

A Community Arts Project at an Orphanage in Mexico:
A Research Study Investigating the Effects of Collaboration between Dance Artists and
an Orphan Population through the Medium of Dance

by

Emily Ann May

A Bound Document Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2016 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Mary Fitzgerald, Chair
Jeff McMahon
Melissa Rex-Flint

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

ABSTRACT

This document explores a community dance project at an orphanage in Mexico and the investigations following. This project researched how dance can be used to create a transformative and empowering experience for the participant and what discoveries of identity are made through dance. The research took place at an orphanage in Texcoco, Mexico and at Arizona State University. The participants in this research include three dance artists from Arizona State University and 10 ten-year-old children from Mexico. The portion that took place in Mexico was conducted in daily three-hour classes over the span of two weeks. For five months following the two weeks in Mexico, weekly rehearsals were held and a culminating concert was performed on November 20th–22nd of 2015.

DEDICATION

To my parents for giving me my first home.

To my brother Julio for showing me the resilience of the human spirit.

To Madre Ines, Madre Diana, and all the children of Hogares Infantiles. You show me the meaning of unconditional love.

To my committee and their invaluable support and guidance.

To my Grad Pack, for inspiring me to always dream big.

To Jasmine and Erika for being angels in my life.

To my Julia for making me a mother.

To my husband Kevin who is as devoted to this project as I am. You will always be the greatest miracle in my life. I wait with great anticipation to introduce you to your home in Mexico that you have supported and believed in from the first day we met.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to countless individuals are merited for this opportunity. First and foremost, thank you to Madre Ines and Madre Diana of Hogares Infantiles for dedicating your lives to God and the service of his children and providing a beautiful home to many and embracing me into your family. To my brother Julio, who continues to inspire me with his resilience. To my parents, Peter and Ann, who teach me the importance of family through love and through example. To Erika and Jasmine for their passion, talent and kindness. To my committee: Mary Fitzgerald, Melissa Rex and Jeff McMahon, for teaching me and guiding me with patience, and for helping me refine my ideas into a substantive work. To my Grad Pack: See Cha, Molly Schenck, David Olarte, Grace Gallagher, Ricardo Alvarez and Jenny Gerena for being my artistic family and providing invaluable feedback throughout this process. Thank you to the incredible production team including Mollie Flanagan and Michael Zull. Many thanks are due to all those who contributed to the GoFundMe campaign to raise funds for airfare for my dancers. Thank you to ASU for the travel grant that funded the travel to the orphanage in June of 2015. Ultimately, I acknowledge with gratitude the many miracles that God has provided in this endeavor.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Beginning in my early childhood, dance has always drawn me in with the freedom and excitement that accompany speaking and perceiving through movement. A dance improvisation class when I was six years old gave me an awareness of my abstract thinking and free response. In an exercise in which the class responded with movement to the sensations evoked by the teacher's verbal imagery, the teacher asked me to continue moving and for everyone else to stop and watch me move. He pointed out to the class, "See how she is freely exploring?" I was getting lost in play, and that was the first time I realized the value of personally investing in my movement. Investigating the world around me through dance enriches my life. I have investigated spirituality, creativity, clarity in expression, the beauty of the human form, and how dance edifies the viewer and the performer. Dance transforms and empowers me.

The capacity of dance to promote inquiry helps me delve into personal investigations and enlightens me in my failures and successes, allowing me both to create and inspire growth and confidence. I experienced the transferability of these qualities when I made the choice to move with my family to an orphanage in Mexico to finalize the adoption of my brother. The water made me sick and I could not make my palate adjust to spicy food. One day I was delighted when a child offered me a sucker because it reminded me of candy from home. With the first lick, I found that it was covered in chili powder. I was infuriated! Even the candy was different and spicy! At the same time, I experienced joy – and there was a lot of joy to be found. I had never eaten mangos so delicious in my life – I still crave them. It was not uncommon for the children to have a dance party before bed or break out into song while doing chores. Almost every Tuesday night I worshipped with the children at Mass. In the thirteen years since then, I have reflected on the impact of that single unanticipated choice. I carry in my mind and heart the faces of the children

and nuns at the orphanage in the same way I carry the faces of my own family. Mexico became a place where I belonged and a place I could call home.

In gaining this familiarity, I became aware of needs – both of the children and of the orphanage. My personal transformation through dance led me to feel strongly that dance could address some of these needs. The children often had conversations with me about how pretty I was, or how I should be treated better than they were treated. I felt sad and uncomfortable that these beautiful, kind, smart children felt like lower-class citizens. I wondered why they felt that they did not deserve to be treated the same as me. The children far outnumber the adults at the orphanage, resulting in a lack of mentorship regarding appropriate affection and healthy interpersonal skills. Another result is that their free time was not filled with activities that promote creativity and stimulate learning. They would often be found watching television or movies. I wondered if they could recognize their individual worth, learn how to build supportive relationships, and expand their creativity through dance. This motivated me to create a project to investigate these ideas through dance and performance.

Chapter 2: Background

My research studies the transformational qualities of dance. Dance exists all around us and is an essential part of life. I study how dance enriches life through artistry, promotes creativity, builds relationships, uncovers questions, and deepens feelings of belonging.

Community is a collaborative effort by a group of people to co-create a common space in which works are evaluated based on their artistic merit, not solely through aesthetics and the hierarchical positioning of the creator of the art. I learned social and interpersonal skills in dance, and I developed in this common space. The dynamics in a community can motivate individuals to develop an ability to listen to others. The establishment of the actual physical place of study is also important. This needs to be a place free from outside distractions that will allow the participants to focus on the mind/body connection.

Recognizing the need of the children in the orphanage to have a community that helps them develop healthy social interactions, I sought research on the best way to fill that need. In a 2008 monograph, The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team stated the following in regards to children with warm, responsive caregivers:

[The child] develops an internal working model of expectations for nurturing, supportive reactions from that caregiver, whom the infant comes to trust and use as a secure base from which to explore the social and physical world. Such experiences in turn promote the development of a sense of worthiness and self-esteem and appropriate long-term social–emotional development and mental health. Without the early experience of a few warm, caring, socially–emotionally responsive adults, long-term development may be compromised (p 2).

I wondered if, through the community that dance can foster, we could fulfill these needs.

The opportunity to give children in an orphanage individual attention may cultivate in them a stronger sense of self and ability to connect with others.

Dance gave me ample opportunity for play during my childhood. My study investigates how the inherent characteristics of dance facilitate play. This has allowed me to discover the approaches to discipline, creativity, expression and community that resonated with me. As I study dance, I find frameworks and contexts that help me to understand what I value in dance. These discoveries give me a strong sense of freedom and play within my dancing. Improvisation in dance and art provides an opportunity for play and for a refinement of creativity.

The practice of improvisation in dance develops in the artist a connection between the inner self and the outer world, including other people. In Stephen Nachmanovitch's book, *Free Play*, he says, "Improvisation is not breaking with forms and limitations just to be 'free,' but using them as the very means of transcending ourselves" (p 84). Later in his book he discusses the topic of group improvisation and play. He says, "...In collaborating with others we round up, as in any relationship, an enlarged self, a more versatile creativity" (p 95). I wonder if improvisational practices that help to develop the ability to listen, trust, play, learn, collaborate and express can also help an individual reach a more true sense of self.

The characteristics of dance such as physical engagement, exploration of how the body can move and the relationship of the dancer to space and to others around them provide fertile ground for creative investigation. Those characteristics also require the researchers to participate in the same activities in order to "listen" through internal sensations and through input from participants, for the discoveries and themes that become important to the participants. The role of the researcher as participant is a key

component to constructing a living curriculum. Susan Bendix said the following about the development of curriculum in the conclusion of her doctoral dissertation,

“It is a lived thing by teacher and student. The world is full of mystery. A life is almost always filled with conundrums and obstacles. In this way, regardless of one’s place within a life span, the duality of being both a learner and a teacher never ends” (p. 270).

Curriculum is dependent upon persons, place and time and yet the established roles of teacher and student do not restrict one to either learning or instructing. In Sarah Houston’s journal publication she references the following from the Foundation for Community Dance’s Conference in 2000: “Dance with young people is an empowering process of personal, social, and artistic discovery. The empowerment comes from creative engagement with the medium – doing it, making it, sharing it, watching it, and reflecting on it – owning it” (p. 170). Dance has the power of transformation and empowerment, but that potential is dependent on the agency of the participant and the effectiveness of the framework in which it is used. I wonder how a constructivist approach helps to encourage a living curriculum produced by listening from the researcher as well as the participant.

I seek to understand what comprises a person’s sense of self and the role of dance in the formation of identity. I value knowledge that informs educators of the effects of the social constructs they create about the formation of the students’ personal identities. In my research, transformation is seen in the development of the individual, resulting from active engagement in the creative process and practice of dance.

Goals

To reiterate and summarize, the goals of my research study are to develop creative thinking and investigation that informs self-identity within a global context for the participants. This study seeks to investigate the topics of childhood and how play contributes to the formation of one's sense of self. It seeks to recognize the effects of collaboration between a group of adult artists and orphan children. This study implies transferability of knowledge gained through the research study to knowledge that can be utilized in the personal and global lives of participants. In my project, I involve practices and experiences that focus on play, creativity, improvisation and learning from others. This project begins with a community dance experience at an orphanage in Mexico, and continues those investigations through the creation of a new choreographic work.

Research Questions

The essential questions driving my research include the following:

How can dance be used to create a transformative and empowering experience for the participant?

What discoveries of identity can be made through dance?

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Site and Participants

The research site is Hogares Infantiles Orphanage in Texcoco, Mexico, a city with just fewer than 300,000 residents. There are many improvements that were made to the orphanage between my initial time spent there in 2001 and the two weeks of research conducted in 2015. It has a large grass field, a green house, a garden, a pet sheep, improved motor vehicles for transportation, a medical center with monthly visits from a certified doctor, separate bathroom facilities for the boys and girls with running water, large outdoor toys such as swings, and a large cement platform outside with a canvas cover. Over the weekends, the children visit with a variety of benefactor groups. The children also receive periodic classes in Zumba as well as sewing and other crafts. The quality of recreation and space for activities for the children has improved greatly.

Three nuns run the orphanage and there are two married couples who live and work at the orphanage. The orphanage currently houses 78 children. The mother superior, Madre Ines, was raised at Hogares Infantiles. There are two female part-time adult workers who were raised at Hogares Infantiles and are also raising their children at the orphanage while working. Children of appropriate age attend public and private school through high school. The current age range for male orphans is 2 to 20 years old and the age range for female orphans is 6 months to 42 years old.

Participants in this research included five boys and five girls all age ten, an ASU undergraduate dance student, an ASU graduate dance student and myself. The orphan population participants received a description of the research project and a consent form on the first day we met together. I also consulted frequently with the mother superior and one other nun regarding the project.

Data Collection

The use of qualitative research methods in this study supported the data that provided insight into the individual complexities of participants. The data that this research study sought to produce and gather is meant to inform research participants and others on the development of self through dance. The specific approach I used is practice-based research that encourages play and critical thinking. The main forms of data collection were video recording of class time and performance and journaling. In addition, data was collected through informal conversations.

Video recording was taken at each class and at any time of planned or spontaneous dance performance. The video recording allowed for review and reflection during the classes as well as throughout the life of the research study. This use of technology also aided in providing a platform for discussion and creative interpretation. Due to the ephemeral nature of dance, the video recording provided a method for archiving data from the project and also created a different lens from which to gather data of the lived experience.

Journaling was an integral part of data collection for all participants and was meant to reflect the embodied experience of each participant and provide further exploration and articulation. The orphan population participants were given time in class to journal and were given specific prompts. These prompts were generated prior to the start of the dance project, but were also adapted according to the ongoing data analysis during the dance project. Adult participants wrote daily journal entries in the evening after teaching class. I was the only individual who read participant journals.

Analytic Procedures

The analysis for this research was ongoing. Each movement class utilized practice-based research methods. These required an active presence from participants to yield

and respond to knowledge and understandings that emerged from individuals and the group. I facilitated these sessions using movement coupled with discussion.

The video recordings served as a reference to highlight specific moments of question. After the two weeks of classes in Mexico, the experiences and data were further analyzed through my creative process. This creative process utilized movement investigation, improvisation, images and sensory responses experienced during the project to further illuminate the research in a performance setting.

Ethics and Validity

The first ethical issue and threat to validity of this study regards the orphan population participants. We considered the potential risk for the orphan population in participating in this study. Any person in the orphan population who chose to be a part of the research could choose to discontinue participation in the research at any time. All research participants could opt out of journaling, discussing and/or engaging in the movement and class activities at any time. Those choices would also serve as data.

The variety of data collection methods helped to ensure that the flaws inherent in each method do not misinform the researcher. The video recordings will serve as an archived picture of the overall class experience and dance performances. The discussions allowed for impromptu dialogue that was immediately responsive to the context of the experience. The journaling provided each participant time to reflect at his or her pace. Each of these methods would support the contextualization of the embodied experience.

Chapter 4: Outcomes

Our engagement in the creative process to make a new choreographic work led to understanding and unearthing the transformational effects of the community dance project. I listened as my body spoke through movement that reflected the project. Throughout the five month rehearsal process the messages my body spoke became clearer to me as I explored, improvised movement and played. This process required a great amount of trust and vulnerability. I had to believe that in giving time to listen to my body and in responding through changes and investigations an honest work providing new insight would emerge. On opening night I knelt on stage and felt the lights slowly illuminate my bare back to the audience. I was ready to invite them on a transformational journey of individual story, enlightened play and divine connection.

Individual Story

Our hands traced along the edges of our long white circle skirt costumes and the contours of each other's bodies as we wrote the names and honored the children's stories. Our hands made small, quick gestures and led us in a huddle across the stage. In three brief moments, two dancers directed a third dancer to a solo – encouraging her to make her debut signature. This moment in the dance was inspired by the first choice I witnessed the children make: to sign their names on the research permission slip. I sat on the cool tile in the dining room of the orphanage gathering the children around me. They huddled close and watched with inquisitive stares as I told them about the project and passed out the research permission slip. The formality engaged them and one child asked, "Does it have to be a real signature?" My face showed I was confused. All of a sudden I was reminded of how thrilling it was as a child to do adult things and indulge in the freedom of independence. "Yes" I said, "it has to be your signature that is unique to you."

A person's name is unique to his or her identity. How a name is said and used can create an instant association and familiarity among people. The children adapted our names to their unique intonations and pronunciations. We found this endearing and immediately began to use our "new names." We experienced the same greeting each day that we pulled up to the main orphanage. Stepping out of the car, we were instantly surrounded by children. They repeated our names over and over as they grabbed our hands, hugged us, touched our hair and flooded us with questions. "Como me llamo?" translating to, "What is my name?" was a frequent question. The child's face would light up with a huge smile and then giggle with embarrassment if we said his/her correct name. If we did not say their correct names they were adamant in repeating their names and making us repeat their name. "No! Be-AH-trees!" This was clearly something that would shape the classroom setting and investigations on identity in a meaningful way.

I layered the classroom experience with the themes of names and signatures to connect to identity. It was a natural response to greet the children at the beginning of each class. It quickly became apparent that the fastest way to grab the attention of a child and get them back on task was to call out the child's name. In a two hour class a child might hear his or her name more than ten times. I even wondered if part of the motivation behind acting out was just to hear their names being used. In their first movement experiences the children explored shape and space using their names. I began our first two classes with the activity of shouting your name and striking a pose. Most of the children whispered their name and shrugged as a pose. I wanted them to establish their presence and feel they belonged. The entire two weeks we spoke, heard and moved our names. Through time these purposeful interactions helped us become familiar with the individuals and their stories.

The movement dialogue of names and signatures impacted the creative process. Before each performance of “Mi Firma”, I directed the performers to think of the children’s names. Call out their names as you dance knowing they will hear you. Honor their name and story with every scribble against your flesh and brush against the fabric. Carve their presence in the space with the motion of your body. Infuse every interaction with the distinct nuances of the children’s personalities. Allow yourself to get totally lost in a moment of play until something suddenly calls awareness back to the environment. For months we revisited the stories and experiences shared with the children. “Do you remember when Alejandro improvised the slide across the floor to transition to his new spot in their dance?” “Yeah, that was so awesome!” “In an ‘Alejandro fashion’ slide into these clothes.” We reflected on movements and choices made by Alejandro to embody what an “Alejandro fashion” would be. In the creative process I made connections between individual stories and began to understand from where these stories began.

From the first interaction with the children I devised an approach to learning dance that would inform them about individual choice making. The potency of that initial moment with the children was profound. They began to ask me if what they were doing was right or wrong. I responded by saying that a real signature was their unique creation and it would identify them. They watched each other as they wrote and re-wrote their signature. This was important and valuable to them. The children had an opportunity to act because of the invitation to participate in this project. I built in the same invitation to make choices for my dancers and myself in the creative process for the new choreographic work. I was inspired by the vivid image of surrounding rooftops in Texcoco with clothes hung to dry on clotheslines. My rehearsal space was filled with clothes, fabrics, baskets and a clothesline strung across the stage. In each rehearsal we

played with the props by embodying the reactions and intentions of the choices of the children in the familiar scenarios we experienced in Mexico.

I facilitated a laboratory of choice through dance with the children to explore meanings in their reactions and intentions. The classes were comprised of creative dance using frameworks of structured improvisation that introduced elements of Laban's body, effort, shape, space and relationship. The children learned set choreography in small groups and rotated among the teachers. I provided a variety of approaches that asked the children to change and manipulate the choreography to reflect their personal interests. During each class the children explored new movement ideas, learned choreography, changed the choreography and rehearsed the developing piece in preparation for their performance at the end of the two weeks. This structure heavily emphasized choice making and allowed me to listen to the children and learn about their values and social structures.

Each child expressed in his or her own way the importance of doing things the right way. They were not hesitant to ask me to clarify instructions. "Do we write the date and the question in our journal or just the answer?" They were eager to demonstrate that they knew how to do something and do it quickly. They jumped right into movement activities that they could easily translate to a literal action. I instructed them to write their name with their elbow. Their elbows all moved quickly in a small space as if they were writing their names on an imaginary piece of paper. I lead them in several mirroring activities. They were watchful and precise in following me. I was astonished as one boy rose to releve in passé, or balanced on one leg on his toes with the other leg tucked toward his torso, and balanced for a few seconds. By recognizing that the children wanted to do things properly and understanding what was familiar to them, I then

decided to challenge them toward something less familiar, to move more abstractly and spontaneously.

The informed choice making process reveals what is familiar as well as what is unfamiliar. Stepping out of one's comfort zone is a journey. On the second day of class I filled a table with simple art supplies I brought from home; magazines, nail polish, markers, doilies, glue. The children were going to use these supplies to build their ideal place. Each child threw any idea of personal space out the window as they smashed themselves against the table. They wanted to be as close to the supplies as possible. After telling them that they could use all of the materials in any way that they wanted they lunged for the table like a piñata had been broken open. Shortly after, they began chastising each other on what they could or could not do. "Yes," I would say, "you can rip the pages from the magazine, you can pour the nail polish out of the bottle, you can use the glue for something other than gluing things together." The children would pause for a slight moment to process and then return to their art project. Delving into the unfamiliar was a messy process.

As creativity became messy and unfamiliar the children looked for support and validation. They looked to each other to know if they were okay. I realized the children tended after each other as part of the social structure of the orphanage. Early on, one boy withdrew from the group as the children were dancing across the floor in pairs. I instinctually approached the remaining children and put them into a group of four and asked the boy if he would return to the larger group. He did. In another exercise the children moved across the floor leading themselves with an isolated body part. They had to change the leading body part three times. It immediately caught my attention that the pairs would often lead with the same body parts! As the children were working on their choreography I suggested to a boy that he write his name on a low level. He said, "No."

Later I saw him writing his name on a low level and found out that one of the girls asked him to do it. I pushed the children to try unfamiliar things and they found support in one another and eventually that trust in their community opened them up to new experiences.

To conduct this research, I embraced new experiences and allowed myself to step into the unknown. Many of my processes and experiences in the rehearsals following Mexico paralleled those of the children. We learned and created new material in every rehearsal similar to the experience of the children. I created approaches to patterning and changing movement that challenged us. I wanted us to explore and find new possibilities. This was very taxing! There was confusion, frustration, aggravation, anxiety and fatigue. We invested our talent and passion to draw from our life-changing experience in Mexico. Like the children I had to let go of the idea that one right way would produce the perfect outcome. Allowing myself to be “messy,” I experienced freedom in the perplexities of creation. In frustration and fatigue as well as joy and laughter, I created. I managed doubts and fears with trust in my community of support and that engendered courage and growth.

From this research my community of support grew to include the dancers who participated in the project with me. Just like with the children, as they were presented with choices to move and explore, this also gave means for expression of support and confidence in one another. During a rehearsal I was concerned whether I was making anything worth watching. We sat down to watch a recording of the dance and I waited for validation from my dancers. With a strong tone in her voice that expressed trust in my vision and encouragement in my direction one dancer said, “What do YOU think Emily?” The final piece was embedded with the sentiment of this community support. Subtle moments of looking in each other’s eyes, asking with hesitant excitement, “Are we in this

together?” In a moment of spontaneous play that followed a slumber party-like pillow fight with the fabric, one dancer turns, trips and almost falls to the floor but is quickly caught by another dancer. Moments of hand holding, weight sharing and hugs transition the dancers throughout the piece. In the last performance, nearing the end of the dance, I wanted to challenge myself as I moved down the clothesline swinging, hanging, turning and jumping. At one point I overestimated the support of the clothesline and threw myself flat on my back. All in an instant I felt the shock of what just happened, heard gasps from the audience and then I saw one of my dancers immediately respond by throwing herself down to the floor. Backstage we laughed and I exclaimed, “You really got my back!” We were in this together.

Effects of this community of support were apparent among the children. As facilitators, we were also becoming a part of that community. The children continued in their uninhibited inquisitive manner, but their questions began to change. In one exercise, I wanted the children to fully reach their limbs and travel across the entire room. As I was emphatically explaining this, one child asked, “Can I get creative and sign in a different way?” They were starting to question what possibilities existed and their agency in exploring those possibilities. The children demonstrated another change in their dialogue by becoming more communicative nonverbally. I had to keep from laughing at times when their faces would turn and look at me with a clear expression of confusion, frustration or skepticism. The children felt comfortable being open with me when they were lost. The priority of being right changed to an interest in exploring. While watching one of the recordings of the children dancing during class, we saw one of the boys fall down. He laughed and we all joined with him. He was not embarrassed or overly concerned that he had made a mistake. The children demonstrated a level of comfort and confidence in the creative learning process.

Enlightened Play

Creative learning is filled with play that encourages spontaneity and freedom from judgment. It can be cultivated to be a powerfully insightful practice. I use the term “enlightened play” as a way of identifying teaching approaches that facilitate embodied personal connections. I learned ways of shaping and fostering enlightened play through my project in Mexico and creating the new choreographic piece. Important to this practice is establishing the space, practice through pretend, and reflection.

Establishing the space is a literal and mental effort. I taught the children in the girls’ dining room. The dining room is one of the largest rooms at the orphanage and it can fit two or three long tables with chairs. Two of the walls of the room are covered with windows while the other two walls open to a courtyard and the kitchen. It is a very common area with a lot of foot traffic. As I developed my choreographic work, my inspiration was most clear and potent when I was in the dance room moving. My challenge in Mexico was to transform the dining room into that sacred dance space of inspiration.

To create a unique space for moving bodies to thrive, I established expectations of purpose and commitment. From the beginning I knew I wanted the room to be free from the distraction of other children watching the class. The madres were careful to engage the children outside of the study group in walks and activities that would curb their curiosity to try and peek through the windows. This demonstrated to the children in my class that the room was reserved specifically for them. At the beginning of the first few classes it was mayhem as I ran around setting things up, gathering children, escorting other children out of the space and stopping children from bickering. I quickly adjusted and waited in the courtyard with the children until every child was present. Together we

quietly entered the empty room and found our journals. Entering a private quiet space together with an initial task encouraged a sense of responsibility and purpose.

In our performance at ASU, the lights go out, the curtains open and the conversations of the audience quickly quiet to a hush as they focus their attention to enter the space with the performers. “Elotes!” “Tamales!” “Arroz champorado!” The stereo fills the room with the sounds of Mexican street vendors. The sound gets louder and louder as the dancers huddled together sweep their arms, legs and hips across the floor. The stereo begins to scream out the traditional street calls like the disorienting noise of a busy city marketplace. The dancers break away from each other and reach up to find the clothesline. The clothesline leads them to the edges of the stage just as three baskets full of clothes are pushed to their feet from the wings. The dancers stop. The sound stops. The space is quiet and the dancers look to one another and grab the baskets in an act of curiosity. This action changes the stage into a place of discovery and play.

The children became familiar with our routine entrance and class activities and began to respond with more freedom of choice. I saw this in moments where the children made choices outside of the frameworks I had set up. These were spontaneous decisions such as making an across the floor exercise into a race. As a mentor and teacher I wanted to build on each of these moments to highlight choice making and consequence. While the children were in their small groups working on choreography one group of three children would not stop fighting with each other. I talked to them about how their lack of focus was wasting their time to create their dance. I was working to encourage a sense of ownership and value in creativity. These are important opportunities in play where the teacher can share vision as the children discover their freedom.

I wanted to make a creative space with freedom of choice and informed consequence to cultivate a responsive state of being present. An end product in both my work with the

children and in the research following this experience was a performance. The importance of play in childhood and adulthood is emphasized in performance. It is the play and responsiveness in a work that has been rehearsed and prepared for presentation that makes the performance real. As dancers in my new choreographic work, we strengthened our confidence in how we would deal with uncertainty. The entire work was composed of set and improvisational movement, a large clothesline strung twice across the stage, three baskets, over one hundred pieces of fabric, a costume change on stage and a hand held projector with four different moments of projection. There was huge potential for unexpected and unplanned circumstances. Our play and interaction with all of these elements in that space and time from the early stages of the choreographic process cultivated a familiar connection that helped us understand purpose.

Establishing a physical and mental space helped the children gain understanding in the investigations through play. “Walk forward with me. We are strong soldiers!” I call out to the children while the music is playing. Soon we are floating around the room like balloons filled with helium. The children are smiling and enjoying this exercise of movement qualities. My mind races to think of more examples to play with. “Stop! Who’s that over there? It’s your best friend! Run to them!” I run exuberantly with my arms spread open making the children laugh until they start running wildly in different directions. “Oh! Look out! There’s a police man!” I stop and walk with a careful whistle. The children are enjoying watching my reactions and anticipating the next scenario. I want to know what kind of scenarios come to their mind. I turn the activity over to them and no one responds. We walk in a circle for a minute while I encourage and wait. Finally, I call on one girl. She is surprised and says nothing. She eventually tells me that she cannot think of anything and later she cries on the side of the room. I realize that

although the children feel safe to play it is difficult for them to know how to contribute without an understanding of the purpose of the activity.

In these creative learning environments understanding and purpose are fostered through time and practice. In the activity described earlier the children played with how they would respond physically to different roles and scenarios. They were able to engage and follow but had difficulty contributing ideas on the spot. I continued to craft movement activities that might evoke spontaneous response through movement. In a later exercise I told each child they would take turns being the teacher. By that point we had played many times with ways of manipulating and changing choreography. This activity was designed to put each child in a role of responsibility. They determined what kind of change they would make to the dance and how they would make it.

When children are given opportunity to make choice in play they are taking on responsibility in a nurturing environment. As soon as I said the words, “You will be the teacher,” the children’s eyes widened. I could almost see the equation in their heads, “teacher = control.” For some of the children this was exciting and for others it was an unwelcome role. Ernesto shot his hand up hoping to go first. He immediately started organizing the children in a new spatial arrangement and giving them the task of making a pose with a backbend in it. As the children observed Ernesto in the role of teacher they recognized that he had natural leadership skills. Later when the cues for transitions had changed and everyone was confused, the children asked Ernesto to cue them in for the transitions as they rehearsed their dance in class. In this creative environment Ernesto’s confidence in leadership was demonstrated. The children recognized how that skill could contribute to the group.

The children can learn by observing each other make choices. Jaime was the last to participate in the teacher role activity by default. Jaime said nothing as his group grew

impatient for direction. I engaged in a series of questions to encourage his decision making. “Jaime, what movement do you like in the dance?” Jaime gives no response. “Jaime, what is your favorite animal?” No response. “Jaime do you like a monkey or a lion?” Jaime tells me that he does not like either but covers his mouth with his hand to mumble that he likes “el aguila.” After I demonstrated another series of questions and movement, Jaime has added a circle where the children soar like eagles. Both Ernesto and Jaime contributed to the dance. They each demonstrated unique approaches and skills. As a teacher I tried to interact with each in a way that would support their process. As the children observed each other and participated together in the activity they had the opportunity to appreciate each individual contribution.

In this activity the children practiced their choice making skills by pretending to be the teacher. In the design of the activity they were each challenged and validated as they fulfilled this role. Each child became more informed or aware of how they make decisions and the intent of those decisions. As an artist and choreographer this is a constant question, “What is my intent?” It is a question that is revisited limitless times throughout the creative process. I started with a space, props and dancers. “What is our role as dancers? Are we ourselves? The children? Both? What is the purpose of the clothes?” Many of these questions remained unanswered throughout the majority of the creative process. A duality exists in creative play where it is not necessary to understand the intent to make a choice but in making choices a discovery of the intent can emerge.

When I began this research I wanted to explore identity with the children through dance. What makes us who we are? As the research progressed I realized that dance provides for choice and the choices we make form us. In the final choreographic work the dancers span and stretch over the floor gathering the clothes after the abrupt end to the spontaneous “pillow fight.” Each dancer holding her own basket approaches the others.

Two dancers bombard the remaining dancer with choices as if to say, “Do you like this one? This one? How about this one?” in rapid succession. Each time, the dancer rejects the cloth being offered. Two dancers carefully spread individual pieces of fabric on the floor, forming a cloth mosaic. This catches the eye of the third dancer and she makes a quick and spontaneous decision to throw herself into the mosaic of fabric swirling the clothes around her. All three dancers pick up the scattered cloth and hang it on the clothesline. They slowly weave up and through the hanging clothes examining the details and edges of the fabric. The last dancer turns and sees the long line of clothes as an irresistible opportunity. Running her hand down the line she snatches all the clothes to herself. Each moment of choice in play provides opportunity for reflection and introspection.

Reflecting on the choices we make can inform us of what options we have and do not have. The dancer who in an instant hoards all of the clothes to herself is reminded of the others and gives the clothes back. The dancers embrace and spiral away from each other to reach in their baskets and find a large vibrant cut of fabric. They lengthen it out, toss it over the line, spread it widely and become familiar with the product of their choices. These large cuts of fabric represent what they gathered, what they rejected and what they are left with. Through a process of reflecting on embodied memories the dancers emerge and retract behind this cloth in bursts of movement phrasing. The dancers take ownership of the fabric by signing their names on the surfaces each time they return to it. Ultimately they emerge having replaced their solid white dresses with colorfully patterned uniquely individual dresses. The colors of the dresses are found in the solid colored fabrics that fill their baskets. The dancers metaphorically designed their dress from the options they had.

In a special interaction I witnessed, one of the children recognized her power within the limits of her choices. Nayeli demonstrated her love for learning dance by taking every opportunity she could to learn new movement. Often when she had learned the choreography in her group she would join another group and learn their material. She had high performance expectations for herself and her classmates. When I would film the dance in class she would often call everyone's attention, "Now we are filming!" Many of the children would look to her for approval of their decisions. As I would confirm a choice with a child they would look to Nayeli and wait for her approving nod of the head. In one of our last classes she seemed unusually frustrated and withdrawn during the group activity. I asked her if everything was okay. She lowered her head, did not look me in the eye and seemed embarrassed. I kept asking her questions and finally she told me that I would not like her answer. After reassuring her that I would not be upset she shared that she did not like working with her new group. As I began to decide how I would respond one thought came strongly to my mind. "Nayeli, do you think you can still create movement you will like even though you would like to be with another group?"

In this moment of enlightened play I was asking Nayeli to understand her capabilities in creativity. She paused and lifted her head to look at me. Her demeanor had softened and she smiled. She seemed happy to understand that she still had influence over what she wanted even in undesired circumstances. Establishing the space, practice through pretend and reflection all contribute to fostering the transformative power in play. The children could discover how to be the person they wanted to be.

Divine Connection

Throughout the entirety of the project, it was natural to ponder on the project's origins and what motivated me in the development of this project. As the project began to take shape, I realized more clearly which life experiences and events had contributed

to this personal mission. This realization gave me a deep sense of the potential of the project and what I can contribute to others through this project. I have felt guided by a higher power in a purpose that I realize is bigger than my own scope and personal goals. I do not fully perceive the whole purpose, but it is evident in the people, place and power of dance experienced in the project. The higher power, or whom I refer to as God, was the catalyst for the fulfillment of this dance project. This divine connection is threaded throughout the project in intimate conversation and rich religious and cultural heritage. The divine connections seem to be most understood in culminating experiences that brought the greatest sense of individual worth.

Participating in this project brought a feeling of belonging. Gathering a group of dancers to travel with me and participate in the research project proved to be very encouraging. Roughly two and a half months before the travel date to Mexico, I approached Rebekah and Kara about the project. Within a week of asking them they both agreed to participate. After the first rehearsal with my two dancers prior to traveling to Mexico one of my dancers wrote in her journal, "I was not sure what to expect." I wondered what motivated people to be a part of this project. For one of my dancers this would be her first time traveling outside of the United States. Less than a week into our project in Mexico I had a conversation with my dancers that went like this, "So, Emily, you plan to do this every year?" "Yes, I do." "Okay, we will come back with you every year!" In a very short period of time my dancers had gone from having no connection or familiarity with the orphanage to a strong desire to stay connected and involved with the orphanage.

Discovering that our contributions to the children through dance made them happy was very gratifying. Sharing our passion for dance and seeing the joy that the children experienced strengthened our sense of belonging and purpose at the orphanage. Every

day we were asked by many of the children outside of the study group when we would teach them. No one was forced to participate in any of the dance classes that we taught in and out of the study group but every child always participated. Throughout the day in our casual moments the children would often ask to see us dance. Multiple times the children brought us small bouquets of freshly picked flowers after we finished teaching. The children insisted on carrying our equipment and helping to set up before the classes we taught. The gifts, smiles, service and interest that came from the children told me they enjoyed dancing with us.

The children were hungry for our interaction and this quickly became very overwhelming. The child-to-adult ratio at the orphanage is about 10 to 1 and there are 78 children at the orphanage. The energy of one child can often be overwhelming, but to be greeted by a large group of children who are eager to carry your things and ask you questions and give you flowers quickly becomes disorienting and frantic. As the children were holding my hands, hugging me and asking me questions I looked over at the madres with new insight. They were demonstrating new limits of human capacity to care for others. Three women care for 78 children on a daily basis. This includes caring for the emotional, physical, temporal, mental and spiritual wellbeing of each child. They have expressed that the reasons for their devotion to this service is their love of God and La Virgen de Guadalupe. The madres readily share and discuss their love for the Virgin Mary and their desire to emulate the love she demonstrated as a mother. The conviction of the madres to these higher powers gave them strength amid the demands of their mission.

The tireless efforts of serving the children through dance purified the motivation to come from love. The concert piece, “Mi Firma” highlighted this after a scene where the dancers had thrown the clothes around the room and on each other in a free form of

play. They settled to the floor supporting each other in the descent. Their bodies brushed across the floor gathering all of the fabric back into the baskets. The lights had dimmed and the music slowed. This was a scene at the cyclical nature of the never ending clean up and work that exists when caring for children. This section heavy with reflection lends the opportunity to the dancers to evaluate their intent. In so doing, we begin to see movements that highlight individual children in a way that shows the care and attention needed to recognize their strengths and characteristics. And then, in three sequential moments, we see video projection of the actual children on the long white skirts of the dancers. The audience could begin to see a glimpse of the children as the dancers knew them.

Engaging in the art form of dance focused the minds of the children and instructors and brought a clarity of perspective. We were changing and the children were changing and the madres noticed it. During the second week of the project the madres said to me in a conversation that they had seen more change in the children during the two weeks of this project than in months of seeing a therapist. There was a mutual exchange of knowledge in this process that developed respect. In teaching the children dance, we were listening to their input. We were acknowledging that they already had something to offer and that we could learn from them. The respect that we had for one another taught us about the value of each person.

These qualities of respect, belonging, selflessness, and generosity required an intense amount of time and investment to cultivate. There are a couple chapels in the different houses of the orphanage. When our morning routine permitted, we often spent time in the chapel meditating and praying in preparation for the day. This was a time for centering ourselves and focusing our minds and hearts. This time made us feel free to talk about our deep and personal feelings about our own life's journeys and the guidance

and support we had received. We each desired for the children to know that they were being looked after and loved by more people and powers than they might be aware of. Our conversations with the children were rarely on such a personal level but our actions communicated our love to them. One evening while I was busy helping the children get fitted in their costumes and take pictures and video for the performance and documentation, Kara spent five to six hours teaching another group of children a hip hop routine in preparation for a quinceañera celebration for one of the girls. This was very meaningful to the children and they wanted us to come back the following month to see them perform in their quinceañera. The children valued what we shared with them and this built our confidence.

The clothing and clothesline used in “Mi Firma” represented a duality of potential choices for the children and a continuous labor for the adults. The relationship of the dancers to these items could infer either duality. From the child’s perspective there was curiosity and play that left the clothes strewn throughout the environment. From the adult’s perspective there was a constant labor of gathering and ordering the clothes. Each relationship layers on top of the other, and eventually the dancers emerge in colorful uniquely patterned costumes having shed their white skirts. Each population gained something from the perspective of the other. Toward the end of the piece the dancers emerge from the wings and travel down the familiar path of the clothesline. This pathway had been visited many times before. This time the dancers played with the clothesline as they traveled. It was as if the adults were finding the joy and excitement exuded by the children in everyday occurrences. The children brought us flowers and we treasured the gift.

Appreciating the flowers provides metaphoric significance to appreciating the religious and cultural heritage of the children. The orphanage was founded by Madre

Olga, a catholic mother superior of the Franciscan order. She has had one successor, Madre Ines. The children attend mass multiple times a week. Many of the benefactors who spend time with the children are Catholic. One of the most prominent displays of religious faith is the picture of “La Virgen de Guadalupe” or the Virgin Mary. This specific picture is found everywhere throughout the towns and cities. It is hanging on walls in stores and restaurants, it hangs from the rearview mirror of cars, and it is worn as jewelry. The children see this image countless times a day. This image represents a profound vision received by an indigenous Mexican man in a visitation from the Virgin Mary in 1530. In this story, Juan Diego is asked by the Virgin Mary to build a chapel. When this peasant man approaches the bishop with the message the bishop asks for a sign to know it is true. The Virgin Mary tells Juan Diego to take flowers in his cloak to the bishop and she would provide the sign. When Juan Diego opens his cloak to give the flowers to the bishop they fall to the floor and on his cloak is the ubiquitous image of the Virgin Mary. This story provides meaning and symbolism of greatness coming from small things in unexpected ways.

This project developed and strengthened intuitive listening and trust in inspiration. After returning from Mexico and during the rehearsals toward the concert piece, I felt prompted to start and end our rehearsals with a prayer. We had already spent a significant amount of time together and shared a deeply impactful life experience. While in Mexico it was very natural to meditate and pray together. Discussions around faith and belief systems came easily and naturally. When we began our rehearsals back in Arizona we continued to investigate individual story and learn through enlightened play but we did not continue in open expression of our divine connections. We began to lose the full sense of trust and vulnerability we had experienced in Mexico. The luster of the project was dimming, and it began to feel simply like a lot of hard work. I was a little

hesitant to ask my dancers if they would join me in prayer during our rehearsals and I hoped to be sensitive in my invitation. I was surprised that both dancers seemed to feel relief that we were incorporating this practice back into our process. One dancer remarked, “I was just thinking that I spend so much time with these ladies but would they pray for me?” After implementing the change in our rehearsals that I felt inspired to do, our rehearsals felt supported through a group effort and we each desired success for the project.

In reflection of the process, one of the last additions that I made in the choreography was movement inspired by the act of praying. Similar to the lived realization of the importance that this divine connection played on the project, I saw how the incorporation of this symbolic movement brought cohesiveness to the whole piece. The epic moment of the piece is symbolic of the religious and cultural heritage of La Virgen de Guadalupe. The three dancers have transformed into their new costumes and lay a large white sheet on the floor. They bring their baskets full of the fabric to the white sheet. Each dancer empties her basket onto the sheet. They pray over their offering and together lift up the sheet. It is carried to the front of the stage where the sheet is carefully lifted from underneath the fabric. When the sheet is revealed to the audience a video projection of the children dancing is playing on the surface. The children were seen as a sacred and beautiful image. We had been transformed by their love and we had felt the love that God has for them.

The divine connection brought the greatest sense of individual worth. During the week of the performance, one of my dancers had a severe asthma attack that left her bedridden. We called her on the phone during our last rehearsal. I shared with my dancers what had been impressed on my mind that day. The flowers picked from the field in Mexico were the first gifts given to us by the children. Although they gave us so

much more throughout the entirety of the project it was significant to note that God has provided all of his children the ability to give offerings through this world He has created for us. The love that we felt for the children served to reassure us of the love God has for all of his children. Rebekah was encouraged by this and we all felt peace. We had found friendships with each other and our family in Mexico. Our perspectives of what encouraged relationships and lasting friendships had been shaped for the better as we felt the divine inheritance in each of us. Simply being makes you of worth.

Chapter 5: Analysis

In analyzing this research project, it is important to recognize my biases and how they shape my perspectives and motives. My previous experiences at the orphanage and with the children and nuns provided me with insights that shaped the research for the community art project. The needs of the orphans that I observed early on in the conception of the project shaped those insights. My relationship with my brother Julio and my observations of how his experiences in the orphanage impacted his life shaped my ideas of why I observed those needs in the children. My own sense of self and my social constructs gave me a way to compare and contrast my experiences with those of the children. My familiarity with the orphanage, my own family dynamics with my adopted brother, and my perspectives are the foundations for the development of the project as well as the limitations in the project.

I chose to address the perceived needs of the children through dance because of my personal value that movement and dance inherently motivate people to explore. As I saw the children embrace the idea of allowing themselves to get creative, I believe they stopped looking for a right or wrong answer. They delved into a continuous investigation of how they could explore movement. I draw this conclusion from the questions that the children would ask during our classes. For example, during a movement activity, a girl asked if she could get creative and sign her name in a different way.

The moments and ways in which the children demonstrated their joy and investment in the project provided the most valuable feedback. In the classes with the children, we would divide into small groups to work on choreography. This work included the children learning movement combinations and changing that movement within an improvisational framework. During this activity, the energy of the children would increase and they would become excited. I interpreted this excitement from the children

to mean that they enjoyed being in their intimate groups learning new movement and using their creativity to make decisions. I recognized in all of the children during the project that they were actively engaged in problem solving and had an attitude of pride for their work.

Through the creative process, the children were able to play in a nurturing environment. This conclusion reflects my feminist perspective as well as my value of creative play in dance improvisation. One of my early inquiries and intentions in developing the project was how the community that can be fostered by dance would benefit the children. Nel Noddings, an American feminist, said, “The longing for community arises from a deep need to feel a part of something larger than ourselves.” (p 65). I continue to question how my feminist perspective influenced the research project and perception of human growth. One demonstration of this perspective is the interpretation of the risks taken by the children to engage in unfamiliar activities and their willingness to exercise trust and vulnerability. I experienced a similar process in the making of “Mi Firma”. Being part of the creative process gave the dance artists, the children and myself the opportunity to figure out how to build community through respect, empathy and ingenuity.

I continue to question how the relationships between the children were affected by this project. I observed in the orphanage the tending after one another that is described in the St. Petersburg – USA Orphanage Research Team study. My project served to provide more knowledgeable individuals to interact with the children in their creative play. In these interactions, the dance artists guided the children’s explorations in discovering their own interests and developing their own characters in response to the dance frameworks. The children witnessed each other making choices and exploring personal expression. The children could observe how we as dance artists interacted with

them. This potentially provided healthy role models for interpersonal skills. The innate behavior of the children to care after one another might have been focused in a direction of supporting each other's creative explorations.

Analyzing the movement experiences with the children brings to light the limitations of those experiences due to my biases in regards to body awareness and dance training. I realize that entering into the project with the children I expected them to have difficulty with rhythmic awareness and complex movement concepts. My assumptions came from my thoughts that they had not been trained in dance the same way I had. I also made gross assumptions about what their capabilities would be given their current developmental stage. In actuality the children recognized the musical cues that supported the movement without any instruction regarding musicality. The children learned two minutes of choreography that included complex sequencing and spatial arrangements in thirty minutes. I did not expect the children to demonstrate such strong rhythmic and body awareness.

During the project with the children I took note of these unexpected movement capabilities. Since that time I have questioned what has contributed to these movement abilities in the children. My first thoughts turn to culture and the social constructs that shape our attitudes toward our bodies and movement. I have also reflected on what personal experiences and background brought me to the assumptions I had when I began the project. The project could improve by constructing curriculum that builds off of the rhythmic and body awareness that the children demonstrate. Further investigation of the contributors to the children's movement abilities would greatly inform how identity is discovered through dance.

An essential aspect of identity that surfaced in the project was how gender roles are expressed in movement. In a previous experience teaching a class of fourth graders I was

given feedback that movement with heavy weight and percussive qualities would resonate with the boys versus movement with light weight and sustained qualities. This shaped my lens on movement and gender. In working with the children in Mexico, I did not detect this same correlation. I found myself feeling very excited that the children did not limit themselves in the types of movement they explored. I am interested in understanding how social constructs shape the lens of movement and gender.

Understanding how the openness to movement was cultivated in the children in Mexico would have greatly informed the research in this project.

The structure of the classes emerged by pulling from my own experiences with dance what I believed would promote learning and growth in the children. I tried to focus on the idea of creating a living curriculum and developing my intuitive responsiveness. Some things were apparent right from the beginning, while others surfaced later on. First, I knew I had to create a space that was conducive to exploring creative movement. In my experience, this meant a simple room with open space free from distractions. After the first few classes the children, dance artists and myself developed a routine to clean and clear the room for class.

Preparing the physical space was only part of the needed preparations for class. During the second and third classes with the children, I spent a lot of time waiting for all of the children to arrive and keeping the children from bothering each other while we waited. This created a lot of chaotic energy and made for an awkward shift as we jumped in and started class. In an effort to keep the calm energy of the prepared room, I made everyone wait outside until all of the children had arrived. Without knowing it, I had given us a clear start to class as well as an opportunity to check in with each child prior to class. While we waited, we had casual conversations with the children. The pre-class discussion became part of the class ritual and might have been just as important and

impactful as the class experience. The children took that time to talk and connect with us and ask personal questions. I better understood the emotional temperament of each child because of these conversations. Taking that time to focus on the children and what they wanted to talk about helped us all start class in harmony. Before entering the room, I gave the initial instructions. This allowed us to enter the room with purpose and better focus.

Establishing this structure gave the children something familiar as they opened themselves up to this new experience. When I observed the effectiveness of creating a ritual to begin class, I implemented an end-of-class ritual as well. Other consistencies in the structure of class emerged in what might be considered a natural response. For example, as the relationships between the dance artists and children developed there was more individual interaction. We looked the children in the eyes and would talk individually with them during classes. It was very common to give hugs to the children either before or after class, or both. The development of these class structures either from necessity or as a natural response directed my reflection on what was of interest to the children. It also served to inform me of the participants' needs to engage in learning.

The products that came from this continual process of inquiry encourage me to discover "What am I not asking?" (Minarsich, 2015). If I would have made a more comprehensive canvassing of the orphanage to understand the needs that could be addressed through dance, it would have given a greater scope and depth to the research. A substantial resource for this canvassing and inquiry that was underutilized was the madres. My original thought was that I would be giving the madres more time to work on things while I was with the children. However, I was not with all 78 children and it was a lot of work for the madres to organize the gathering and transporting of the children. The madres bring a unique perspective because they are with the children daily. They are

privity to information about each child's background. The madres are connected to the cultural heritage of the children. The input from madres throughout the classes would have given greater insight into what was happening and surfacing in the project.

Key to the shaping and the evolution of this project is the practice of listening. I continue to define and interpret for myself what that practice of listening is. I did not expect that in our first interaction with the children I would recognize an approach to investigating identity through movement that was meaningful to the children. I find it important to note that prior to traveling to Mexico I had spent time with the other dance artists in dance improvisational practices. The only agenda I had in those rehearsals was to investigate themes around identity through movement so that we had personal experiences to pull from when working with the children. It is possible that these rehearsals prepared me to be able to listen and respond immediately upon meeting the children.

I aimed to listen and respond to the children as I structured each class. In my experience, I found that the process and product can support one another. The product motivates the process and the process keeps the product alive and meaningful. This constant negotiation between intent and result lends opportunities to the participant to practice intuitive listening. At one point in my post-Mexico rehearsals, I responded to an intuition that we needed a practice of prayer to start and end our rehearsals. Both of the dance artists responded positively and one said she had been wanting this change. The ability to listen might be increased with a willingness to respond.

More questions arise from my analysis of the project than answers. I am curious to know whether the practice of listening that can be cultivated in dance, listening to oneself and listening to others, is what can engender empathy in the participant. My own engagement in this practice of listening throughout the project has furthered my

understanding of my biases and how those shape my perspectives. As I have analyzed the research project I recognize opportunities for listening that could have been implemented. One such opportunity is to create an exit strategy that gives time to the participants as well as the other children at the orphanage to share and reflect upon their experiences. This could be something similar to a talk back session after a performance.

During my childhood education, I studied in a Spanish Immersion program. This experience instilled in me a desire to learn of and experience cultures outside of my own. This project demonstrates this value as I have created an opportunity for peoples from different backgrounds to work together in creative endeavors. The positive relationships that were developed between the children and the dance artists could be seen in the forms of gratitude we shared with each other such as thank you letters, gifts, hugs and expressions of hoping to be together again. I am careful to question what will happen to the participants when the project ends. On a large scale, I wonder what the global implications of this project might be. From a pedagogical standpoint I question how the learning and growth gained from the project is sustained. I have developed considerations for the project that might address these questions.

A major consideration is to investigate more fully the social implications of a group of dance artists who are relatively unfamiliar with the culture of the orphanage working together in a community arts project. One approach to this investigation could be to collaborate with artists from the community on this project. This collaboration might provide insight into the local art scene as well as provide role models for the children from their own community. Another approach is to encourage the perspectives of the males who live and work at the orphanage. I became aware of many of my biases that seemed rooted in my feminist perspective. Investigating the perspectives of the adult

males who work at the orphanage, the male children, and incorporating male dance artists can offer a more comprehensive lens on the project.

I discussed the unique connections that tied individuals to each other and to the land as stemming from a cultural and religious heritage. I used the title, “divine connections,” because of the essence of listening that is highlighted in spirituality and being connected to a larger purpose or power. I experienced a greater freedom in my own expression of faith during the project. My desire to possess and exercise unconditional love grew from the ways I was served by the children, the madres and the dance artists. These moments of service exemplified to me an eternal or divine goodness. Although I had many conversations about faith with the dance artists and the madres, my own religious practices shape my interpretation and experience of spirituality. To address this bias, it would have been helpful to have an early conversation with the dance artist participants about what brought them to the project. This insight would inform me of the origin of each person’s motives. In addition, adding the lens of the children would inform me of their beliefs or questions about life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I return to my original questions that drove this research: how can dance be used to create a transformative and empowering experience for the participant? What discoveries of identity can be made through dance? My response to these questions is that dance provides the opportunity for choice making. Becoming cognizant that identity can be shaped by the choices we make empowers us to believe in our potential outside of imposed stereotypes or circumstances we cannot control. Choice making in dance encourages trust in intuition and can provide frameworks for reflection. Dance is a constant that we can engage in.

In a conversation with the madres in Mexico they named specific children who showed a major change in attitude and demeanor after participating in the project. The madres described the children to be happier than they had ever seen them. The madres made a comparison stating that the children's participation in this project brought more positive change than months of seeing a psychologist. They described the physical countenance of the children to be more open and full of light. Teresa, one of the child participants, lacked emotional stability and was often crying or distressed in class. However, she was a natural mover and excited to dance. In a brief conversation near the end of the two weeks in Mexico, Teresa expressed in a simple but direct way that the project was meaningful to her and it made her feel good.

Creating the choreography for "Mi Firma" allowed me to continue with the investigations started in Mexico and to deepen my understanding of my personal connections to the experience. Dancing in this performance let me express my innermost feelings through my passion for dance. This project gave validity to some of the approaches I used to stimulate an understanding of identity through creativity and community. The dance experience that was fostered by the space and community gave an

opportunity for play. The structure for play that surfaced in this project emphasized the agency of the participant. As a participant in this research, I learned more about my own values and perspectives in dance and dance education.

My investigations surrounding identity were deepened through this project. I found that empowerment can come from learning how to negotiate in exploration versus focusing on doing what is “right” and avoiding what is “wrong.” This approach can engender courage through belief in our ability to respond in successful ways in unfamiliar circumstances or with unforeseen limitations. My heart is full of gratitude to have taken these steps toward developing myself as an artist and educator so that I can serve others through dance. There is something very special and inspired about formally beginning this research at my home in Mexico.

I intend to continue this research with yearly projects at the orphanage in Mexico. The Summer 2016 project will expand the creative classes that investigate identity through dance to all of the children at the orphanage. This will be possible through the development of the community of dance artists participating in the project. To bring greater validity and insight to the research, each participant will have a more active role in the shaping of the curriculum. I aim to collaborate with artists from the local community around the orphanage. I hope to yield understanding of how this research can serve the children through years of participation.

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