

Understanding the philosophical basis of Veronica Sherborne's approach to Movement

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Sherborne worked in an era (1943-90) when teaching was changing from almost strict "military style" and didactic methods where rows of children stood in lines on the football field or in a hall carrying out the orders of the teacher, into a child centred, creative and free-thinking approach where the teacher's role was that of educator, rather than dictator. Towards the end of her career, she saw the government taking tighter control again as the National Curriculum was launched. Sherborne never explicitly explained her philosophy of education but she wrote in 1990 in her book "Developmental Movement for children" that her movement education was firmly based upon the work of Rudolph Laban (1879-1958) and part of this chapter will scrutinise this remarkable man's influence. It is possible also to glean some ideas about her broad educational philosophy through the papers that she did write for conferences and also by considering her words spoken during workshops. Conversations with her friends, ex-students and colleagues and also her daughter, Sarah, have further enlightened the authors' own personal understanding and experience of who Veronica really was. Like any good educator, Sherborne continued to learn by trial and error, by reflection and by careful observation of the ways in which children learn and develop. (Sherborne, 2001) so that her philosophy was one that evolved throughout her life (Sparkes, 2001). This chapter will examine the main influences on Sherborne's approach to movement, especially that of Rudolph Laban, and it seeks to explore Sherborne's perceived views about children's learning.

The influence of her initial teacher training

Sherborne trained at Bedford College of Physical Education in the early 1940's. The training at Bedford during this time resulted in students being granted recognition both as physiotherapists as well as Physical Education teachers. Her training as a Physical Education teacher at Bedford would have thoroughly equipped her with formal teaching skills in games, gymnastics and dance but the emphasis was definitely on *formal* training. In an interview with Margaret Kirby in 1984, she described the strict regime which was prevalent at that time.

Our teaching practice preparation was learning how
To give commands and we spent the whole of the autumn
term in the evening learning to say "Forward". "Sideways".
"bend", "Forwards and downwards". "drop" and we learned
how to command each others from long distances away.....and
you had to prepare your apparatus lesson, your free
standing exercises and so on. Everything was in four lines
and the apparatus was very carefully organised and
structured.....I had to unlearn so much at the Studio
(where she later trained with Laban) that had been
ingrained in me at Bedford.

Kirby (1984) page 31

There was, however, one bright light in her training. Bedford College of Physical Education was particularly forward looking in Dance and had been a focus for visiting lecturers from abroad since the 1920's (Thornton, 1971). Joan Goodrich, the Dance lecturer in 1940, had trained under Leslie Burrows and Mary Wigman who were the first to bring Laban's style of dance and movement to Britain. Veronica, as an 18 year old student, had entered her physical education training with the ambition of being a dance teacher and so she was drawn to the modern educational style of Goodrich. Then Laban himself, along with

Lisa Ullman, came to the college for three days to teach the students. This first encounter with Laban had a stunning effect upon her (Kirby, 1984) and after several years of teaching in mainstream secondary school, she sought him out in Manchester for further training.

The influence of Rudolph Laban

Conversations with Geraldine Stephenson, who had also undergone training at Bedford PE College and who joined the Art of Movement Studio in Manchester at the same time as Veronica, revealed that Laban's approach to movement was unorthodox and completely different from anything they had encountered at Bedford. Laban sought out the expression of a person's feelings and inner attitudes. He applauded controversial interpretations of the world and allowed his students the space to discover movement qualities for themselves. He gave students the confidence to find their own way. For some like Geraldine Stephenson, it would be into the world of theatre and dramatic movement, for others it would result in a lifetime of dance (Preston-Dunlop, 1963); for Veronica Sherborne it would eventually result in Developmental Movement (Sherborne, 2001).

Laban was a truly charismatic personality and his impact and influence on his students was profound. In order to understand the nature of his influence on others, it is useful to explore those factors which had shaped his personality and approach to movement many years earlier and many miles away in a troubled and unstable Europe. Rudolph Jean-Baptiste Attila Laban was born in 1879 in Bratislava to a well-to-do military family. At the turn of the century, aged 21, he realised he did not want to follow in his father's military footsteps and left the army to pursue his burning interest in art forms. Moving to Paris with his young wife, he found the capital to be blossoming with new experiences

as this was the period when names such as Picasso, Monet, Matisse and Rodin were becoming part of the scene. Preston-Dunlop (1998) suggested that it was at this time that Laban encountered Rosicrucian thinking and practice upon which he built his philosophy-the emphasis on harmony; suppression of the energy-sapping ego and promotion of the belief that all are equal but different; focus on the importance of the energy of the centre of the body; the importance of "auras" (his later development of the kinesphere which closely resembles these). Sherborne's teaching style reflected this thinking as she accepted her pupils' "differences" gladly and created an environment where all felt accepted (Hill, 2006). She also stressed the importance of the centre of the body, particularly with her work with disabled children and adults. Douglas (1994) refers to both Laban's and Sherborne's attention to the centre of the body:

Consider the focus on body awareness; perhaps because of his origins as a dancer and choreographer, Laban was much concerned with the centred body in the context of the space but Sherborne's focus is on the centre of the body as critical in knowing the self and giving confidence in the body.

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Laban used painting, drawing, architecture, music, drama and dance in his search for rhythm and harmony, expression of inner attitudes and the creativity of the soul. He encountered many difficulties and hardships after the death of his wife and father, yet he continued on his quest. He began to see the problem that music and a set pattern of steps somehow constrained dance, keeping the natural rhythm of the body fettered. He began to experiment without these traditional tethers and used only the

voice and tambour and the body's natural rhythm. The experience was tremendously freeing for him and his dancers. He called the resulting form "movement".

Preston-Dunlop (1998) describes Laban's growing confidence in his movement/dance discoveries:

For the dancer, the body took on a new significance through Laban's lived assurance of the power of the unified human being. He implicitly denied Cartesian dualism. body-mind oneness was found in its essence in the dancing dancer, the lived body, the dynamic person".

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With these discoveries, he realised that such experiences were hard to describe in words and so his long battle with notation began.

Laban's life took many twists and turns through two world wars and eventually he took up residence in Britain where he influenced many British educators including Veronica. By the time he was in his 60's he had developed certain principles of movement (Laban, 1948) and during the 1960s and 70s, physical education in British schools was often based on these principles (Slater, 1974). Russell (1958) described "movement" as an activity that involves the whole person and is a far wider concept than the then accepted physical training, prevalent in both primary and secondary schools of the day. Jordan (1966) wrote of the huge effect the adoption of movement education was having in schools in the 1960s:-

To many teachers even today, it is so different from

the physical education **they** experienced at school that they think it is a different subject.....for others it is as it should be, a better approach to physical education which gives greater scope to children, whatever their physical and mental endowment: one which brings the whole child into play- bodily, mentally and expressively at the tempo and in the manner which is personal to the individual at each successive stage of growth and development

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The Scottish Expressive Arts 5-14 Guidelines for Physical Education (1992), which are still in force today, show a clear foundation on Laban's principles (p.57). These movement principles provided a framework for teachers both to successfully observe movement and also to teach movement holistically, creatively and inclusively (Davies, 2001) It was upon these principles of movement that Veronica Sherborne developed her movement work which she used with mainstream children, student teachers and children and adults with moderate and profound physical, emotional or cognitive disabilities.

The main principles are centred around BODY, SPACE, DYNAMICS and RELATIONSHIPS. Figure 1 shows these in a diagrammatic form that the authors find useful for explanation and clarity. Those movement elements included are only examples. They are not meant to represent all the possibilities of human movement. Laban maintained that any human movement, whether a single movement or a sequence of movements, could be analysed into these four categories (Laban, 1998). Humans tend to favour certain movement qualities and ignore others e.g. some tend to move in strong, flexible, slow and free flowing strides, favouring the use of large amounts of space and using both arms and legs as they move. They might find the use of light, quick

movements particularly difficult and so their movement vocabulary would be restricted to their favoured types. Laban encouraged his students to experience a wide movement vocabulary by encouraging them to try out those movements not natural to them so that, in turn, they would gain body mastery and movement confidence.

As well as analysing, Laban used his movement principles to build up his students' understanding and experience of movement. By working upon a movement idea from each of the four categories, his students' movement vocabulary would gradually be built up so that they would have a solid movement bank from which to draw for experimenting, creating and gradually increasing their body confidence and ability to express their inner attitudes. As they developed physically and were given room to practise, so their movement confidence and fluency would increase.

Once her time at Laban's School was completed, Sherborne would have left with a deep understanding of, experience in and training for, human movement. Sherborne's attitude towards the fundamental importance of movement for adults and children, with or without disabilities, was now assured. Initially, Sherborne returned to teaching dance to student teachers and then, with Laban's recommendation, she used movement in therapeutic work with emotionally distressed adults at the Withymead Centre in Devon. Both Sherborne and Laban had realised the psychological effect of movement many years before research in Sport and Exercise Psychology had been considered.

The influence of other contemporary educational thinkers

During Sherborne's early years as a teacher, educational theories were changing slowly. Her own attitude to movement had changed as a result of working with Laban and then her experiences

changed as she used movement with different populations, including her own three young children (Hill,2006). The physical bonding encountered during motherhood and subsequent physical play with her developing children gave her a new and profound insight into the importance of movement, play and relationships in child development. Her children were born between 1956-62 and daughter Sarah recalls how her mother built a large climbing frame in the garden which was copied by the local school because of its innovation. The dressing-up box was always filled and well used and while motherhood would have been daunting enough for most women, Veronica continued to work part time. Occasionally, she would confuse roles and her students one day were stunned to see her appearing for a dance lecture in her apron!

In educational thinking, the notion that the education of young children should be child-centred, both active and interactive and reflect the social world of the child became more acceptable during the 1950's and '60's as educational theorists and pioneers of early childhood education became more accepted, more numerous and more established (Dewey, 1938; Erikson, 1950; Froebel, 1826; MacMillan, 1930; Montessori, 1965; Piaget, 1953). Although educational theories tended to focus on the cognitive aspects of child development and the way that thought processes were organised and developed, Sherborne realised that the ability to think, reason, understand and learn also involved perceptual and sensory skills and that these cannot be separated from the physical development of young children. She could clearly see that physical and intellectual development were closely intertwined during the early years as her children moved to explore, play and make sense of the world and people around them.

The educational value of movement for young children had been recognised in some circles as long ago as 1914 when the Christian Socialist sisters Margaret and Rachel McMillan, having worked with children in inner-city environments, noted the relationship between poor physical development and poor intellectual development of young children. We do not have explicit writing from Sherborne to know whether these pioneer women had influenced her thinking but we do know how much she stressed space and environment and opportunity. In setting up their first 'open air' nursery, the McMillan sisters recognised the need for children to have space and opportunity for physical movement in order to enhance both their learning and well-being. Likewise, Maria Montessori organised education for young children based on the notion that children learn best by interacting positively with a safe, familiar, stimulating environment. Montessori (1965) stressed the role of the educator was to provide the best possible environment and physical learning experiences for the child in order to help her/him explore and learn purposefully. She also believed that reflective observation of children learning were the key tools to effective planning. Similarly, Piaget (1968) stressed the central importance of the familiar environment in which children are safe and stimulated to explore and learn. He placed an emphasis on the role of *social interaction* in learning

The influence of her own reflections and personality

Sherborne was living and working in an innovative time with exciting new philosophies of education as well as the controversial worldview of Laban. We can only infer that she was indeed influenced by these new forces. Politically, there were also changes which affected her work. During the early 1970's, children with special needs were transferred from the authority of the Department of Health to that of the Department of Education and Sherborne, with her vast experience of movement

education, became more involved with the challenge of providing movement experience and opportunities for moderate and profoundly disabled youngsters. She wrote:-

Over the years I have noticed that children make progress in certain fundamental areas as a result of movement experiences of different kinds. It is possible to help developmentally retarded children to relate to their bodies, to become more self aware and more confident. It is possible to help them form relationships and it is possible to help them focus attention and to concentrate

Sherborne, 1975

The concern of these movement experiences was to engage children sufficiently that they became aware of how they use their body; to give them confidence and opportunity to move with control; to move with a qualitative awareness and to move with ease alongside and amongst others. The concern was to help children to re-experience, rebuild or maybe even experience for the first time those elements upon which a healthy body image and body schema is built. In fact, it is the focus of Sherborne's movement experiences for the whole child and his/her needs, rather than movement technique itself, that sets it apart from most other movement programmes which either seek to improve motor skills or remediate specific motor defects.

Sherborne noticed that one major factor that children with special educational needs often lacked, was that of a consistent caregiver to act as their guide through the rocky road of growth, development and socialization. Realising the significance of early relationships and the impact of these on communication, trust and sociability, Sherborne created movement experiences where these could be consistently addressed. She empowered adults,

whether teachers, carers or occasional helpers, to work alongside the youngsters and to participate in the movement experiences too.

The nurturing environment that became the hall mark of her movement sessions were created by *the way* she interacted and taught her children as well as what she chose to present. Her interaction was always one of fun and enjoyment for both the children and the adults so that motivation was stimulated. Stern (1977) equates fun with the notions of interest and delight:-

By interest and delight, I mean the mutual providing of stimulus events of such a nature that attention is engaged and maintained enough to allow the build-up and fluctuation of excitement within a tolerable range so that affective, positive experiences are generated.

Once attention was gained with interest and excitement, then Sherborne would begin a dialogue. Schaffer (1977) refers to dialogue as an essential acquisition in order for the child to realise s/he is involved in a relationship. This, in turn, involves reciprocity and intentionality. In the early days of building a relationship, Sherborne (1990) outlined the one-sidedness of the caregiver/teacher taking most of the responsibility for the interaction until eventually, the child reciprocates and a real dialogue takes place. As a result of the child being involved in a reciprocal relationship, s/he will start to realise that personal behaviour communicates; that it might influence the actions and reactions of others and that others usually respond to his/her signs and signals. Soon, the child learns to send out signals intentionally expecting others to respond. Eventually the child will show awareness that behaviour can communicate and can be used intentionally to affect the nature of the relationship.

Hill (2006), Sparks (2006), Marsden, Weston and Hair (2004) and Loots and Malschaert (1999) have each commented on the way Sherborne approached her pupils i.e. her unusual teaching style. Not only did she interact by creating an environment of fun and enjoyment in which a dialogue could begin but she also provided a sense of equality and sharing between herself and the children. She made it obvious that she enjoyed being there and valued all the efforts that the children made. She created a learning environment where children felt emotionally and physically safe; where they could experiment with positive encouragement and where she would be sensitive and responsive in her reactions. She was never negatively critical of anyone's work.

The focus in her movement sessions was one where the emphasis was on each child's *process* of learning. Her emphasis was not on the product but she sought to praise achievement also. Her aim was twofold: that children would feel at home in their own bodies; that they would trust and feel emotionally and physically confident to form relationships (Sherborne,2001). For children with some disabilities, such as autism, or those who have suffered abuse, these have always been very difficult challenges.

Sherborne's model was one where the environment created was safe and secure so that children could always experience success and happiness. The way of working was characterised by a concern for how the child could learn, how the child might interact, how s/he might communicate, how s/he experienced movement and how s/he felt. The model intentionally created an environment where children could find a way of communication and where their efforts were valued. Within this model, opportunities for working with others and achieving with others naturally developed. Children were encouraged to 'grow' at their own pace. They were not forced to make developmental steps

until their inner selves had the strength and confidence to move forwards (Sparks, 2001).

A lasting legacy

Many years after his death, Veronica Sherborne wrote of her debt to Laban:-

Everything I teach is based on Laban's theory; I couldn't work at all as an educator or as a therapist without that background knowledge and I was very fortunate in being able to work with Laban himself over quite a long time.

(1982 page 14)

Yet she never became his puppet. She was aware of the knowledge treasure she had discovered with him and was aware of his great charisma. Preston-Dunlop (1998), also aware of his charisma, wrote how important it was for his students to see through this and to recognise that empowerment came, not through following him, but through finding one's own way.

In a similar way, Veronica Sherborne was a very charismatic teacher. Kirby's (1984) study showed a tendency amongst many of those taught by Veronica to "relate movement education directly to the teaching they had experienced from Mrs Sherborne". They did not seek an understanding of the theoretical principles underlying the practice and she was concerned that the temptation would be to "merely repeat a set of activities which they had learned.....without relating them to the movement qualities involved" (page 223) Douglas (1994) challenges colleagues to take Sherborne's work forward:-

We need to look at her programme and her activities. To use them, to search for the principles underlying her work and

to be creative within those principles. It is important to be dynamic in exploring the potential of the work and to prevent it becoming dead. Veronica's work is worthy of analysis and scrutiny but I suggest it will only survive if practitioners take the principles and develop within them, mindful that the power is in the **movement experience** not the system

(page 15)

Veronica was indeed fiercely independent and encouraged her students to stand on their own feet. She did not write down her philosophy nor her theoretical principles. She just knew, in the last decade of her life, that what she did just worked. But this was after a lifetime of experience and reflection and she never lost the joy of discovery.

...its been trial and error all the time but I have learned an awful lot and I'm discovering something new almost every week and that gives you a feeling of achievement,,,,,,it's exciting

Sherborne (1983) in Kirby (1984)

The lasting legacy of Veronica's philosophy is not only the principles of movement, the acceptance of all persons as being valued, the importance of being at home in one's own body and the ability to form relationships through movement, but it is one of pure joy in discovery and the excitement of achievement.

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