

Choreographed childhoods: Patterns of embodiment in the lives of contemporary children¹

Eeva Anttila, Professor in Dance Pedagogy
Department of Dance and Theatre Pedagogy
Theatre Academy Helsinki, Finland
email: eeva.anttila@teak.fi

Abstract

This paper is based on a forthcoming book chapter. It discusses patterns and dynamics of embodiment and especially of embodied interaction in childhood. The discussion leans on the notion of “social choreography,” which refers to the multitude of ways that human beings organize their daily actions and interactions according to various models and implicit influences. The purpose of this article is to illuminate how even very young children are being “choreographed” and conditioned to move and behave according to predetermined patterns. These patterns are reflected in children’s play culture, informal and formal education, and increasingly mediated through media culture. Modern arts education, when critically scrutinized, can be also seen to reinforce certain aesthetic patterns and styles. In dance, this may mean that the aesthetic preferences of the teacher dictate children’s movement qualities and choreographical choices. This can be a homogenizing influence, where cultural differences may become compromised. This chapter discusses how dance educators could become more aware of these hidden influences and consciously widen the aesthetic perspectives and choices for themselves and the children they teach. It also suggests that all adults who interact with children can be considered movement educators, or “choreographers.” From this viewpoint, all educators need to be aware of the models and aesthetic preferences they pass on to future generations. Maybe, by becoming aware of the great influence of social and cultural patterns, these patterns could gradually become more flexible and allow for greater agency for growing children to be in charge of their bodily actions and interactions.

Keywords: childhood, choreography, social choreography, children’s dance, creative dance

Introduction

I have been fascinated about the beauty and vitality of children’s movement for a long time. I have keenly observed how they move in space in relation to each other and to adults, and what kinds of dynamics are present in their everyday actions. Recently, I have become increasingly concerned about the range of expressive dynamics that seem to become more limited as children develop.

The qualities of children’s embodied interaction are without a doubt relevant in understanding a child’s inner life. Thinking of this makes me wonder, who is in charge of molding the patterns of embodiment? How do educators re-enact them? What metaphors does education give rise to? A flock of flying birds or an army? In investigating these questions, I will lean on the concept of choreography. I will build analogies between dance choreography and the wider meaning, the choreography of life, or social choreography.

In the field of contemporary dance, the meaning of choreography is shifting. It has expanded, for

¹ A full version of this paper will appear in G. Boldt & F. McArdle (Eds.) (forthcoming). *Young Children, Pedagogy and the Arts: Ways of Seeing*. Routledge.

example, to the field of human relations. According to Michael Klien and Steve Valk, choreography has become a metaphor for dynamic constellations of any kind. They say, “If the world is approached as a reality constructed of interactions, relationships, constellations and proportionalities, then choreography is seen as the aesthetic practice of setting those relations or setting the conditions for those relations to emerge” (Klien & Valk, 2008a, p. 20).

In this paper, I am probing questions related to choreography from multiple points of view. Who is the choreographer? What is being choreographed and why? What kinds of methods and approaches are being used in choreographing childhood? My aim is to highlight children’s capacities to be co-choreographers of their own lives.

I will begin my investigation with the metaphor of solo dance. This notion refers to internal connections and fundamental movement patterns that lay the foundation for all external movements, interactions, and choreographies that become shaped in a relationship with the world and other human beings. Then, I will discuss embodied interaction between human beings in various contexts that become increasingly dictated from outside as children get older. I question this progression and wonder if it could be altered if educators became aware of their role as co-choreographers in children’s lives.

Solo dance: Internal choreography as a basis for relating

Solo dance refers to internal neuro-muscular patterning that provides a deep structure for increasingly complex actions and interactions. This sophisticated system develops during early years through active exploration and reciprocal interaction between the embodied human being and the surrounding world. It becomes manifest in fundamental movement patterns that make chained, integrated movement sequences possible.

In Klien’s and Valk’s terms, these patterns are to a large extent intrinsically embodied by self-organizing systems (2008a, p. 20). Fundamental patterns can be conceived of as an internal structure that provides safety and facilitates the quest to explore further, learn more, and to build relationships.

When restrained from active exploration, this structure may not develop favorably (Goddard Blythe, 2009, p. 6; Hackney, 2000, p. 23). In this case, the child may be more likely to experience falling, tripping, bumping into others and objects, and dropping and breaking objects. While mistakes and frustrations are necessary and inevitable for every child, a balance between challenging moments and satisfactory experiences is important for nurturing the quest to explore the world further. Thus, fundamental patterns have to do with feelings of security, safety, comfort, trust, and confidence. The development of these patterns is of great importance for the child’s well-being, development, and learning, including the development of conceptual thought and language. Recent findings in cognitive science substantiate the view that the sensory-motor system is intertwined with the cognitive, information processing system (Johnson, 2008, p. 26; Pfeifer & Bongard, 2007, pp. 168-169). A growing number of scholars agree that cognition is embodied (see Damasio, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Thelen, 2008).

The philosopher Mark Johnson (2008) claims that meaning emerges in our sensory-motor experiences. Recognizing the embodied origin of thinking elucidates its flexible nature. Following

this thread, dance can be considered a metaphor for thought: “Dance is the forming of certain configurations of thought, expressed in manifold ways by the birth of ideas or the shivering body ... Hence dance is a matter of thought pointing towards the possibility of change as inscribed in the body” (Klien & Valk, 2008b, p. 87).

The ability to express one’s views, opinions, feelings, and ideas through embodiment is a vital element of choreography, whether on a theatre stage or on the stage of life.

A whole other set of patterns, indeed, comes into play in the stage of life, the shared world. The question is, how do children manage to keep strengthening and developing their internal patterns further, and what kind of external patterns will they adopt? How do these different patterns match and become merged into coherent choreography? What happens if the child’s internal patterning and creative, self-initiated embodiment become undermined? Next, I will take a look into recent research in the first dyadic relationship that the infant encounters.

The duet: The aesthetics of reciprocity

According to Ellen Dissanayake (2009, p. 150) it is now well-established that new-borns come into the world with innate capacities that predispose them to solicit physical care and to elicit social and emotional interaction with others. She asserts that infants’ perceptual and cognitive abilities permit them to engage with their caretakers in complex, communicative interchanges, in playful behaviour that we often refer to as “baby talk” (2009, p. 151). Baby talk consists of rhythmic, repetitive utterances that have poetic features. Dissanayake writes, “the behaviour is dyadic, since infants actively elicit, shape, and otherwise influence the pace, intensity, and variety of signals that adults present to them” (2009, p. 152). Thus, it is reciprocally choreographed. It is not dictated by either of the partners; it is a collaborative creation.

The notion of the infant as co-choreographer challenges the conception of a child as incomplete, who has dominated developmental psychology and education for a long time. Instead, we can see the child as an active subject, a multitalented and resourceful agent.

As children grow, they enter the world of peer relationships. While caretakers remain their dancing partners for many years to come, children’s mutual play gains more significance in the choreography of life. Next, I will discuss children’s play as “instant” choreography, improvised and fluid interplay between equal partners.

Instant choreography: The improvised dance of children’s play

In the field of dance art, instant choreography refers to work that is created at the same time that it is performed (Stark Smith, 2011). The English dancer Julyen Hamilton, known for composing his dance works instantly, says that “improvisation for me is the process ... I never call a piece ‘improvisation.’ To me it is a piece” (Holzer, 2011).

From this perspective, children’s play is not simply a “rehearsal process” for real life. Play is significant in itself, as an aesthetic, performative act created on the stage of life, for life. Play elucidates a child’s capacity for collaborative, instant choreography.

The Swedish childhood researcher Gunilla Lindqvist (2001) has noticed that children love playing

in their dance classes and that they thought that there was not much difference between dance and play. Research in the field of children's dance concurs with this view. But, who choreographs children's creative dance?

Choreographing creative dance

Modern arts education can be considered a continuation of the romantic conception that considers artists to be exceptional and gifted individuals. Arts education based on this view potentially reinforces dominant aesthetics. In dance, this means that the aesthetic preferences of the teacher dominate the movement qualities and choreographic choices, as well as the ways children are expected to interact among one another. This can be a homogenizing influence where differences may become compromised.

According to Sherry Shapiro, a global view of aesthetics involves the recognition of diversity and acknowledges that there are multiple meanings of what dance is or what good dance is (2008, p. 255). It seems evident that respecting diversity has become even more challenging and crucial in times of globalization, where "children across the globe seek to imitate the fashion, music, and dance of the West" (Shapiro, 2008, p. 256).

Many dance educators have become aware of the homogenizing influence of Western dance forms and modernist arts education, but few have raised critical voices concerning creative dance, which for many dance educators represents a movement away from dominating aesthetics. Among the few critical voices is dance scholar Sue Stinson, who claims that creative dance may foster escapism and a way of socializing children towards "docile, well-disciplined individuals who will fit into the way things are rather than attempt to change them" (Stinson, 1998, p. 38).

Stinson's critical viewpoint seems fitting from my perspective as a long-time member of daCi. Based on children's dance performances in the context of our triannual conferences, a bias can be detected towards the aesthetics of Western theatre dance. This may be due to the dominant status of Western dance forms in the training of dance educators worldwide.

According to Klien and Valk (2008a, p. 85) the development of Western dance in the 20th century is primarily about "obedience and long legs." They consider this development a kind of perversion, where the dancing body is subjected to choreography. They write that, "Along the way, the map has been mistaken for the territory, the architecture for the experience. Maybe that's where it has all gone wrong. The structures are not the dance, they are perceptual orientations for getting there" (2008a, p. 85).

It increasingly concerns me that children perform dances authored by teachers like me: middle-class, Western, female teachers. Through this practice, we, consciously or not, pass on the aesthetic models that are inscribed within Western dance training onward to the next generation. These aesthetic models may overshadow the fundamental movement patterns, patterns of dyadic interaction, and improvised, self-initiated expressive patterning and meaning-making that could be allowed to grow into creative dance choreographies initiated and co-crafted by children. If choreography is understood in its wider meaning, as a way of seeing the world (Klien & Valk 2008a, p. 22), then dominating aesthetics bear significance also in the way children will perceive and understand the world.

Studies regarding a child's capacity for artistic expression, transformation, and aesthetic growth give grounds for a renewed view of their potential and expertise as creators and choreographers. Dance scholar Karen Bond has investigated children's perceptions of dance. She describes how children perceived dance in multiple and mysterious ways, and how a particular performance project celebrated "the capacity of young children to initiate, develop, and transform curriculum in areas of authentic interest" (2001, p. 48).

My own research (Anttila 2003, 2008) and practical experience point in the same direction. Children certainly are capable of sustaining their own creative play culture, but they are also capable of making aesthetic judgements and creating aesthetic, or artistic, forms based on their judgements, views, and experiences. In my work with children in the context of elementary schools, I have explored various ways of giving the students a greater role as agents of their creative work. For example, using storytelling, drawing, and improvisation for creating themes, ideas, and material for dance, I have witnessed artistic content and style that originates from children's worlds and imaginations, bearing little resemblance to Western theatre dance. I believe that when given enough space and support, children can become artists and choreographers.

When dance education takes place in the context of formal education, issues of diversity and gender become more pronounced in comparison to a dance studio setting. In school contexts, I have witnessed how some boys, for example, emphasize heteronormative masculinity in creating their ideas and material for dance, but also how many boys create a non-gendered or feminine material, performing gentle and soft qualities that can be seen as affiliated with femininity rather than masculinity (Anttila 2003, pp. 178-190).

Imposed patterns and conventions exist widely in culture and society, and children can hardly stay naïve in relation to what is beautiful, what is ugly, what is appropriate or not, or, for example, how girls and boys are expected to behave. I am willing to claim that predetermined aesthetic patterns and gender stereotypes are not distinctive in dance, where children are allowed to be active creators and participants in the creative process. This call for more diverse practices in dance education seems to be closely connected to the notion of social choreography that has to do with "how individuals can imaginatively order and reorder aspects of their personal, social, cultural and political lives" (Klien & Valk, 2008a, p. 21).

The performing arts have moved towards a more collective approach to art-making and increasingly consider reality, knowledge, and mind as organizational systems, as networks of relations and contexts, and focus on art as a socio-cultural activity (Klien & Valk, 2008a; Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg, 2002). The question is, to what extent can we see this shift take place in educational practices? I will return to this question in the concluding section.

Taming and re-leasing the choreographer

Once children enter formal education, a whole new set of patterns becomes imposed on them. They are introduced to different formations, such as circles, rows, and lines. They are taught how to sit at a desk and how to hold a pen. They learn how not to interrupt an adult and how not to respond spontaneously. They learn various norms and rules. Combined with decreasing time for play and self-directed exploration, the foundation for integrated, connected embodiment may

gradually erode.

In addition to visible limitations and rules, there are also obscure patterns that are imposed on children. There is social hierarchy and authority of knowledge. There is the hidden curriculum of power and submission, of the good student and the bad student, of the talented and the not-so-talented, of the “bold and the beautiful.”

School can be seen as a place, a micro-cosmos that is governed by special regulations where each person has an assigned role and a power status: the principal, the teachers, other staff, the students, the parents. The encounters between persons in school are regulated by these roles.

Disciplining the body in education is a phenomenon that, in my view, deserves even greater attention. It continues to be a topic of interest to dance education research, for example by dance scholar Jill Green (2002-2003; 2007). The production of docile bodies certainly takes place in dance education, but it can be considered an integral element of all forms of modern education.

William Doll has presented a postmodern view on education that involves a reflective relationship between the teacher and the student, where the teacher asks the student “to join with the teacher in inquiry, into that which the student is experiencing” (1993, p. 160).

When the environment is rich and open, it is possible that that multiple interpretations and perspectives can come into play. Doll claims that anomalies, even mistakes, must be nurtured, and this means dialoguing “seriously with the students about *their* ideas as *their ideas*” (1993, p. 166).

Doll’s view bears resemblance to Klien’s and Valk’s vision, where “the constellations are loose enough to actually reach a state of excitement or play without falling apart, without losing identity. A system such as society or a state can be dancing, unlike our present-day situation, where the structures are too tightly constrained” (Klien & Valk, 2008b, p. 84). As of today, however, few schools can be considered “dancing systems.”

Tight structures have been evident also in the arts. In dance, the postmodern turn that started to take place during the 1960’s can be seen as a rebellion against the aesthetics that objectified the body, movement, and the dancer in its attempt to achieve a symbolistic, representational ideal. During this turn, individualism became replaced with connectedness and presence. Somatic, contemplative practices replaced traditional dance training techniques. Improvisational, collaborative, and experiential approaches to choreography emerged. Dance art escaped from proscenium stages and inhabited unconventional spaces (Monni, 2004, pp. 194-197; see also Banes, 1980; Novack, 1990).

My question is, could this kind of turn take place in our educational practices? What would happen if we unleashed the children, or even further, if we refrained from leashing them in the first place? Is it possible to envision childhood as a co-creative choreography?

Co-choreographing childhood: A vision, or a possibility?

In this closing section of my paper, I ask how childhood could be choreographed collectively, that is, through a reciprocal, interactive, creative, spontaneous process where each partner in dance is

entitled to creative agency and input. The starting point for such choreography is recognition of a living, moving body, its fundamental movement patterns and internal connectivity. Supported by this internal dance, the young infant reaches out to the world, relates to others, and develops a sense of trust, security, and curiosity. The first reciprocal dance happens with the closest caregivers. This intimate, mutual choreography lays the groundwork for learning, relating, feeling, and belonging.

I wonder if we could understand this choreography and see how we could contribute to it, to co-choreograph education with children. Is it possible for us, adults and arts educators, to become more aware of our desires to choreograph our children's and students' lives and consciously widen our aesthetic perspectives, giving more choices for them? I consider all adults who interact with children as movement educators and co-choreographers of childhood. Thus, all adults who interact with children should become aware of the models and aesthetic preferences they pass on to future generations. Maybe by becoming aware of the great influence of these patterns, they could gradually become more flexible and allow for greater agency for growing children to be in charge of their bodily actions and interactions.

References

- Anttila, E. (2003). *A dream journey to the unknown: Searching for dialogue in dance education*. Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from http://www.teak.fi/general/Uploads_files/Acta%20Scenica/a_deram_journey_to_the_unknown_AS14.pdf. (Theatre Academy Helsinki: Acta Scenica 14.)
- Anttila, E. (2008). Dialogical pedagogy, embodied knowledge, and meaningful learning. In S. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance in a world of change: Examining globalization and cultural differences* (pp. 159-179). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Banes, S. (1980). *Terpsichore in sneakers: Post-modern dance*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bond, K. E. (2001). "I'm not an eagle, I'm a chicken!": Young children's experiences of creative dance. *Early Childhood Connections*, 7(4), 41-51.
- Damasio, A. (2010). *Self comes to mind: Constructing the conscious mind*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Dissanayake, E. (2009). The artification hypothesis and its relevance to cognitive science, evolutionary aesthetics, and neuroaesthetics. *Cognitive Semiotics*, 5, 148-173.
- Doll, W. E., Jr. (1993). *A post-modern perspective on curriculum*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Goddard Blythe, S. (2009). *Attention, balance and coordination: The A.B.C. of learning success*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Green, J. (2002-2003). *Foucault and the training of docile bodies in dance education*. *Arts and Learning Research Journal*, 19(1), 99-124.
- Green, J. (2007). Student bodies: Dance pedagogy and the soma. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 1119-1132). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Hackney, P. (2000). *Making connections: Total body integration through Bartenieff fundamentals*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Gordon and Breach.
- Holzer, S. (2011). Does it make you feel, think, imagine: A conversation with Julyen Hamilton about improvisation, dance, text, language, and performance. Retrieved from http://www.corpusweb.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1546&Item

[id=34](#)

- Johnson, M. (2008). The meaning of the body. In W.F. Overton, U. Müller, & J.L. Newman (Eds.), *Developmental perspectives on embodiment and consciousness* (pp. 19-43). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Klien, M., & Valk, S. (2008a). Choreography as an aesthetics of change. In *Framemakers: Choreography as an aesthetics of change* (pp. 20-25). Limerick, Ireland: Daghdha Dance Company.
- Klien, M., & Valk, S. (2008b). Dance as a metaphor for thought. In *Framemakers: Choreography as an aesthetics of change* (pp. 81-90). Limerick, Ireland: Daghdha Dance Company.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Lindqvist, G. (2001). The relationship between dance and play. *Research in Dance Education*, 2(1), 41- 52.
- Monni, K. (2004). *Olemisen poeettinen liike. Tanssin uuden paradigman taidefilosofisia tulkintoja Martin Heideggerin ajattelun valossa sekä taiteellinen työ vuosilta 1996-1999*. [The poetic movement of being: Philosophical interpretations of the new paradigm of dance in the light of Martin Heidegger's thinking and the artistic work of years 1996-1999]. Doctoral dissertation. (Theatre Academy Helsinki, Finland. Acta Scenica 15.)
- Novack, C. J. (1990). *Sharing the dance: Contact improvisation and the American culture*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Pfeifer, R., & Bongard, J. (2007). *How the body shapes the way we think: A new view of intelligence*. Cambridge, UK: MIT Press.
- Preston-Dunlop, V., & Sanchez-Colberg, A. (2002). *Dance and the performative: A choreological perspective – Laban and beyond*. London, UK: Verve Publishing.
- Shapiro, S. (2008). Dance in a world of change: A vision for global aesthetics and universal ethics. In S. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance in a world of change: Examining globalization and cultural differences* (pp. 253-274). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Stark Smith, N. 2011. About performance and the making of improvised pieces. *Contact Quarterly*, 36(1), 29-36.
- Stinson, S. W. (1998). Seeking a feminist pedagogy for children's dance. In S. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance, power and difference: Critical and feminist perspectives on dance education* (pp. 23-47). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Thelen, E. (2008). Grounded in the world: Developmental origins of the embodied mind. In W.F. Overton, U. Müller, and J.L. Newman (Eds.), *Developmental perspectives on embodiment and consciousness* (pp. 99-129). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

© 2012, Eeva Anttila

Eeva Anttila (Ed.Lic, Doctor of Arts in Dance) has been involved in dance education since the 1980's, focusing on dance for children and youth, and on contemporary dance pedagogy. She currently is a professor in Dance Pedagogy at the Theatre Academy Helsinki, Finland. Her dissertation (2003) focuses on dialogical dance pedagogy, and her current research interests are somatic approaches to dance pedagogy, embodied knowledge, and embodied learning. She has published work in national and international journals and edited books. She is an active member in many dance and arts education organizations, and is the past Chair of Dance and the Child International.

All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012.

<http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]

ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1