

3. CONSTRUCTING MEANING AND LEARNING COLLABORATIVELY THROUGH MOVEMENT AND BODY EXPRESSION

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Abstract: *Movement and body expression exercises are not the obvious choices for mainstream approaches to cognitive and socio-emotional learning. Here we present the preliminary findings of a youth led participatory action research project aiming at a better understanding of wellbeing and educational equity issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on exploring how meaning making and collaborative learning were facilitated through a movement and body expression exercise. Implications for mainstream educational practice are discussed.*

Key words: *body expression and movement, collaborative learning, meaning making, wellbeing*

1. Introduction

During the pandemic and online learning, young people were mostly exposed to rather conventional teaching methods, mainly focusing on intellectual development and growth. Body expression and movement occupied a less significant place in the practices and inquiries of educators seeking emergency remote teaching solutions to ensure continuity of education through the challenges of the pandemic. Here we argue that movement and body expression are resourceful repositories for educational practices tied to young people's wellbeing, meaning making and collaborative learning that need closer attention and further exploration.

Studies on movement and body expression generally focus on the advances of practices and knowledge in therapy and educational support addressing various disabilities. It has been indicated that movement and body expression exercises have many positive effects, especially in relation to various forms of disability or mental health issues. In working with psychotherapy and posttraumatic stress disorder, Mulloy (2019) shows that body language and movements have an altering effect on reducing chronic posttraumatic symptomatology and improving feelings of safety and security. Another example comes from García and Panhofer (2019) who indicate that integrating body, emotion and thought help in the revealing of emotional aspects and facilitation of ideas and thoughts that are difficult to name, such as those related to trauma and crisis. Similar findings are presented in the works of Cozolino (2014), Caldwell (2018), Ogden and Fisher (2015) and Garcia-Medrano & Panhofer (2020), linking body expression and movement with positive effects on well-being. In Cozolino's study from 2013, phenomenological based embodied reflection is associated with the enhancement in the quality of presence and the safe, trusting relationships required in the activation of feeling, emotions and cognitions and the co-construction of narrative reflecting a positive self happening in various forms of clinical supervision (Stella & Taggart, 2020).

Movement and body expression can be used as a repository for difficult

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experiences but also as a tool to link experience and dialogue. This experience informed dialogue can be a step towards self-recognition, acceptance of oneself and others (Bareka, Panhofer & Rodriguez Cigaran, 2019). Studies looking at broader developmental gains, indicate that the use of body movement and expression as learning methods helps to integrate seemingly separate perceptual maps that represent the typical ways in which we feel, organize, and process our experiences (Bradshaw-Yerby, 2021). Movement invites the concrete to abstract sequence of thinking, facilitating that purposeful play, noticing, expressing, feeling, reasoning and esthetics become part of current learning activities (Stern and Bachman, 2021). Other social, emotional and interpersonal benefits of body movement and expression exercises include stress reduction, improved listening and attention skills, reduced aggressive behaviour, improved self-esteem, self-regulation, self-mastery and personal expression and joy (Nim, 2016).

Research evidence in education suggests more broadly that physical activity has the potential to engage students in their learning which in turn enhances their motivation and interest in the learning activity or learning context, a relationship with significant positive effects on academic performance (Sugahara et al, 2016; Hillman et al., 2009; Buddle et al., 2008; Coe et al., 2006; Price and Rogers, 2004). Although well emphasized benefits of exploring the ties between the general physical activities and learning have been underscored in recent literature, the number and breadth of developments in the space of the classroom specific teaching practices taking note of these positive effects are not yet of considerable dimensions.

Moreover in the context of remote teaching during the lockdown periods of the pandemic, the scarcity of such exploratory work is even more obvious. We aim at contributing in closing this gap in educational practice and knowledge by taking a closer look at the potential relationship between movement and body expression exercises and the meaning making and collaborative learning contextualized in a youth led participatory approach to understanding issues of wellbeing and educational inequity associated with the lockdown period of the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, whilst inquiring over the preliminary findings in the research project Promoting equity and wellbeing in schools in disadvantaged communities through action-research (PESSCA), we focus on exploring *how meaning making and collaborative learning were facilitated through a movement and body expression exercise*. Implications for mainstream educational practice are discussed.

2. Methodology

Participants. The group of young participants consisted of 15 young people (13 female and 2 male participants). Their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old. The intentions of the PESSCA project were promoted among the students in the school and those interested were invited to register by filling out a Google Forms form. All 15 students expressing their intent to participate were later contacted and invited to take part in a set of activities carried out at their school early in October 2021. Participants were informed of the purposes, procedures and all scheduled activities ahead of the first meeting on the school site. A written informed consent containing

all the information about the project, procedures, schedules, data and intentions of publishing findings in this project was also addressed to their parents and/or legal guardians. On the first day of activity the young participants discussed all aspects of the research project and procedures with the researchers, and an agreement was reached with them in the form of a checklist, making sure all of the participants fully understood the research project. Participants were free to withdraw from the project at any point, without notice and participation was only required if it met their full consent. One male participant has decided to not allow for any of the data collected on the basis of his participation in the project to be subjected to analysis or be further used for research purposes. As such, our findings only refer to the remaining 14 participants.

Procedure. The activities with the young participants took place over four days, at the school site. The exercises of movement and body expression were used at the beginning of each day, initially expecting they would simply provide good warm-up and get together practices, for the other methods we planned to use, such as photovoice and forum theatre (Safta-Zecheria et al, in press). In the following, we will focus our attention on one such movement and body expression exercise and on the surprising effects on eliciting the meaning-making capabilities and collaborative learning in the group of young participants, on its own, on the third day of the project, before engaging young people in other planned action-research techniques such as photovoice or forum theater.

Brief description of the exercise. There are three stages to this body-movement and expression exercise. The first stage consists in placing participants in pairs. Each of the pairs consisted of an artist and his work of art. The artist had to use his imagination and put the person with whom he was paired in a position that resembled an action. In the end, the artist had to join the work of art and complete with his body the action described by the partner. For this moment, the students had 5 minutes.

At the second stage the students had to change roles with each other. The artist became a work of art, and the work of art an artist. For this stage they had 5 minutes. At the final stage of the exercise, students who were in the first stage of a work of art resume their role as a work of art. After the artist has finished performing the action, they are asked to distance themselves from the works of art. Students who have played the role of artist are asked to choose another work of art that was made by a colleague and complete it with their body. This exercise was a form of collaborative learning that prepared the photovoice workshops. The movement and body expression exercises were considered necessary for participants to warm up and gradually tap into their creative, engaging, attentive and aware selves, a state preparing them for the following workshop on photovoice.

Data collection and analysis. The data analyzed and presented here was collected in two stages of the four days program with the young participants. A first set of data comes from in-situ observation on the third day. Two members of the research team were observing individual participants and the general dynamic of the group during sessions; their observations were discussed in end-of-the-day debriefing sessions within the research team together with the feedback received at

the end of each day from the young people. For the purpose of this analysis, observations were further discussed between researchers, based on the reports and observations collected in-situ at the time of data collection. A second set of data was collected at the end of the fourth day, when young participants were asked what they would take with them from the four days of activities. The participants giving their free answers were recorded on voice-recording devices and the recordings were transcribed at a later stage. Only fully anonymized text data was coded and further analyzed.

3. Findings

We observed a gradual improvement of participants' general attitude towards the program, young people indicating they were progressively more interested, curious and willing to take part in body-movement and expression exercises with peers who were not their close friends; the same attitude was extended to taking part in discussion, analysis and creative groups engaging in photovoice and forum theatre, activities which were scheduled at a later time in the program. Young people were more interested and open to new challenges, even when the activity was requiring an intense cognitive or emotional engagement (i.e. creating a graphical map of their peaks and lows throughout the lockdown and talking in groups through the various personal histories the graphical representations evoked). This finding is consistent with other studies indicating that movement exercises have a positive effect on participants' attitudes towards a variety of learning contexts (Stern & Bachman, 2021).

In terms of young people's participation in collaborative learning settings and engaging in solving open-ended problems collaboratively, we observed that soon into the first few body-movement and expression exercises their willingness to take part in following activities alongside members of the groups they did not know so well, or who were in a different grade, increased significantly. Collaboration was not seen solely as an opportunity to share ideas with those whom they perceived like-minded, but as an opportunity to engage in discovering new ideas, in a diversity of work configurations and taking on a variety of tasks. This finding is also consistent with research documenting a positive association between movement and well-being, whereby certain habits of mind, like observation, envisioning, exploration, collaboration, broadly associated with arts education, are specifically attributed to body-movement and expression work (Trevarthen & Fresquez, 2015; Nim, 2016).

We also observed a direct and instant effect of movement and body expression exercises on meaning-making and discovery processes young people engaged in. Particularly when engaged in body-movement exercises that required also iterative work, such as the one asking them to create an unfinished work of art using a colleague's body and then complete the work of art with their own body, then removing themselves from that composition and then taking another artist's creation to continue with their own idea of what the body-expression another has produced to create something new. In this sort of recurrent iterative and body-awareness exercises young people engaged in concrete and abstract thinking establishing new

meaningful connections, organizing ideas and shaping their perceptions to incorporate the perspectives of others, proceeding with their creative endeavors in a manner that bridged the physical and psychological aspects of learning and imagination seamlessly evolving from one decision and meaning-making opportunity to another. In this, we noted that our finding is consistent with research exploring the effects of body-movement exercises on learning (Stella & Taggart, 2020; Sugahara et al, 2016) and well-being (Garcia-Medrano & Panhofer, 2020).

From voice recorded work sessions and feedback from the young people in the project we found that opening to others (namely colleagues in the groups whom they weren't acquainted with prior to participating in this project), learning to communicate and trust other people, gaining in empathy and overcoming fear associated with opening up to others are among the areas where young people saw improvements and positive effects they juxtaposed or saw as a direct outcome of their participation in various movement and body expression exercises.

4. Concluding discussion

Generally speaking, as part of an youth led participatory action research approach, the proposed movement and body expression exercises build on the benefits of 'learner-centered' approaches to learning whilst mitigating some of its limitations, by offering prompters for differentiation and contextualized, adaptive pedagogical interventions when needed - such as the dynamic role-change and the various iterative actions it proposes.

Particularly focusing on the observed effects of the proposed body-movement exercises on young peoples' learning and participation, it is worth underscoring the effectiveness of the associations made in this approach between concrete, physical and abstract, emotional and cognitive aspects of learning, creativity, engagement and willingness to participate in collective and collaborative activities. Limitations of the work presented here include the very contextualized nature of our approach and the narrow scope of the data sample we focus on. The findings and interpretations presented here serve merely the purpose of raising awareness over the significance and potential of body movement exercises for aspects of educational practice and reflection that we have noticed to lack an ample development in the literature.

Finally it is worth noting that in our approach to unpacking and promoting issues of educational equity and well-being in schools, the body-movement and expression exercises were merely conceived of as opening acts, helping in facilitating and heightening perceptions and eliciting motivations for young people to engage further in other participatory research interventions such as photovoice and forum theater. Yet, the immediate and visibly positive effect these exercises had on young people's learning and participation left us convinced that there is far more to the relationship between collaborative learning, meaning-making and body-movement and expression that needs to be inquired over and discovered.

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