

## Creative Learning Through Movement with Children

By Sonja H. Sutherland

The drum is the guide. “When the drum plays, you move, when it stops, freeze. Listen... Can you hear the circular rhythm? How do you move in circles?” The drum plays and the children spin, roll, tumble and cartwheel; they stay in one place and make circular movements with various body parts; they scamper, crawl and fly through space making circles on the ground and in the air.

Over the past 11 years I have taught and developed Creative Learning through Movement curriculum at a private elementary school to children ages five through eleven years old. Classes integrate cognitive, emotional and motor development by grounding problem solving, emotional exploration and thinking in movement and expression. They provide children with opportunities to learn how they learn and how they can influence their actions and behaviors.

“Can you hear the low-to-the-ground rhythm? How do you move?” The children move in response to the inquiries. The drum stops, they freeze. “Someone is slithering slowly on her belly. Someone is scooting quickly on his bottom. Someone else is walking on all fours. How do you move low to the ground? Who has a way of moving low to the ground that they would like to share?” Eight hands shoot into the air. “Let’s all watch Johnny. Who can move like him? Don’t worry about doing your movement exactly like Johnny’s. Just get the general pattern, like a sketch of his movement.” Each round of directives and questions is followed by drumming to accompany the kids as they explore their responses.

We watch Johnny do his low-to-the ground movement again and the children add details to their movement sketches. “Notice how he tilts his head side to side as he slithers on his belly and how his tail slides back and forth. Feel how your spine moves when you do this.” The drum plays and they slither. “How is Johnny using his hands and feet to move along the ground?...What kind of animals move like Johnny?” Ginny says she moves like a crocodile. Ben says he is an iguana. We explore how different reptiles move. “Now imagine we all slip into the ocean. No more hands and feet! Fins. What creatures swim through the water with this side-to-side motion? They imagine they are sharks and glide through the water. Slowly, they grow arms and legs and crawl back onto land.

The children hop, skip, jump and squiggle along straight lines, curves, zigzags, and circles taped on the floor. They trace these with their hands and feet. They outline

them in the air with their elbows and knees and on the ceiling with their fingers and noses. Put these together and what do we get? Letters.

The children grow awareness antennas -- on their shoulders, elbows, fingers; on their pelvis, knees, toes; their heads and shoulder blades. They carve through space leading with different parts of themselves and tracing letters. From lines to letters to words, what does this spell? Embodied Learning.

Just as children develop their handwriting -- their signatures, they also learn to give form to their feelings and to shape their own unique movement signatures. The children create shapes that travel, transform, change direction and tempo. Some float, others sink. Shapes explode, melt, freeze. They connect their shapes. Some support and others need support. They make straight, angular, and curvy shapes. Shapes twist and untwist. Smooth shapes grow bumps. Bent shapes straighten and then bend again, one part at a time.

The drum provides pacing and structure. When the drum plays quickly, the children jump, leap, gallop and scamper around the room. "On a scale from one to ten, how fast are you moving?... Just how fast is your ten?!" The drum beats and the children race and fly. It stops and they stop. "Who can move so very, very slowly that it would take you the whole class time just to come back to the circle?" They experience large differences such as those between the extremes of one and ten on their personal speed scales. Then they differentiate smaller, finer differences. How do you slow down from your five to your three?

We explore the continuums of speed, intensity and quality of their mobility -- how they move through space — and of their motility -- how they move internally. "In three counts make a shape and freeze. On a scale from one to ten how thick is your shape?" The children make their shapes thicker and then more porous; their shapes collapse and then the children fill themselves back up little by little. They melt and then unmelt. They add measured amounts of thickeners and thinners to themselves to see how this affects their movements and their experience.

"How do you shape your feelings? How do you create an angry shape? Do you twist, bend, curve, or straighten? What qualities does your angry shape have? On a scale from one to ten, how angry is your shape? Let's take the intensity of your angry shape up two counts; do you get more dense or less? Do you expand or shrink? Do you feel more protected or less? How might you travel through space with your angry shape? What happens if you take your same angry shape back down two counts? How does it feel to still hold your angry shape, but with less intensity? We

explore different intensities and qualities of many emotional shapes: happy, scared, brave, sad, timid, silly, confused, confident shapes.

We often use the curriculum from their classroom as themes. The children are studying the ocean. Sea creatures everywhere! We explore qualities of movement that evoke the textures, flow, force and speeds of the sea. As Moshe Feldenkrais eloquently said: "Movement is Life. Life is process. Improve the quality of the process and you improve the quality of life itself." How does your sea creature move? Slowly? Quickly? In percussive bursts? Like a flowing ribbon? Does it make small movements or large? Off we go: Sweeping, gliding, floating, twirling, creeping. We move in slow motion with sudden quick outbursts, we dart, we rest. The movement qualities of the many varied sea creatures are our study.

Seymour is a large skeleton taped on the floor. He teaches functional anatomy. "What part of your skeleton connects your head to your pelvis?" The children walk up and down Seymour's spine, exploring how their own spines move. "Can your spine twist? Bend forward and back? Side to side? Curve around? If you make circles with your pelvis how far up your spine can you feel the movement? If you make circles with your head, how far down your spine can you feel this? Where do your ribs attach to your spine? How do the movements of your spine affect your ribcage? What does your ribcage protect? They explore the movements of their heart and lungs. How does your breathing affect your ribs and how do your ribs affect your breathing?" We investigate how the bones in our arms and legs move. Isn't it curious how the skeletal structure of our hands-arms-shoulders resembles the structure of our feet-legs-hips? And our fingers and toes share the same skeletal name -- phalanges? The children walk on their hands and feet. They interlace their fingers and toes. They pick up things with their feet and walk on their hands.

It is time for a movement puzzle. "Everyone sit on the floor with the soles of your feet together. With your fingers interlaced, can you hold your feet and roll in circles?" Children come up with many different ways to roll around in this configuration. I may direct: "Start by lying on your back and holding your feet as before. From this position, who can roll side to side? Without pushing or straining who can find a way to roll to your side and then to sitting? What do you have to do with your head to make this easy? Not all the children figure out how to roll all the way around in a circle with ease. No worries. We will come back to this during the last fifteen minutes of class when it is time for running games.

Through the use of body scans -- in lying and in motion, the children explore and expand their self-image and develop spatial awareness. With an imaginary paint-

brush, the children partner up, select their favorite colors and cover each other's whole backsides in paint. Then they lie down and sense all the parts of themselves that are touching the floor, as well as the parts that are not. "Notice how you are making a print on the floor. Let's stand up. Can you still sense the pattern on your backside? Travel through space and sense how your pattern moves. Can you sense the moving pattern the whole group is making together?"

And now a group movement puzzle. There are different shapes taped on the floor. Let's see how many drumbeats it takes for the group to gather in one shape without talking or touching. No one may nonverbally direct one another. The only behavior they may change is their own. Sometimes if the group is struggling for a long time to solve a group movement puzzle, I add a constraint: "If more people are in another shape than the one you are in, switch to their shape." Or if Jinny is very stubbornly staying in her shape while everyone else has joined a different shape I may add another constraint: "If someone is alone in a shape, everyone else must join her." The group shifts to join Jinny. We all benefit from the reminder that "We are not after flexible bodies, but flexible minds". "Now, let's see how many drum beats it takes for the group to fill each shape on the floor with at least one person, but no shape may have more than three."

It is finally time for a tag running game. Two or three children are "it". Everyone runs. If you get caught you have to solve the movement puzzle we worked on earlier in class: Without straining, how do you do one full circle while holding your feet with soles together? Once you solve the puzzle, you are free. If you need help, raise your hand and I will come over and give extra verbal and/or hands-on hints. By incorporating movement puzzles into running games I can work with children individually while the group is engaged in a game.

Over the years of teaching Creative Learning through Movement classes I have observed how these kinds of structured movement explorations and dynamic games with children foster creativity, spark curiosity, develop personal and interpersonal skills, enhance self-image, encourage group participation and cooperation, and support a love for learning and moving. I have found this to be true for the children and for myself. It is a joy to create and learn together.