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Engaging Families in Dance: An Investigation of Moving Parents and Children Together

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Abstract

This article describes a relationship-based dance program, *Moving Parents and Children Together*, and summarizes a 3-year study of teacher practice and parent-child interactions. Our work focuses on “relational engagement” in dance, which entails a person’s basic motivation to connect plus a psychological investment in building interpersonal skills. We adopt an action research perspective, take a mix-methodological approach, and report on the design and use of a new measurement tool. We find evidence that using an “engagement lens” to assess behavior influences positively dance instruction and personal teaching practice. We also find general positive change in parent and child average engagement scores in two areas, activity and interest. Case studies of

immigrant and multi-generational families show positive growth in, and increasing self-awareness of, interpersonal attitudes and behaviors. Taken together, participants view MPACT as a powerful vehicle for growing and nurturing relationships.

The Secret Sits

*We dance around in a ring and suppose
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.*
Robert Frost (1942) "A Witness Tree"

Of all the things we do, interaction with others is perhaps the most important, and least predictable. When we interact with another person, even a stranger, our attention becomes structured by external demands. In more intimate encounters, the level of both challenges and skills can grow very high. A successful interaction involves finding some compatibility between our goals and those of the other person or persons, and becoming willing to invest attention in the other person. When interactions go wrong, especially when they go very wrong time after time, there can be a loss of trust. For children, the immediate and long-term consequences of exposure to chronically unsuccessful interaction with adults, especially caregivers, can be traumatic, resulting in a loss of the core capacity for interpersonal relatedness with life-long problems (Cook et al., 2005; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Booker Loper, & Shear, 2010). For parents and caregivers, especially those in rehabilitation or living in highly stressful environments, the void left by an unresponsive child can be devastating.

Many educational researchers now argue that the secret that sits in the middle is all too obvious: empathic, engaged, respectful, *caring* relationships are the key to a joyful life (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002). And yet, paradoxically, what constitutes a loving and healthy relationship must be learned. We carry the promise of connection from birth, but the skills are not given, they must be modeled, taught, and earned. Emotional abuse and neglect, experiences of separation, sexual and physical abuse, as well as witnessing domestic violence or living in poverty, can undermine the development of healthy minds, bodies and relationships.

A growing number of dance activists and educators believe that Dance is a powerful vehicle for growing and nurturing relationships. Dancing together requires the kind of *intersubjectivity* – the shared cognitions and felt emotions between people – that can build interpersonal trust and understanding. Relationship-based dance instruction can develop an ethic of care in teachers and learners (Warburton, 2004). Because dance instruction packs layer after layer of meaning and imagery with very few words – much like Robert Frost's pithy, aphoristic couplet – it promotes an immediacy of experience that can create sudden insight, opening previously shut channels of communication and avenues of understanding.

In what follows, we describe Luna Dance Institute's *Moving Parents and Children Together*, and present a summary of a 3-year study of this ongoing project that uses the power of moving together in time and space to help people build (and rebuild) personal relationships. As described in the Background section below, the vision of this program stems from a desire to support individuals and families in need. This section outlines the program's growth, ongoing assessment and development of project goals and objectives, curriculum, and evaluation methods. The subsequent sections present our mixed methodological approach to examining program effectiveness. Research investigation occurred in three phases: instrumentation, measurement, and case study. Instrumentation study refers to the design and pilot testing of a measurement instrument that could chart change through participation in dance. Measurement study refers to the use of that instrument to chart quantitatively change in attitudes and behaviors through participation in dance. Case study refers to qualitative exploration of two specific families, an immigrant two-child family and a multigenerational family. We adopted an *action research* perspective in all phases of study.

At the heart of our investigation is the phenomenon of relational engagement in dance: the ways adults and children, administrators and mentors, teachers and learners, researchers and dancers alike engage in the process of moving from I to You to We to Us in dance. A number of researchers in dance have explored the power of movement to engage young people in creative activities and expand their ideas about themselves and others (Bond, 1994; Bond & Stinson, 2000, 2007; Stinson, 1997).

Our work builds on previous research by focusing specifically on "relational engagement in dance," which implies more than a "motivation to meet and move" with someone else; it assumes a person's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge and skills that relationship-based dance work is intended to promote (Warburton, Ng and Reedy, 2010). The theoretical underpinnings of our relationship-based work are rooted in attachment theory (Odell, 2013; Reedy, 2003, 2012). And, though we set the outcome bar high, our approach is process-oriented. Small steps and sudden leaps are celebrated in equal measure.

Background

Family community dance classes have been a part of Luna Dance Institute (hereafter "Luna") since inception in 1992 as *Luna: a dance world*, a studio-based program in Oakland, California. In the spring of 1998, Chantal Sampogna, an attorney in the Alameda County Family Court System and part-time children's dance teacher at Luna, observed that the relationship-based emphasis on these family dance classes would be helpful to families in the process of reunification. She also observed that the intense reliance on eye-contact, touch, and trust might be difficult for them but that the practice might strengthen their skills and improve the bond

between parent and child. Within a year, Luna staff had reviewed the existing literature on attachment and trust, procured funding, wrote curriculum, and implemented the Moving Parents and Children Together program (hereafter, MPACT).

Building curriculum, embedding assessment

MPACT was launched as a pilot program at the Solid Foundation, a 25-year old organization based in Oakland, California, consisting of three different residential facilities for mothers with substance abuse issues as well as a transitional day-time drop in Women's Center. From the start, the Solid Foundation allowed Luna staff to pilot the program with one class per week in 4-5 week sessions. But Solid Foundation staff had some reservation about Luna's ability to persevere. The women had experienced violence, transience, and homelessness. Many were court mandated to be at the Solid Foundation in order to regain or maintain custody of their children. The agency administrators did not have confidence that the program would be appreciated, let alone be successful. The classes were taught in small bleak bedrooms and living rooms, as well as in the more spacious, but also more public Women's Center.

The course curriculum was co-developed by Luna staff Patricia Reedy, Nancy Ng, Chantal Sampogna, and Laurie Foster. The classes were co-taught and tightly structured. Each class began with a group gathering, followed by relationship-based dance curricula based on dance concepts. After about 35 minutes, the children had a "kids only" dance class on the same concepts taught by one teacher. Parents were encouraged to watch, ask questions about their child's development, and share their observations with the second teacher. After each class, teachers spent 20 minutes completing class-record observations of parent-child interaction. At the very end of the session, parents participated in a focus group, teachers were questioned in their own evaluation group, and Solid Foundation social workers were interviewed.

From the beginning, something positive was happening in these classes. During the first parent focus group, one parent commented that her child had "learned trust." Skeptical about this outcome after only six one-hour sessions, one of the authors (PR) asked what she meant: she said, "I've been a drunk my whole life and I can't look anyone in the eye. You can't trust someone if you can't look them in the eye. I've been scared that my kid would be like me; that he wouldn't look anyone in the eye. But every class she (pointing to dance teacher) says 'look at your mom, now dance to your mom' and now he can look me in the eye." Her feedback, and others like it, gave us the courage to apply for funding to develop the work further.

Luna expanded MPACT using an inquiry-based approach, asking research-like questions as opposed to making assumptions about our curriculum. Over the first few years, the classes were taught in various settings with diverse populations: in dance studios, community centers, homeless shelters, Head Start classrooms, residential treatment facilities and those for incarcerated women, shelters serving survivors of domestic violence, and public high school teen

parent programs. The same assessment tools were rigorously applied: co-curriculum planning & co-teaching, collaborative class record completion after each and every class, focus group of parents, group interview of teachers, individual interview of professionals working with the families. As issues emerged, Luna staff grappled with them in curriculum meetings.

During the early years, in particular, Luna staff were challenged by a set of issues: defining the family, and therefore attachment, beyond a model of one-parent/one-child; teaching mixed-age curriculum; inappropriate behavior (e.g., parent outbursts toward child); clarifying roles as teachers not therapists or authority figures; and lack of consistency in attendance plus scheduling conflicts. Over time, Luna built trust with participants, so much so that the Solid Foundation gave unprecedented permission for a group of parents and their children to attend Luna's 10th anniversary celebration in March 2002.

Right-sizing

In 2004, Luna created a Logic Model for MPACT's work to-date and embarked on a case study of one family within the system. At that time, the following measurable outcomes were established.

- Short-term: Parents increase knowledge about child development; increase participation in and enjoyment of parent/child classes; increase knowledge about the role of movement as a form of communication.
- Mid-term: Parents improve attitude about children's behavior, movement and body; increase positive interactions between parent and child; increase trust of Luna faculty by parents and child; strengthen relationship between Luna and outside agency staff; shifts in parent's perceived self-efficacy for relating to child; children improve interpersonal skills and self-control.
- Long-term: Improve parenting skills; improve relationship; strengthen bond between child and parent; improve children's cognitive, physical and social skills; outside agency incorporates MPACT strategies.

At the same time, by mid-2004, word had spread about the positive effects of MPACT on families living under duress. Luna desired to share the work, yet fear of potentially decreasing effectiveness if Luna's program became too large. Instead, Luna consolidated direct services into approximately 90 classes each year divided between three residential facilities and Saturday morning community classes, and began a campaign to solidify attendance accordingly. Luna staff discovered that public libraries located in neighborhoods where client families lived were appropriate places for MPACT classes to be held in order to develop lasting relationships with them.

Luna also initiated an internship program to build capacity within Alameda County, expanding professional training workshops and placing interns into other agencies as needs arose. Concurrently, Luna embarked on several Cultural Competency projects, including a four-year partnership with Asian Women's Shelter, San Francisco. These projects allowed the organization to investigate the role culture plays in incorporating dance into the lives of families at-risk, as well as to deepen understanding about how to work with diverse communities. As a result, unmasking assumptions about culture has become central to all of Luna's professional development work. This work has strengthened the internal capacity to meet the needs of constituents over time, despite changes in Luna personnel or transience within partner organizations.

Evolving inquiry

Over the years, Luna staff observations have become sharper, analysis of those observations deeper, and thus the curriculum has shifted and become more rigorous. Luna staff notice, for example, that often parents must find the "child within" through the dance before they can attend to the needs of their child, what one might call the "ego-centric" stage. Once parents move through the process of beginning in ego-centric (I) play, they often advance to an allo-centric (You) focus as they attend to the needs of their children. Next, a growing focus on dual needs of the relationship emerges, or what one might call a "we-centric" milestone, and then finally an "us-centric" perspective as they develop the ability to be a family within a dance community.

Luna also learned that parents are very concerned about whether their children are developing within "typical" or "normal" parameters, and so the organization incorporated an embodied parent education curriculum that teaches the early movement patterns of the developing infant and the relationship to brain development (Bainbridge Cohen, 1993). Luna staff members often see parents who are hungry for knowledge and are excited when they notice shifts in their child's development, particularly language. Parents become less likely to view their child's impulsive behavior as "bad" and instead come to understand that self-control is learned through experience. Parents learn to allow for that experience within the dance class and beyond. They develop more realistic expectations for their children's behavior and growth. One parent remarked, "no one ever asked me about my goal's for my child. At first I just wanted my baby to walk. And then I realized, no, she needs to crawl first—that's good for her brain. No, no, she needs to slither before crawling. Then I realized how hard she is working just to hold herself up and now, I want my baby to be just where she is at." In fact, one of Luna's most important findings over the years has been that parents carry home the knowledge and skills learned at MPACT, continuing dance activities on their own between class sessions.

Investigation

To date, more than 3,000 children and their families have participated in MPACT classes. In the residential centers, parent participants were primarily mothers; in the libraries they included fathers, cousins, aunts, foster parents, grandparents and other kin. Children have ranged in age from infants to 11 years old. Family size has ranged from one adult/one child to a family with a mother and ten of her children. To respect confidentiality, families are never asked questions about individual circumstances or relationships, so MPACT data only reports basic demographic information.

Curricular development and outreach programs remain a top priority, but Luna also has sought to understand better the ways relationship-based dance programs produce changes in family dynamics. In 2008, Luna and the primary author began a new initiative to develop evaluation methods by designing a new assessment tool, with specific focus on the MPACT program. Together from the outset, we organized our efforts using the lens of action research. Whereas most research seeks to make causal links between predictor and dependent variables based on data or events that occurred in the past, we wanted not only to understand past events, but also present phenomena, particularly the ongoing dynamics of human interactions in which one is a participant, as well as future intentions and the forward design of joint organizing (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Thus, we endeavored to design a tool that would both inform teachers' pedagogy and curricular planning and provide data about the program's effectiveness for parents and children. Our investigation depended entirely upon joint participation, with teachers and researchers acting as equal partners providing input at all stages of the project.

At first, our main objective was to build a tool that measures individual and group response over time, quantifying observable qualitative behaviors in order to contribute to ongoing data triangulation and analysis of performance targets using demographic data, participation documentation, classroom observation, and verbal and written report (questionnaires, individual and group interviews, instructor reflection journals). Later we realized another important objective was for this tool to be designed in a sustainable way for ongoing data collection for both in-the-moment, formative "in-class" assessment as well as summative, "program effectiveness" evaluation purposes. We wanted a tool that could help shape our ideas about MPACT instruction and also integrate into teacher practice.

Methods

The concept of "relational engagement" was at the heart of our enterprise. As Alex Pentland notes in his (2008) book, *Honest Signals*, biologically based "honest signaling" of states like engagement evolved from ancient primate signaling mechanisms, offering a unique window into human intentions, goals, and values. "To engage" is a transitive verb and thus indicates attention

to and interest in something other than oneself. Engagement can be momentary or sustained, fragmented or total. These unconscious social signals are not just a back channel or a complement to our conscious language; they form a separate communication network.

Relational engagement is an especially key index of interaction that reveals one's attitude toward a person. It can be understood as the outward manifestation of conscious and unconscious, verbal and nonverbal ways that individuals communicate a meaningful contact, involvement, or connection with someone or something (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). And though relational engagement shares many of the attributes of other types of engagement, we distinguish it from behavioral, affective and cognitive engagement in its focus on other individuals (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Smith, 1999).

Relational engagement can be understood as having an ordered but not necessarily linear trajectory of interaction between parent and child, from activity to interest to mimicry.

- Activity: A basic level of engagement, the notion of activity stems from the oldest part of our nervous system, the autonomic nervous system, which activates the fight-or-flight response. Activity is defined as a measure of general excitement and attention. When one gets excited about something, your autonomic nervous system is aroused and you become more alert and attentive.
- Interest: An intermediate level of engagement, interest as a measure of engagement goes beyond alertness and general attention to imply a specific focus and connection to another. In a dyad, if two people are talking together and each one anticipates when the other will pause and jumping in exactly at that point and leaving no gaps, then they're paying a great deal of attention to – and interest in – what each other has to say.
- Mimicry: A more advanced level of engagement, mimicry creates the sense that people are not only active and interested, but also on the same page. When people mimic each other's gestures in conversation, research has shown that it's highly correlated with feelings of trust and empathy (Pentland, 2008).

Several questions of interest arise from the phenomenon of relational engagement in dance. One set of questions involves the ways in which the focus on relational engagement affects teachers over the course of MPACT sessions. For example, how do teachers experience looking for relational engagement in a complex environment? How does an “engagement lens” shape the viewing and experience of providing MPACT instruction and also integrate into personal teaching practice? Another category of questions involves the efficacy of a relationship-based dance program. Do we find changes in relational engagement within families? Despite widely varying circumstances, are there nonetheless regularities across these families? How do multigenerational families or those with multiple children dance together in ways that promote (or undermine) engagement?

The process of measurement instrument design and the two case studies were conducted using an interpretative qualitative methodology. We chose this approach because of the complexity of the topic and likelihood that participants would hold different opinions about the program as it relates to their family experience (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Garner, 1991). The methodology was underpinned by an acknowledgement of reality as socially constructed and the ontological stance adopted by researchers was that of “self as instrument” (Merriam, 2001, p. 7). As with other researchers in dance (Chappell 2006; Fortin 2005), we acknowledge our subjective experience – as dancers, dance educators and researchers – as valuable in both fieldwork and interpretive analysis.

To assess change (or growth) in relational engagement within families, we originally intended to analyze data produced by the measurement instrument using descriptive (univariate) and inferential (multivariate) statistics. We expected that exploration of descriptive statistics would result in specific predictions that could be tested using Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to answer the question: “Does relationship-based dance instruction influence relational engagement (i.e., do participants’ mean engagement scores change in a statistically significant way across sessions and can this be generalized to a broader population?).” Repeated Measures ANOVA test has three primary assumptions: 1) observations are random and independent from the population, 2) distributions of the populations from which the samples are selected are normal, and 3) variances of distributions in the population are equal. Because of the self-selected nature of the population, random assignment was not possible. This sample also exhibited neither normal distributions nor homogeneity of variance. ANOVA is normally robust with respect to violations of these assumptions, except in the case of unequal variances with unequal sample sizes. As discussed below, because we did not have consistently equal sample sizes across the sessions, we could not meet this final assumption and therefore relied on describing behavior in this specific population rather than predicting generalizable engagement effects of MPACT instruction on the population of dancing families at large.

Participants and timeline

The study was developed in three phases. Our first step was to design, test, and develop a valid and reliable measurement instrument that a) defines relational engagement in understandable terms and visible ways and b) charts change in engagement as participants grow from ego- to us-centric attitudes and behaviors through participation in dance. The second phase involved testing the instrument’s inter-observer reliability and using the instrument to assess the effect of MPACT on parent-child engagement. The final step was to unpack our findings in light of the unique experiences of specific cases.

From 2008 to 2009, the main focus was on instrument development and the examination of teacher change, and what we came to call “engaged looking,” during three 6-week sessions at

MPACT “primary” sites: East Bay Community Recovery Project/Project Pride, an Oakland-based residential correctional facility that serves mothers who are incarcerated and their children; and Solid Foundation of Oakland’s Mandela 1, a residential drug rehabilitation program for mothers and their children. Velea Roehl served as principal coordinator and co-instructor with Tricia Ong. The research team included Luna senior faculty Patricia Reedy and Nancy Ng and research consultant Edward Warburton. We met together on a monthly basis, including site visits to “bridge” classes at the César E. Chávez Branch Library, Oakland.

In 2010, Bonner Odell and Erin Lally replaced Roehl and Ong as teacher-researchers. This change necessitated a period of adjustment, instrument development, and pilot testing. From Fall 2010 to Winter 2011, the teaching and research team held regular meetings, including site visits to “bridge” classes at the César E. Chávez Branch Library and West Oakland Branch Library, Oakland, California. The main focus was the refining of instructional methods, clarity of measures and protocols, and looking at family change. From February to June 2011, the team used the measurement instrument to collect data in a total of 13 classes across one 5-week (Session 1: 2/26—3/26) and two 4-week sessions (Session 2: 4/9—5/7; Session 3: 6/4—6/25) in order to establish inter-observer reliability and to chart family change. Because MPACT sessions are subsidized and built on a “drop-in” model, attendance varied from class to class and session to session, with some families continuing on a regular basis and others participating more sporadically. The average attendance included four families (4 adults, 5 children). From August to October 2011, we conducted field research for case study with two families (2 adults, 3 children). We videotaped at first and final sessions with concluding interviews with adults at the final session. Researchers included Luna senior faculty Patricia Reedy and Nancy Ng with research consultant Edward Warburton.

Ethical approval for these investigations was given by the University Office of Research Compliance. All participants were informed that participation in MPACT as a privately and publicly funded project includes evaluation, research, and reporting requirements with strict confidentiality agreements. Participants signed video and photo releases and provided verbal informed consent for class observations and focus group interviews.

Measurement instrument

With the core dance curriculum in place and independent (demographic) variables pre-determined by the self-selecting parameters of the program mission, we focused on capturing key elements of relational engagement – activity, interest, mimicry – and the change over time. In the course of developing and testing a rating system that would be reliable, valid, and also integrate into instruction, we found that scanning (i.e., systematically looking around the room) and counting of all combinations on all dimensions – i.e., presence/absence of activity/interest/mimicry in parent/child – was unworkable in the context of a complex environment and early childhood dance class. To integrate more seamlessly with real-world

teacher practice, we developed a simplified system that isolated the dependent variable and observed participant group for any given exercise. Eventually, this system of observation and coding was called the Relationship-based Engagement in Dance (RED) measurement tool. RED was inserted into six different sections of the individual lesson plan as follows (see Appendix 1 for example Lesson Plan from March 5, 2011).

- Activity in Warm-up and Closing sections. Our measure of activity focuses on ability to remain alert and attentive to what is happening in the dance class. For example, are they aware of what is happening now in the dance class; do they follow directions immediately; do they anticipate, prepare for, what comes next? The general consensus was that activity could be ascertained best for parents during the opening Circle Time/Warm-up, where a scan and count for “activity absence” in parents to task could occur at the beginning in the first drum beat of the name game. In the Closing activity, “activity absence” in children to task was scanned and counted at the first breath of the “reverse brain dance.”
- Interest in Exploration and Improvisation sections. We found the presence (or absence) of interest can be seen in someone who stays (or does not stay) focused on her significant other, especially when dancing together. In the Exploration 1 section, teacher-researchers scanned and counted “interest presence” of parents towards their children and “interest presence” of children towards their parents. In Improvisation 1 section, they scanned and counted “interest presence” of children to parents.
- Mimicry in Kids Only sections. To assess mimicry in a dance-specific way, we asked, do parents not only follow, but also mimic (mimicry presence) in some way their children’s movements during the Kids-Only dance section?

Data and analysis

Observations and interviews. Observations took place during the regularly scheduled class sessions. Teacher observations were recorded using MPACT class record sheets directly after each class (see first page of Appendix 2); researcher field logs with written notes were typed up or audio recorded with 24 hours of each session. Interviews and focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured guide that comprised specific questions related to the program objectives, family experience and engagement. Prompts and follow-up questions were included and used to aid flow, give more clarity or encourage fuller discussion (Ely, et al., 1991). Interviews were set up to be relaxed and informal. They were recorded using digital audio recorders and lasted about 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim using transcription software and content analysis using NVivo8 (QSR International 2008), a software organizing system used in other qualitative dance research (Nordin and Cumming, 2005). Three focus group interview transcripts and five observation logs were imported into the software and lower level meaning units (free nodes) were identified and coded, in bottom-up fashion, into emerging categories (tree nodes) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Final top-level themes emerged inductively

from the process of hierarchical sorting. Final stage analysis occurred as the findings were interpreted and written up. The findings are not intended to be presented as “right” but are offered as a very specific and carefully considered exploration of the influence of MPACT on these families and teachers.

Procedure and scoring. From February to June 2011, the two co-teachers used the RED measurement tool to independently scan and score (presence or absence) each of the six different moments during each class session as described above (see second page of Appendix 2 for example scoring from March 5, 2011). To estimate inter-observer reliability, we used percent agreement and Cohen’s (1960) kappa (κ), which corrects for chance agreements. For the first two classes of Session 1, the two teachers independently scanned and rated performances, achieving an inter-observer coding that was highly associated with one another (mean correlation coefficient 0.84; corrected for chance this coefficient dropped to the mid-70th percentile). Discussion and clarification resulted in almost complete consensus for the final two classes of the first session (mean correlation coefficient at 0.96; corrected for chance this coefficient dropped to high-80th percentile). After this point, for Sessions 2 & 3, the performances were scanned and scored together with agreement and consensus ratings tallied for final scores. For the purposes of more analytical study, we found RED to be a reliable, precise, and valid tool for assessing engagement-related relational behavior in dance. We believe the high level of agreement was due in part to Luna’s culture of collaboration and the action research process.

Findings

The role of “engagement lens” in teacher practice

How do teachers experience scanning for relational engagement in a fast paced class setting? How does an “engagement lens” shape the viewing and experience of providing MPACT instruction and also integrate into personal teaching practice? In teacher interviews, we found clear evidence that our goal to transform and integrate into teacher practice was happening during lesson planning and implementation.

... the way that we have been working together and using this tool has helped us to look at engagement differently and know kind of where the pressure points are ... Now, when I am scanning, I am really ... have a narrower focus ... and it is really about how to (snap of fingers) maintain engagement, how to deepen it, how to recognize it, and how to see when it is wavering and changing, and then how do we support each other (T2, 2009).

Moreover, teachers expressed confidence in the new approach, especially the “engaged looking” aspect, which seemed to help them gauge families’ responses to the curriculum.

And the scanning is definitely happening and then we're also noticing it sometimes, because we've done different types of looking, this last week when I check for interest, I checked it for moms and [my co-teacher] checked it for kids. We had agreed we would check for kids, but I just flipped it the moment, but we still got good information on what was happening at that time and it gave us a lot of information about, "Okay, next week I'm going to structure my prompts a little bit differently for the families, because it took them awhile to get their engagement at the level that we anticipated it to be at this point in class, because I think I did some things that weren't very clear ... And we're giving each other different kind of feedback in the moment as co-teachers in terms of how we support each other. [my co-teacher] might jump in and say, "Oh! I don't think they got that, let's try that again," because we did a scan and saw the people were out of it (T1, 2009).

There also appeared to be evidence that this new tool contributed to the shaping of instruction and therefore parent and child learning in, and engagement with, dance and each other.

... families are having easier time building trust with us as teachers because our focus is so clear that this is about you and your child and that changes some things ... I feel like the scanning, the attention on engagement has supported those other social dynamics (T1, 2009).

As the teacher-researchers gained comfort with the tool, their focus shifted from delivering instruction to increasing engagement in-the-moment and capitalizing on teachable moments.

It is changing, okay, for instance, before I started doing this research project, if I scanned the room and saw that some kids were having a really hard time staying engaged with their mothers or with the material, I might take that time to mine ideas from kids to bring them back on track. So, I would ask them about, "oh what body part should we use next or blah, blah, blah," which I still might do. But now that I am doing a research project depending on what part of the class it is, I might have them, instead of being it so much directed by me, I might have them do something that is more directed towards each other. Now, I might say something like, "tell your mommy a secret about which body part you are going to use," so that it is not so much about them sharing out for the classes as a model and more of them, uses that basic relationship ... (T2, 2009).

As teachers began to see student improvement in the classes, they trust themselves to take parents and children deeper into the curriculum, emphasizing the conceptual and relational aspects of dance.

Something that's come up a lot for [us] is that when you're just even thinking about being dancers who look at dance all the time and when you sit in audience, if you know something is an improvisation, it may take you awhile just start to follow versus if you're watching a set dance. You can have a different anticipation and so just trying to give them a meatier Kids Only section and exploration and then add Improv to that ... So the moms have sometime to settle in and to watch first ... and emphasizing that we are giving them a movement problem to solve. That's different when we are giving them more directed ideas about how to dance. So it's a way to again throw that parent ed [sic] in and check for engagement. So far it has been pretty successful (T2, 2009).

The effect of instruction on relational engagement

To assess change (or growth) in relational engagement within families, we analyzed the quantitative data produced by the measurement instrument by describing the data set in terms of descriptive (univariate) statistics. We found that the presence of engagement for different events (i.e., Warm-up to Kids Only) showed wide variability across different levels (activity, interest, mimicry). Interestingly, the engagement level of mimicry showed no significant results. Teachers noted a lack of confidence in correctly identifying mimicry during sessions: "it's difficult to actually see mimicry as one thing ... since it seems to look so different in different people and families at different times" (T3, 2011). This comment was confirmed by observations of the research team and so mimicry will thus not be analyzed further.

Parents. Parental attention to the initial Circle Time/Warm-up task (activity-level) ranged from 75 to 100 percent of the time, with average scores of 100 percent attention in eleven of thirteen classes. Parental ability to stay focused specifically on her/his child (interest-level) when dancing together during the first Exploration section ranged from 50 to 100 percent of the time. In general, parental interest in dancing with child increased over time, with average scores of 100 percent interest in over half of the classes.

Children. Children's ability to stay focused specifically on her/his parent (interest-level) when dancing together during the first Exploration section ranged from 17 to 100 percent of the time; and during the first Improvisation section children's interest ranged from 33 to 100 percent of the time. In general, children's interest in dancing with parent increased over time with each session, with average scores of 75 percent interest in almost half of the classes. Children's attention to the final Closing task (activity-level) ranged from 40 to 100 percent of the time, with average scores of 80 to 100 percent attention in over half of the classes.

In sum. We found consistent overall positive change in parent and child average engagement scores across the 13 classes. That is, for parents and children, the univariate statistics showed that there was a high probability of seeing relational engagement throughout the dance class. The data suggests that, with relationship-based dance instruction, the probability of being and staying

engaged increases over time.

Case Study 1: “Him coming back to me”

What is the experience of multigenerational families? To address this question, we focused on a single grandmother (Mother M) and grandchild (Son J, age 6). This family is somewhat unique in that the grandmother had adopted her grandchild a few years earlier in order to “provide him a good home, a more stable life” (Mother M, 2011). In class sessions, the young boy was notable for his energetic displays of traveling in, around, and through the space, often with lack of focus on the task at hand; the mother was notable in her level of frustration and vocal exhortations. It was difficult to ascertain the origin of the behavior – whether Mother M’s attempts to control Son J’s behavior stimulated him or visa versa – but the dynamic was self evident on numerous occasions: discord and disconnection.

During the movement exploration, Son J begins to move toward Mother M (again), but diverges off and heads toward one of the teachers. Mother M calls to him, telling him to come back. Her voice command does not work. J does not look in Mother M’s direction, though her voice is clearly audible in the room. As he seems to ignore her, he loses focus on the task and begins to run around the room at a very fast pace. Mother M is clearly irritated and raises her voice, now “chasing” him and talking at him though in a less “warm” tone. A teacher steps in to divert Son J from a close physical encounter with another child. Mother M stops, sits out (Field Notes, 2011).

In response to “what brought you to MPACT dance classes,” Mother M replied: “I want him coming back to me ‘cause I need him, he needs ... to do that.” From the first to the final session, we began to see the seeds of interpersonal growth and the development of a new family dynamic. Son J seemed more able to make eye contact with teachers and other children. Mother M spoke out less often and rarely raised her voice. At the final interview, Mother M explained:

My child is adopted and so I needed to find something to bond. I used to dance and so when I saw this it was a thing I wanted to try ... And so, I do it for the bonding, although this is the first that we’ve ever really bonded. Cause he’s not, he’s not, he hasn’t (starts to choke up) learned that yet. You know what I mean? So, he’s in the process of learning to bond. So, even though he runs around and does what he does, he’s learning to come back, which is something that he hadn’t done before. We’d never danced together before. It was always him over there and I was over here. But now, he’s learning to come dance as a family in this class ... it’s a good place for us to learn how to bond, for him to learn how to bond. He was, he was a wild child. I was gonna to take him out of class. I was afraid for the other children, because he was a runner, ran in circles, circles, circles. But he

finally got a grip, he's ready to behave, he's having fun. He's being part of the class instead of not in it (Mother M, 2011).

Case Study 2: "She loving her"

How do families with multiple children dance together in ways that promote (or undermine) engagement? To address this question, we focused on one particular family with two children that experienced many interpersonal challenges. A recent immigrant from Eastern Europe, Mother N spoke about, and we observed, that daughter L (age 7), who is on the Autism spectrum, struggled with staying engaged in the class and also connecting through dance with her mother and sibling, daughter N (age 4). In response to "what brought you to MPACT dance classes," Mother N replied:

I try a little more time for my kids to be with them ... my daughter (L) need extra services, I want something of joy for her ... we used to go to another place, but we had to stopped because they asked her (gesture to L) to leave the classroom. I believe I get discrimination from them, because they notice my daughter has problems about everything, and I tell them, but they ultimately they told me 'we giving you a refund, she's not able to dance in the show.' They say it's progressive and she's not keep up, she's distraction. And Dance teachers said 'she was not dancing in the show, she is behind.' She passed to take a slower program, so we wanted them to move her into that class. But she was so sad of leaving (begins to cry.) She was so sad for that particular classroom. She won't go to the other (lower level) classroom. So, at the top of the year, when she came here for the first time she was sad but happy because she dance, she just would drop everything before coming here to get here fast. My other daughter (N) said, "would she be ever able to participate in ballet?" I said "well we think maybe just you will." But the next day I said (to L), "do you want to go back to your ballet class? I mean you can you go to – in the morning to a library class here and then go to your ballet class, but we must leave early that I don't want them to be late." And she (L) said, "I don't want to go." I said "Okay, we don't need to go there...where it feel like work." So, it was like a ... good transitions so she happy now here with good teachers ... but she was hurt. (Mother N, 2011).

Mother N continually spoke about daughter L's issues, and the mother would rarely attempt to dance with both daughters at the same time, instead alternating between daughters one at a time. For example, while Mother N danced with daughter L, the younger daughter N would dance with social worker; however, when Mother N danced with daughter N, the older daughter L would be taken out of the room by the social worker. Indeed, both teachers observed that her daughter did not seem to want to share her mother's attention or be near her sister, daughter N: "she loves her sister, but she doesn't want her in the same classroom" (Mother N, 2011). The teachers especially noted daughter L's aggressive behavior (hitting, slapping) toward both her mother and

sister when the three family members would attempt to dance together. We noted that the mother often left the room with daughter L to discipline her, leaving daughter N to dance with the attendant social worker or a Luna partner teacher. In subsequent classes, daughter L would not participate at all.

At one point after class Mother N approached the researcher and said, “you asked before why come? Most all I want is she loving her, that’s why I keep coming” (Mother N, 2011). Over the course of the session, we observed L’s participation slowly improve. She participated in more sections of the class toward the end of the session. She appeared to tolerate, if not embrace, her sister’s presence and we observed less of a reluctance to dance with her mother.

Because the younger daughter N had reportedly told her mother that she loved the MPACT classes, Mother N promised to bring her as often as she could. In later sessions, she came without daughter L once, but brought both girls together for the last 2 classes:

During the next-to-last class ... daughter L participated the entire time, making shapes and dancing with both her mother and sister. The most dramatic shift occurred during the final class, however. Mother N had a migraine headache and did not dance, instead suggesting to daughter L that she play the “mom” role. Daughter L embraced the role, dancing with her sister enthusiastically. She initiated connected shapes, and at one point embraced her sister in a hugging shape. Both she and her sister danced the entire time, and the teachers were struck by their consistently happy and harmonious attitudes. They smiled throughout the class and moved expressively, both individually and together ... Having danced with this family since they first came to us, I cannot help but conclude that the relationship-based curriculum, which emphasizes a balance of individual expression and family interaction, allowed child L to reach this new level of intimacy with her mother and sister at her own pace ... (T4, 2011).

Discussion

In observations and interviews of teachers during instrument development, we find clear evidence that using an “engagement lens” to assess relationship-based dance behavior shapes the viewing and experience of providing MPACT instruction and also integrates well into personal teaching practice. The use of the RED tool also seems to give teachers permission to set back from any drama of the moment and to be more sensitive and specific about what they witness, to become clearer and less judgmental about what may be occurring. Over time, we also found consistent overall positive change in parent and child relational engagement. Average engagement scores in activity and interest increased both within and between class sessions. Moreover, our case studies of recent immigrant, multi-child and multi-generational families show increasing self-awareness of inter-personal interactions and shifts in family dynamics,

moving from I to You to We to Us attitudes and behaviors through participation in dance. Participants clearly believe that MPACT is a powerful vehicle for growing and nurturing relationships.

Interpretation

These findings suggest that dancing together requires the kind of inter-subjectivity – the shared cognitions and felt emotions between people – that can build interpersonal trust and understanding. We argue that, ultimately, what relationship-based dance programs like MPACT can do is, in part, to develop an ethic of care in participants. Teachers come to understand that the primary relationship does not exist in the traditional teacher—student—subject triangle but with the family unit itself. Teachers learn to use the dance curriculum and assessment tools to navigate, support, and grow family relationships, which leads to more positive experiences with the community of dancers. They learn the importance of close observation and listening to what families need, reflecting on that feedback and putting it into the curriculum in the moment, within class sessions, and from week to week. In turn, family participants learn that the focus on building a culture of relationship-based dance emphasizes relational engagement across the board. Because MPACT dance instruction provides multiple opportunities for interaction with very few words, it promotes an immediacy of experience that over time can create and sustain engagement and connection between parents and children.

At the same time, this investigation shows that the success of the program is predicated on the ability to hold multiple layers of relationships in, through, and around the classes themselves. Since the classes are co-taught, teachers actively *model* relational engagement and interdependency. Co-teaching also creates the space and time for instructors to be better observers. The requirement to reflect after each class together provides an opportunity to examine assumptions and deepen understanding of the experience. Each teacher has a complex relationship with participants: they are simultaneously teaching the child, the parent, the parent-child dyad, the siblings and larger family. These are also families that have diverse relationships outside of the class. Co-teaching and co-reflecting, as well as quarterly MPACT staff meetings, provide the necessary opportunities for probing biases, assumptions and fears, and to move through them, rather than ignoring them. A salubrious side effect of this process has been that, despite teacher turnover and organizational changes, the MPACT curriculum stayed consistent, expanding relatively easily to accommodate new approaches.

Limitations

The MPACT curriculum focuses on relationship building. However, though we produce detailed descriptions of the effects of MPACT, this investigation is limited in several ways. First and foremost, the measurement aspect of the study is limited due to specific methodological

deficiencies. Because of the nature of the classes, the Luna philosophy of open participation, and the inability to require consistent attendance, we were unable to control for sample size. Secondly, one must assume that context affects behavior; that is, it stands to reason that any contextual support might directly affect engagement levels. It is possible that any experience in dance could account for increases in engagement with movement task and one another.

However, the MPACT curriculum is designed to be an intervention of explicitly relationship-based dance instruction, emphasizing those aspects of dance that enhance relationship, so we find it highly unlikely that *relational engagement* is a naturally occurring phenomenon of any and all dance instruction. A future study with comparison groups – i.e., creative dance instruction versus relationship-based dance instruction – with equal sample sizes and control groups would provide more confidence in our preliminary findings.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, the need for interpersonal trust between individuals, within and between families, seems to apply as well to the need for trust in the organization itself. The fact is that MPACT families often live in circumstances where they have limited freedom; they often feel judged and power is a major issue. They often have had experiences within the child welfare system where they were not respected. Some have court-ordered custody removal. Others fight to obtain needed services. They work hard to “prove themselves.” Thus, trusting authorities, even those with “therapeutic” or “social welfare” intention, does not come easy to the families who participate in MPACT, many of who have children with special needs. An unexpected outcome of this project has been how important MPACT classes have been to parents of children with autism and other special needs. Luna often finds that parents are tired from advocating constantly for services for their children—often within a system they do not understand or may even fear. Yet, year after year, they come to trust Luna and keep coming back, sharing their heart-warming stories of connection and success.

It is the strong belief of the Luna organization that this high rate of retention stems from the fact that Dance is a great equalizer of power. In Luna classes, the conceptual based approach allows everyone to be dancers that explore, relate, create, and perform with the skills, tools, imagination, and ideas they bring in that very moment. One of the most remarkable examples of this vision occurred at the end of 2010. Luna had been teaching embodied parent education classes and parent-child classes at one of the Solid Foundation’s sites. The mothers were enthusiastic and began teaching Saturday morning “mommy and me” dance classes on their own. In response, Luna staff decided to “up the ante”: to make the curriculum more rigorous and challenging by deepening mothers’ abilities in composition and choreography. By the end of the session, they had co-choreographed a dance that included their children of various ages. They performed this dance for the agency staff, which had never happened before since staff members

usually did not observe or participate. After the performance the agency staff applauded, hooted and hollered, laughing with delight and appreciation. The MPACT teacher asked the mothers how they would like to finish the class (and that session and semester), and the parents chose to teach the dance to the agency staff. That season ended with an entire community of people dancing together with shared power, genuine authority, and manifest joy.

Today, Luna's MPACT program has several components aimed at creating a rippling effect so that more families can experience the positive outcomes of relationship-based dance. Luna continues model MPACT programs with 90 classes per year taught in 3 residential centers and 3 public libraries. Four professional development workshops are offered each year, including advanced topics on attachment and child development-related subject matter. Luna also supports a comprehensive internship program, currently working with two mothers who are graduating from a residential treatment center and wish to be trained to teach MPACT-like classes as part of their job development. Luna has developed a *Building Cultures of Dance Initiative* working with various communities to build MPACT-like programs for the agencies in their neighborhoods. By partnering with dance teaching artists and social workers in Marin City, Santa Ana and Los Angeles, Luna hopes to support new programs in those communities. Ultimately, Luna values inquiry and action research, and believe that building relationship-based arts education institutions and programs – institutions and programs that families can trust – includes making this work visible throughout our county, region, state and nation.

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Patricia Reedy is the Director of Teaching & Learning at Luna Dance Institute and its founder. Since 1992, she has designed all program components; written curricula; and directed Luna's evaluation, assessment and research. Reedy continues to teach children, teens and professional

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Appendix 1

LESSON Parent-Child **UNIT:** WOL Winter session1, 2 of 5 classes **DATE:** 3/5/11

Objective/Goals: Welcoming first class; have fun; comfortable setting; movement invention; action words: rise/fall with sudden and sustained qualities, include other locomotors and family relationship words: near/far, towards/away, connecting and around.

Engagement data collecting:

Class Level/Ages: P-C; various ages

Teachers: EL & BO

Bring: forms; pens; blue tape; snack; cups; water pitcher; CD player/iPod dock; CD's/iPod; chart paper/markers; block; book

Parent-Child Class

<p>Gathering & Warm-up EL 5'</p>	<p>Name-game with drum: after first drum beat LOOK NOW: Absence of Activity: Parent to task.</p>
<p>Exploration #1 EL 10-12'</p>	<p>Freeze dance exploring: rise/fall with sudden and sustained; include other locomotors such as gallop, jump, turn, crawl and roll, hop, slide. Modify w/ strong and light.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slide sustained.... Now sudden! • Roll sustained... now sudden! • Shoot up suddenly, then melt down slowly... <p>LOOK NOW: Interest of Parent to Child: presence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a strong low shape. Now burst into a high shape! • Try a light floating dance, but every once in a while burst strongly! • Try a bursting and melting dance all around the room. • Try a slithering dance. Can you slither up high? <p>Vary with BP's/whole/all & part of way (range): "Melt just a little, a little more, til you're a puddle on the floor!"</p> <p>Freeze in high/low shapes...at times hold your frozen shape and stretch towards and away from family suddenly and sustained. Third time: "Kids, reach to your parent suddenly—then pull back sustained..." LOOK NOW: Interest of Child to Parent: presence.</p> <p>Challenge: Change directions suddenly when you hear the drum!</p> <p>Incorporate near and far: dance really far away from your family...dance really near to them but don't touch...now connect. Parents- freeze! Kids do a sustained dance around your parents. Switch- parents do a sudden dance around your child!</p>

Improvisation #1 BO 5-7'	Towards and away from family across the floor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sustained dance toward each other, suddenly connect! Sustained dance away. ○ Sustained dance toward each other, but add a sudden movement in the middle to surprise your parent! LOOK NOW: Interest of Child to Parent: presence ○ Strong sudden dance towards family, connect together in the middle, light sustained dance away. ○ Rising and falling sustained dance toward. Rising and falling sudden dance away. In middle: Parent: freeze. Child: do a sudden dance around your parent. Then children freeze, parent do a sustained dance around your child.
Improvisation #2 BO 5-7'	Shadowing with Sudden and Sustained (modify w/ strong and light) Teachers demonstrate. Kids lead first. Teachers can prompt with BP's/whole, different locomotors and spatial modifiers.
Kids Only Class EL 8-10'	Transition into kids only: hug parent, find them a chair to sit on. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Free dance for 2 minutes (explain to families intention and what to look for...name what see) ○ Leaps over block - challenging them to make a new shape ○ Surprise dances: teacher gathers children in a huddle and explains that now they are going to do a surprise dance. Use sudden/ sustained or rise/fall. First, practice in a circle. Then, find your own perfect spot in the room and do your surprise dance! LOOK NOW: Mimicry of Parent to Child: presence. Hug family; family tell child what you saw them do.
Closing BO 5-7'	Little reverse BD: during first closing circle breath LOOK NOW: Activity of Child to task: absence Story and snack.

Appendix 2

MPACT Class Record w/ Research
 Attach attendance form and lesson plan

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Date 3/5/11 Site WOL
 # Families 5 #Adults 5 #Children 6 Teachers initials PD+EL

What worked well this week re: curriculum? using sudden + sustained as modifiers gave rise to interesting movement discoveries for families. It was also new material for some of our long-standing families. Leaps centered our boys.	Ideas for deepening or expanding this curriculum n/a
What challenges were addressed, resolved, improved this week? Mom N tried teachers suggested strategy to engage w/ prompts herself instead of trying to get child J to. No problems w/ child J playing w/ blocks during leaping. Next week observations of parents "I," "We" or "Us" (general) will bring in case he is distracted. Mom N exhibited more "I" space this week b/c not so preoccupied w/ trying to get child J to follow prompts (varied movement by diff energies). Mom M very expressive.	New challenges that emerged this week? Ideas for shifting curriculum or structures Child E came for 1st time and was very distracted by child J. Both ran around together throughout class and rarely responded to prompts. Child E shimmied continually and repeatedly hit child J. Mom M + child G did sustained + sudden reaching toward each other + connected w/out being asked. During shadowing, they challenged themselves to copy each others' very sudden movements.
Record any question any parent asked n/a	Reflect on collaborative teaching process Smooth trading off.

# of parents that report (check all that apply) <input type="checkbox"/> They used what they learned at home # ____ <input type="checkbox"/> They are playing with their child more # ____ <input type="checkbox"/> They have increased confidence # ____ <input type="checkbox"/> They are seeing their child in new ways # ____ Describe or elaborate on anything above Mom N agreed w/ BO that child J is responding to more of the class structures.	Record any parent comments on Shifts in thinking about role as parent Skills, knowledge re: child development or dance Child's learning about language, self-esteem, dance Dance activities at home
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

ENGAGEMENT STUDY

Observation sequence	Engagement Category	Target child/parent	Presence/absence	#	Comments
After 1st drum beat - Name Game	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Activity <input type="checkbox"/> Interest <input type="checkbox"/> Mimicry	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent to child <input type="checkbox"/> Child to parent <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Child	<input type="checkbox"/> Presence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Absence	1/4	
Freeze Game - Shoot up suddenly; kids reach toward suddenly, pull back sustained.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Activity <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interest <input type="checkbox"/> Mimicry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parent to child <input type="checkbox"/> Child to parent <input type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Child	<input type="checkbox"/> Presence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Absence	B: 5/5 E: 3/5	One family came late. Two children not on task; parents trying to get the on task. B caught it as interest, E didn't.
Towards + Away: Sustained w/ sudden in middle	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Activity <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interest <input type="checkbox"/> Mimicry	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent to child <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Child to parent <input type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Child	<input type="checkbox"/> Presence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Absence	B: 2/6 E: 3/6	EL doesn't remember 3rd person she saw - EL + BO agree on other 2.
Surprise dances - Kids Only	<input type="checkbox"/> Activity <input type="checkbox"/> Interest <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mimicry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parent to child <input type="checkbox"/> Child to parent <input type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Child	<input type="checkbox"/> Presence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Absence	B: 1/5 E: 0/5	BO saw Mom M holding baby w/ muscle tension while daughter did slow, sustained don
3rd closing breath	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Activity <input type="checkbox"/> Interest <input type="checkbox"/> Mimicry	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent to child <input type="checkbox"/> Child to parent <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Child	<input type="checkbox"/> Presence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Absence	3/6	

Note re: Agreement between teachers. Were any of the numbers adjusted for agreement purposes? No.

Child A is only 1 yr. old so we cannot include him in much of the data b/c not developmentally able to complete tasks yet.

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