to help children with special needs
how could it help these children develop skills for self-expressivity as well as complete the developmental movement stages that may have been neglected due to their disabilities.

It was at this point that I began to ponder the idea of an early intervention program to assist children to experience the treasures of emotions/feelings and expression of self. In DMT the therapist initiates a process of attunement with the clients. From this attunement process, Loman and Merman (1996) have shown that communication

is improved, trust is increased, the client feels more control over the environment and greater creativity occurs. As I pondered this idea, I realized that the attunement process requires an interactive environment, so why not include the children's parents as well as the therapist in that process? With this insight, I developed a growing desire to offer the tool of attunement skills to the parents, which I believe could help the children to be better understood in their daily living.

I named the program "The Treasure Hunt" to signify that we would discover their child's rich abilities as well as embrace and value the child's disabilities as part of their human wholeness. A similar aim was described by Lucy Watney (1993) who wanted to help children reach their maximum potential through integrating the physical, cognitive, emotional and social aspects of self in order to enhance the functioning of the individual. Through involving the parents, I hope to create a therapeutic living environment for the child, rather than just a one hour per week experience with me. My program holds the intent to stimulate, reshape and connect the child's internal world with changes coming from their external environment; in other words, integrate their body movement, social interactions and relational patterns with their parents. Secondly, through establishing the internal somatic and emotional connections of both parent and child, I hope to raise self-awareness. Finally, by establishing external interpersonal connections, I aim to develop a healthy relational bond and emotional boundaries between the child and their parent(s).

Each session begins with an introduction to help the therapist to assess the mood of each child and the relational dynamics between the child and their parent(s). Then warm up activities occur which develop group ritual and awaken body and spatial awareness. This component allows the therapist to observe the children's and parents' preferred movement patterns, dynamics and kinespheric use. Group activities follow, which develop empathic skills between the children and the parents through the sharing of rhythm, exploring of strength, and mirroring of movements. The group activities also work on social skills by offering an opportunity for participants to interact with other children and other parents. I ensure that each session includes

multi-sensory movement activities to enhance cognitive organizational and self-regulation skills. And finally, during the relaxation, I use Bartenieff Fundamentalstm, to complete each session with grounding and body connectivity.

I hope this program offers not only a new perspective for the children, but as importantly, a different way of thinking and being for the parents. In the normal routines of daily life a parent may be prevented from identifying the child's abilities due to the compounding stress of the constant focus on the child's disabilities. Through the fun of dance, music and rhythmic activities, families are offered the opportunity to explore the freedom of movement, and enhance their non-verbal and verbal communication. I hope all participants will exchange and share any insights, connections, and movements between themselves and their children, and that the parent(s) and their children enjoy a journey of rich discovery.



Photo: Courtesy Macarthur Temporary Family Care

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