



Takeshi Matsumoto and Makiko Aoyama performing Club Origami by Takeshi Matsumoto, Makiko Aoyama and Robert Howat. Photo: Summer Dean.

Little Big Dance: Co-creating dance with early years

Here, the first UK Professor of Dance Education, **Dr Angela Pickard** from Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University, discusses how the Mosaic approach provides a useful tool for developing and evaluating dance work with early years children as co-creators.

Launched in 2019, Little Big Dance is a national programme that set an ambition to ‘strengthen, enliven and reimagine’ dance for children under five years old and their families. Led by South East Dance in partnership with Yorkshire Dance, Take Art and Dance East, Little Big Dance is supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Arts Council England, Dance Umbrella, Strike a Light Festival, Spark Arts, Leeds Dance Partnership, and Birmingham Hippodrome.

Engaging with movement and dance from a young age can enhance physical, social, and cognitive development and can contribute to long-term health. Children who engage with the arts from a young age are more likely to become arts audiences as adults. Little Big Dance set out to harness this, enable more high-quality dance work for very young audiences to be made and share what we’ve learned in the process.

My role as Little Big Dance Evaluator is key to assessing what we mean by ‘high quality’ in this context and to understanding the programme’s impact on young audiences. In this article, I describe how I have approached this.

Little Big Dance

Little Big Dance’s aim is to drive forward the evolution of how dance work is created for younger audiences by bringing dance artists, early years specialists and dramaturgs together with 0-5-year-old children to learn together and create new works. It places young children under five years at the heart of the process as co-creators, therefore the work is made with and by children, as much as for children.

To date, it has supported 18 dance artists with training and development opportunities that offer the skills needed to create work specifically for young audiences. Three new pieces of dance work have been commissioned and created by and with birth to five-year-olds for national tour, trailers for which can be found online.

- It’s Ok by George Fellows explores a range of emotions a child can experience
- Club Origami by Takeshi Matsumoto, Makiko Aoyama and Robert Howat explores origami and the concept of ‘animism’ – the belief that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence
- Skydiver by Xenia Aidonopoulou is a multi-sensory dance experience initially inspired by the myth of Icarus.

Little Big Dance’s approach has been to, through the four partner organisations, bring children from early years settings together to participate and collaborate with dance artists. They have interacted through meaningful, creative, imaginative and playful movement and dance experiences, and explored, tried out, researched, developed and tested creative ideas together.



Philip Hulford performs in Skydiver by Xenia Aidonopoulou. Photo: Rosie Powell.

Children and their families, early years teachers and/or assistants have watched and responded to work in progress together with the dance artists. Through this in-depth process, the children have influenced decision making and the creation of dance works for young audiences has evolved.

Evaluating the programme

Through the evaluation process, I am profiling children’s ‘voices’ as verbal or non-verbal in the form of, for example, movements, gestures, physical expressions, mark-making, sounds, emotions and words, so they can be heard.

This draws on principles that underpin Loris Malaguzzi’s view that young children are “rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent” and on the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011, Clark, 2017), that seeks children’s active involvement in decision-making.

Historically, very little attention has been paid to gaining responses from babies and toddlers, as it was previously thought that babies and young children were not able to convey their experiences, however, an emphasis on the views and rights of the child have led to a change in thinking.

The Mosaic approach is a way of engaging with young children and acknowledges the many ways that children respond and express their views and experiences. Importantly, it is not reliant on or limited to the use of voice or on the written word so is inclusive for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers. Using Mosaic, the responses and voices of young children reflect diverse forms of communicating, representing and interpreting their thoughts and emotions. Children’s responses can be captured through observations and other participatory activities and can be viewed as a search for pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that fit together to construct a >>

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holistic picture or ‘mosaic’. This mosaic enables me to see themes, ideas, preferences, interests or patterns emerging.

Elements of the approach are:

- multi-method – recognising the different ‘voices’ of children
- Participatory – treating children as experts in their own ideas
- Meaningful – including children, artists, early years practitioners and families in making meanings
- adaptable – applicable in a variety of contexts and settings
- focused on children’s experiences.

Young children ‘speak’ through their actions, expressions and reactions. Therefore, my approach to evaluating Little Big Dance values and integrates the physical, visual, symbolic, emotional and verbal, in order to gain feedback from young children.

In this way, the evaluation is an active participatory, child-centred process, intended to capture feedback through the lens and perspectives of young children. The children are active, rather than passive, participants and co-constructors in the artistic process, raising the status of their responses and placing them at the heart of a holistic evaluation process. It is embedded into the performance and captures children’s lived experiences in real time, rather than separating the child from the experience, as may happen when using traditional evaluation interviews or focus group methods, for example.

Little Big Dance is a test base as it is the first time that the Mosaic approach, which places children at the heart of the feedback process, has been used for an evaluation.

Below, I share some tools from the Mosaic approach that I have used to watch, listen and learn from children 0-5 years, during my evaluation. These have also become useful for artists supported through the Little Big Dance programme, who have started to utilise some of these ways of working as part of their own research and development when making work with young children.

Observation

Observing children as they watch, participate or interact with an activity, workshop or performance is a time to watch their actions, behaviours, interactions, expressions and multisensory communications. It can reveal:

- their likes and dislikes
- their wants and needs
- their interests
- how they respond socially and interact with other children and adults
- how they respond emotionally
- how they manage their emotions
- how they respond physically
- how they respond to invitations to participate/interact/engage with creative activities
- where they are in their learning and development
- how they respond holistically through movement, sound, expression.

It is important to let participants and audiences know that someone will be observing and making notes and to gain permissions to do this. Everyone involved in the Little Big Dance ‘test’ settings, and performances were aware that I was observing as part of the evaluation. I wanted to use different methods to build up a picture of and understand what and why something within the artistic experience yields engagement, response and motivation amongst young children, their families and the workforce that supports them. Again, some of the artists have started to adopt these themselves, for example:

- Noting down snap shots of babies and children’s responses/reactions
- Movement/time records for example, to see periods of focus/engagement
- Longer written observations that document actions, responses, vocalisations etc.

Watching body language during the ‘test’ or research and development workshops and the performances is a useful way to see which aspects of the workshop or performance gained the children’s attention and held their interest, and for how long. Importantly, physical and emotional engagement such as facial expressions, joining in and participating, copying movement, making



Claire Lambert & Laura Booth performing in it’s ok by George Fellows. Photo: Summer Dean.



Children taking part in Skydiver sharing day at The Dance Space, Brighton. Photo: Daniel Falvey.

sounds/noises, engaging with a friend, an adult, parent or carer about the workshop or performance and being playful and creative by improvising their own movements for example, are all important areas to capture.

Drawing

Children's freehand 'doodles' and drawings provide a rich, creative and colourful data source and a means of representing and communicating perspectives and thinking.

Drawings can represent layers of meaning and are often combined with other modes of communication such as sounds, verbalisation, talk and mark making/writing. Often, it brings thoughts, body/action and emotions together. Sometimes the drawings are representative based on something that the children saw in the performance and sometimes they convey a mood or a feeling. The choice of shapes and colours as well as words that are used during the process of drawing are observed. Where children are able to interact with language, then questions can be asked about the pictures.

Made objects/artefacts

As part of the Club Origami performance, children made artefacts with paper inspired by what they had seen. These, like drawings, became useful starting points for child conferences and conversations. The children also made meaning using a range of modes such as sound, gesture, and playing with the made objects.

Emotion stickers

Brightly coloured 'emoji' stickers depicting a happy

face, a straight face or a sad face can be used to engage in brief conversations with young children who are verbal around how they felt about the workshops or performances, as well as whether they liked or did not like something in particular. This can also be useful if a performance has evoked feelings of sadness or empathy, for example - not all performances are created to be joyful throughout. This can make for helpful conversation with children and their families or in their nursery/care settings.

Based on my experience so far, in my view, the evaluation of the Little Big Dance programme is leading the dance sector in developing ways to engage with young children in both evaluation and as co-constructors of knowledge in the creation process of making work with and for young audiences.

References

For further reading about the Mosaic approach see: -
Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011) (second edition). *Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach*, London: National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
Clark, A. (2017) *Listening to Young Children, Expanded Third Edition: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*

Info

The Little Big Dance Festival and Symposium, featuring a keynote presentation from Professor Angela Pickard, takes place at The Dance Space, Brighton and Brighton Dome on 19 & 20 February 2024.

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