



“Dogs, Bones and Dancing”: a Commentary

Colwyn Trevarthen

Professor (Emeritus) of Child Psychology and Psychobiology, School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, University of Edinburgh

Vice-President, British Association for Early Child Education

I have spent many years studying the development of babies' talents for exploring interests and feelings with a parent, how they use expressive face, voice and hands to share intimate musicality or dance of proto-conversations and baby songs. They have bodies that cannot stand and walk, but they act with harmonious Self-awareness, understanding the rich language of human movement well, and they learn playful rituals. The infant becomes the two-year-old toddler who is enthralled with the new thrill of independent actions with the whole body on two feet, and with inquisitive ears, eyes and hands discovering a rich new world, and so proud that he or she says “No!” to offers of advice. This is the beginning of a rapid development of acting and imagining, and of communicating stories with joyful movement, leading to mastery of traditions of talk and intricate manipulation skills, including writing.

“Dogs, Bones and Dancing” presents a remarkable work by Sightlines Initiative in Kendal with children in nursery and beginning primary school, which richly expands the story I have been trying to understand, in two ways. First, it is clear that, for each of these three-to-five-year-olds, the growing vitality of a human body with its many clever parts has become a thrilling adventure. And second, this life adventure is one to be explored in play with companions who love to share the energy and grace of moving, and the new stories it tells. The child asks to be accepted as the author of ideas to be developed with lively company. In doing so he or she is presenting a personality, a named character acting the role of a performer who responds to others' appreciations with confident boldness, or cautious timidity. Three- and four-year-olds like to imagine dramas that discover thrilling experiences and friendships with bold heroes or lovely heroines, or that are excited with fear of monsters which threaten harm.

Older children entering primary school are beginning to appreciate help in communication with a teacher, pleased with their new talents of speech, appreciating new ideas for manipulation of objects as tools, and for writing: employing their growing language to record interesting stories. But they are not looking for instruction – they want their eagerness to be accepted and made richer. It is clear that such advances in cleverness with cultural understanding depend on the vitality of Self-expression that has been there from birth, and the enjoyment of creating new experiences with others who want to cooperate in making actions and memories meaningful and productive of common good. Wise teachers know that the curriculum for education must be co-authored with the children.

My studies of infants as communicators convinced me that we are born persons with self-awareness of moving, or 'subjectivity'. The way a newborn baby imitates proves we also have the fellow-feeling called 'inter-subjectivity'. We can move in and out of synchrony, and play with the experience, making jokes and teasing. It is a mystery how we sense each other's impulses and feelings, but we certainly are born to have pleasure inventing a social awareness and its meanings.

The account of Sightlines Initiative's work with Kendal Nursery School, by Cathering Reding and Robin Duckett working together with the educators, celebrates the gift of childishness with serious delight. The text explains their strategy to explore the world that the children know, and how situations were chosen to give expression to that knowledge and what it is keen to learn. Projects were recorded in drawings the children made, as well as in photographs, sound tracks and exciting films of voices dancing and feet singing.

Inspiration drawn from the philosophies of preschools in Reggio Emilia, and from Sightlines' previous Drama of Sound work is evident in the ways children's enquiries and imagination were supported. Children were given musical instruments to explore together and could represent for themselves a story they invented about a big snake living in the Wild Side woodland adjacent to the school.

The performances of their imaginations were sensitively accompanied by Catherine Reding with her accordion, who studied how the children responded to different styles of music and, with the class teacher Karen, asked what they meant by 'music' and 'dance', bringing out the subtlety and variety of their associations for those words.

A film that records how Cath accompanied a dramatic display of a group running round a tent in the playground to escape an imaginary cheetah displayed her appreciation of the children's changing pulse of excitement, and showed how with her imitations and anticipations she could evoke synchronous responses with variations from their inborn musical sensibilities. The same is shown where she plays along with a display on a shadow casting screen of the children imitating how dogs crawl, run, jump, roll about, bark or whine and chase each other.

The topic of dogs arose in the production and illustration of a story in which the children were encouraged to play with recollections of their pet dogs, with the help of parents and teachers. With the nursery team, Cath worked with the children to know them and their dog stories, and then, with seven of the children, set up the shadow projection for the children and provided musical instruments to help their performance of moving and vocalising like dogs. She accompanied their acting with her accordion. Again they created a beautiful theatrical/musical event together. When the children saw the film, one performer, Laila, squealed with delight at seeing herself dancing doglike. Importantly the children's animated creations left treasured memories, material for later stories.

In their reflections, the nursery school headteacher and staff reveal how they gained deeper understanding of how learning is built from the children's interests, through patiently observing the children's creativity and 'letting go' of fixed expectations.

In the following year, work with 30 older children at St. Thomas Primary School, Kendal, began with a study of how children in the reception class responded to an invitation to transform photos of themselves into imaginary characters. This was enjoyed and remembered by the children. Together the children developed a dramatic story about a little giant and a little dog, a dangerous whale, a bone that gave them wings to escape, a shark

and an angel who could fly high. With these elements they made up a shadow play with music, rich in fantasies, which they reproduced in drawings.

The whole project is a brilliant lesson in the natural impulses of young children to be imaginative creators of meanings; made and shared through all the ways the body can move and display intentions and feeling, for the appreciation of other persons of any age. This is the river of human vitality in which culture is carried through the generations, benefitting from support of older or more expert individuals, but based on the inquisitive mind and body of the learner.

As Jerome Bruner says, we are, by nature, story-making creatures who wish to share the plot of our life in the word together, and who become complementary agents of that adventure. Being graceful morally, acting powerful and dangerous, or joyful with kindness; this is the way we explore our personality in companionship, building 'character'. In promoting practice with invention a teacher has to learn the trick of being attuned with younger minds.

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