



# Sharing dances within a developmental approach to curriculum

**Yael Owen-Mckenna**, dance practitioner and Joint Head of Service at Coventry Performing Arts Service and Music Education Hub, reflects upon the development of a programme of creative dance and Sherborne Developmental Movement for Special Schools across Coventry

**“I have been both amazed and moved by the freedom of movement expressed by profoundly disabled children in our sessions and their utilisation of another body to explore their own movement capacity.** This can also mean being able to take physical risks, free of equipment designed to hold, contain and support. Dancers can experience falling, rocking and stretching safely supported by another moving, breathing body.” Alexis Haines, Dance Practitioner and Head of Dance, Coventry Performing Arts Service (PAS).

For over three years, I have been working alongside dance practitioner Alexis Haines and, more recently, dance artist Sarah Boulter and the staff and children of Castle Wood Special School in Coventry to develop and deliver a programme of high quality, meaningful creative dance founded within a ‘developmental’ approach to special school curriculum design. As I write, we will be delivering regularly in another special school this academic year. It is so exciting to see this work growing and impacting on so many more children and young people across the city.

Castle Wood is a primary special school with currently 113 pupils, including 26 children in Early Years Foundation Stage. The school accepts children from 3 to 11 years with a wide range of dis/abilities and special educational needs, including children with Profound and Multiple Learning

Dis/abilities (PMLD) and children on the broadest range of the autistic spectrum.

The developmental approach to curriculum design in Castle Wood was championed and jointly implemented by the late Dr Penny Lacey, who was a Senior Lecturer in Education at Birmingham University, widely published and respected in the field of PMLD and Severe Learning Difficulties. Penny’s work in partnership with the school was focused largely on the children with PMLD, but has influenced the curriculum across the whole school.

“The content of the (developmental) curriculum is broken down into four areas: cognition, communication, physical and self care, and independence.”(1)

Penny’s philosophy continues to be instrumental at Castle Wood in supporting a curriculum that fully embraces the creative arts. She was a huge advocate of music, creative dance and the Sherborne Developmental Movement (SDM) approach, citing that these activities provide a ‘context’ and a ‘thematic approach’ for learning, especially for those with the most complex needs.(2)

Alexis and I met Penny very early on in our journey at Castle Wood School and she, alongside the Head and then Deputy Head, encouraged us to be bold, creative and confident in the development of our practice. It was at this time we were introduced

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Yael with participant, Sherborne Session. Photo: Helen Ashbourne



## Disabled people

by Penny to the SDM approach, and in 2013 (joined by Sarah) gained our Level 1 training. Penny often popped into our sessions and joined in or observed and talked to us about what she had noticed in particular children. I would often take up most of Penny's Thursday lunch-break talking with her about something amazing that a child had danced or that I had experienced as a co-dancer in a Sherborne session! Children from almost every class within the school continue to experience a session of creative dance or SDM as part of their school curriculum.

From steady beginnings at Castle Wood, receiving continual support and developing our knowledge of special education, we can now confidently offer a programme of bespoke delivery in movement and dance for children with special needs.

As an arts organisation and Music Education Hub, Coventry Performing Arts Service has learned from Castle Wood and has adopted a philosophy of: Innovation, Inclusion, Partnership. This has supported a framework within which to develop an authentic, high quality and meaningful movement and dance offer in Special Schools and a growing programme of music delivery.

Our programme of dance follows two interlinked strands: 1) Creative Dance – often cross-curricular and topic-based and 2) Sherborne Developmental Movement.

In creative dance we develop our dance sessions alongside topics that a teacher is working on in the classroom, an approach I am sure that many dance practitioners working in schools are very familiar with. Recently, we have been inspired to dance by: ourselves, the jungle, toys, circus, Africa and weather.

In these sessions, some of the more physically able and ambulant children are offered the opportunity to explore possibilities for movement via free improvisation activities, along with more structured partner work or movement explorations. The dance sessions are supported by vibrant resources and music to provide a strong sensory and kinaesthetic experience. Current work in development is ensuring that progression is captured and is investigating the creation of

symbols/cards with words associated with actions, space, dynamics and relationships.

We work with a philosophy of support rather than prompting – a 'hand under hand' approach rather than 'hand over hand'. In relation to learning short, simple sequences of movement (such as a warm-up dance or hello/goodbye dance), we will begin to consider the process of 'forward/backward chaining'. This is a method often used when teaching life skills to individuals with complex needs and is about breaking down a task into its component parts. Often a 'task analysis' is undertaken to see



Above and top: Participants, Sherborne Session. Photos: Helen Ashbourne

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whether forward or backward chaining is the best method to use. I think this approach could be very useful and lends itself well to dance activity, particularly when related to Laban's work in Laban Movement Analysis and Movement Pattern Analysis. It is my intention to investigate in more depth how this approach could be applied within a lesson as a means of exploring achievement and creativity and in measuring progression.

The SDM approach, developed by Veronica Sherborne (1922-1990) is based in observing, understanding, nurturing and encouraging the individual movement patterns and

movement qualities of each child; this happens through a duet, a co-created dance. It is focused on the development of the relationship between the dancer and their awareness of their own body, their dance partner and others dancing within the space, and is based within the concept of physical 'play'. SDM underlines the importance of increasing children's awareness of their own bodies, often absent in children with PMLD and Severe Learning Difficulties. It aims to deliberately facilitate sensation, connection and communication. The Sherborne approach emphasises the possibilities that movement can present when children are facilitated in awareness of their bodies, and can then begin to form relationships with others.

Dancers (usually supported by chairs or walkers) work with a dance partner who provides a supportive bodily 'landscape' from which the dancer can explore and extend their own movement possibilities and experience the freedom of movement improvisation. Dancers are also facilitated to discover and explore the space around them and encouraged to develop relationships with other dancers in the room.

In these weekly SDM sessions we continue to take a 'thematic' approach, at the same time staying with the established SDM methodology. We find this works well. It enables a clear connection with class work and offers the children another way of accessing specific topics, as supported by Penny's developmental curriculum approach. Throughout all of our sessions at Castle Wood, we have committed support from the teaching assistants in the school, all of whom work one-to-one in the SDM sessions with the children. We cannot overestimate how this support contributes to the success of the lessons we deliver. Quite often in the Sherborne sessions we have a parent join us. This is something we are working towards developing further.

Developing these two strands of work has ensured that we are including all children in movement and dance as part of their curriculum. There is no doubt that it has been a huge challenge, but the Sherborne sessions

have been especially beneficial for those with complex needs and those who spend a great amount of time in supportive equipment. I think this work at Castle Wood has broken down many barriers as there are always opportunities for 'compensatory' movements where at different levels children are finding routes towards mobility, physicality and awareness of self. Everybody owns their dance.

In 2014, Castle Wood and PAS were thrilled to be awarded funding from Awards for All, as we created a programme of work called Moving to Discover Me. This project was hugely symbolic of how far we had come on our journey together and how this partnership had inspired so many other opportunities. We've gone from delivering taster dance/SDM sessions to working with a local disabled dance artist and graduate of Coventry University, delivering our dance (and music) programme with Sherbourne Fields Special School, creating a Special Schools Creative Arts Network Group for Coventry and strengthening links with Hereward College (a national Further Education college for young people with disabilities and additional needs). In addition to this Coventry Performing Arts Service in People Dancing's 11 Million Reasons project.

We look forward to an exciting 2015/16 and will continue our journey of developing and deepening our knowledge and understanding in this work. There is no doubting though, that my own greatest privilege and joy is the opportunity to observe, create and share in the dances of so many vibrant children.

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#### Info

**yael.owen-mckenna@coventry.gov.uk**  
**ynsowen@hotmail.com**  
**www.castlewood.coventry.sch.uk**

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#### References

1. Lacey, P. (2011), A Profound Challenge, SEN Magazine
2. Sherborne, V. (2001), Developmental Movement for Children, 2nd Revised Edition, Worth Publishing.

I would like to dedicate this article to the late Dr Penny Lacey. Penny's wisdom and passion in supporting the development of our work at Castle Wood School continues to inspire and guide us. Also with thanks to Alexis Haines and Sarah Boulter.



Creative dance session. Photo: Helen Ashbourne