

UNIFYING

**Cherie Hill, MFA, and
Nancy Ng, MFA**
Luna Dance Institute, Berkeley, CA

MPACT cofounder Chantal Sampogna performs tactile exercises on son Dominic. Photo credit: LDI faculty.

Dance and Relationship Through MPACT

Moving Parents and Children Together (MPACT) is a program of Luna Dance Institute. Founded in 1992, Luna brings creativity, equity, and community to children through professional learning for educators and model programs in public schools, early childhood centers, residential centers, libraries, and at Luna Dance Studios located in Berkeley, California. The MPACT program was founded in 2001 to bring parent-child dance classes to families in the child welfare system after teaching artist and attorney Chantal Sampogna became curious if family dance could help her clients who had been separated from their children due to court mandates. With enthusiasm, Luna took on her inquiry, piloting short family dance sessions at the Alice Arts Center in Oakland, and eventually forming a partnership with the Solid Foundation founded by the late Minnie Thomas. This recovery center provided three houses for women who were in the process of reunification and a women's community center. Luna's partnership with Solid Foundation grew over many years, and MPACT expanded to incorporate other associations, including the

Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco, and the East Bay Community Recovery Services' Project Pride. Now, in its 17th year, MPACT serves residents at Magnolia Women's Recovery Program in Oakland and Hayward, and provides free classes in Berkeley and West and East Oakland libraries and community centers.

MPACT classes have proven to be beneficial for families under duress. Through MPACT, partner agencies find ways to realize their goals by integrating dance and play, as well as embodied parent education, into their programs. Classes facilitate the parent-child bond through relationship-based dance curriculum. In this article Nancy Ng, MPACT's cofounder, and Cherie Hill, dance teaching artist, share the design, approach, and practices used to develop a 17-year-old family dance program. Both authors have experience co-teaching together and training interns and other Luna faculty. Together they reflect on their common experiences, and provide examples of how practicing cultural humility and establishing trust stand at the core of partnering with community-based organizations and teacher collaboration to serve the needs of clients and the program. Ng's account explains the initial process of establishing a relationship with Luna's first residential center, and each writer provides a glimpse into how a dance program serving families within the child welfare system continues to evolve and thrive more than a decade later.

ABSTRACT

The MPACT program was founded in 2001 to bring parent-child dance classes to families in the child welfare system after teaching artist and attorney Chantal Sampogna became curious if family dance could help her clients who had been separated from their children due to court mandates. With enthusiasm, Luna Dance Institute took on her inquiry, piloting short family dance sessions at the Alice Arts Center in Oakland, and eventually forming a partnership with the Solid Foundation founded by the late Minnie Thomas. In this article Cherie Hill, dance teaching artist, and Nancy Ng, MPACT's cofounder, share the design, approach, and practices used to develop a 17-year-old family dance program.

PARTNERSHIP IN A NEW PROGRAM

By Nancy Ng

"I hope you stay with us, unlike those other do-gooders." To this day, these words echo in my ears whenever we begin a new relationship with a community-based organization. Minnie Thomas, founder of the Solid Foundation in Oakland, California, said this to me during a phone call 17 years ago. Miss Thomas (as she was referred to with respect by staff, clients, and partner agencies) passed away in 2015, and the Solid Foundation closed its doors in 2013, after providing decades of grassroots residential and transitional services for women recovering from substance abuse while reunifying

with their young children. Luna Dance Institute piloted its first series of MPACT classes at the Solid Foundation.

Dr. Mary Claire Heffron, director of the Center for the Vulnerable Child at Children's Hospital Oakland (CHO), introduced us to Miss Thomas. We had sought Dr. Heffron's advice on whom to partner with, and the CHO staff trained Luna teaching artists on child development and attachment theory. Luna offered parent-child dance classes to families through our studio, but we wondered if our relationship-building dance curriculum could benefit children and their parents in the Dependency Court System. These are families who have been separated due to abuse and neglect. While separated, the children are under the care of Child Protective Services (CPS) and reside with a foster family or family member. The parents must participate in reunification services to address the causes for the children's removal. The juvenile court oversees the children's safety and well-being, the CPS's provision of reunification services, and the parents' case plan compliance. The ultimate goal is to reunify children with their parents.

Following our training with CHO staff, we thought carefully about the structure of an MPACT dance class that

would be developmentally appropriate, and designed to enhance the parent-child relationship using the elements of dance (body, energy, space, time). We did not wish to be a "do-gooder" with a failed attempt. We agreed to begin the first session of classes as a pilot, to give Luna and the Solid Foundation the opportunity to shift the curriculum and structure based on what we were about to learn. We knew from the start we wanted the classes to be co-taught so more than one perspective could inform program development. We took our time to plan the unit of lessons; teachers wrote personal reflections following each class; and the first pilot session of classes concluded with an evaluation focus group with the parents.

Questions that we asked ourselves in the very beginning included these: How long should the class be, and what was the length of time for each section of class? Should parents and kids be dancing the entire time together? How many classes would there be in a unit? How were the teachers working together? What were we assessing—the curriculum, the teaching process, the child's learning, the parent's learning, their relationship? Who would participate in the assessment—teachers, parents, kids, social service agency



Mother Jessica copies child Dashiell's curvy shape.
Photo credit: LDI faculty.

staff? How would we assess? Would we offer incentives for participation? What communication structures were needed between the Luna MPACT coordinator and the social services staff?

We decided on weekly hourlong classes in a six-week unit co-taught by two teachers with a class size of six parent-child pairs. Each class would have breathing room for parents and kids to acclimate to the start of class and transition out of class with a snack. We felt it was important to the parent-child relationship for kids to be witnessed by their parents, so we began the class with families dancing together, and then had a “kids-only” section of class toward the end for parents to watch their children dance. During this time, one teacher facilitates the children’s dance learning and teaches the class, and the other teacher facilitates parent learning about child development and dance—sharing with the parent what they notice about their children’s dance movements and encouraging parents to share what they notice about their kids. We were very clear from the beginning that as educators we offered a parent-child dance education experience, as opposed to a dance therapy session. Although we recognized that the classes were therapeutic, we would conduct these classes through an educational lens because that was our expertise.

After launching our pilot session of classes at the Solid Foundation, we were surprised by the outcome at the parent focus group evaluation. One mother said that, because of the classes, she and her child learned to trust each other. Trust is key to parent-child bonding, and we were pleased and also astounded at this outcome after six weeks. During the years we partnered with the Solid Foundation, there were many more family success stories like this one. Just like the mother-child relationship was strengthened through trust, Luna’s relationship with the Solid Foundation developed over time into a trusting partnership. We “stayed” with the Solid Foundation as “do-gooders” continuously for 13 years, until they closed their doors in June 2013.

Key to the sustainability of MPACT are an inquiry-based curriculum, a co-teacher reflection process, careful attention to communication between Luna project staff and partner agencies, and a commitment to cultural humility. As program developers and teachers we could not assume we would be “culturally competent” in working with every agency and every family. We learned to be humble, to challenge our assumptions, and to practice critical reflection as a lifelong practice. We recognized early on that Luna needed to be the primary “holder” of MPACT, and we tried our best to communicate with an understanding of the agency’s point of view. As the holder we were responsible for staying true to the vision of MPACT, and ensuring the program continued despite the logistical and communication issues that can occur when partnering with social service agencies. There were numerous times that we would communicate with the Solid Foundation and not receive a response. There were also many times when we showed up to teach a class and they forgot to let us know it needed to be cancelled. I remember one particular time very vividly

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when I had driven 45 minutes to teach a parent-infant class with my baby to find out that all the children had chicken pox and no one could enter the facility. The Solid Foundation, like other social services agencies, served families in trauma. This meant a dance class would inevitably be cancelled when family issues arose. These issues covered a range of concerns: Several families could only pick up their Women, Infants, and Children subsidy at a certain time due to transportation considerations, or a mother who had outside privileges did not return to the center, or the majority of kids were sick with whooping cough because they had not been vaccinated, or a mother was not allowed to leave her room because she broke a house rule. As the program holder, it was our responsibility to be clear about what was needed to maintain the dance program at a high level of quality, and also to be flexible, open, and creative to work with social service staff on the challenges. This was incredibly clear to us at the last focus group we held with Solid Foundation staff before they closed their doors. A staff member thanked us for “holding” the dance program for them. She said, although their actions might have made it seem like MPACT was not a priority, it was incredibly important to the families as well as to the staff, but they could not take care of the families on a daily basis and also keep track of the dance program vision and details. She was thankful we kept the program running well and that we held it all together for them, as well as for Luna. This staff member’s appreciation and Miss Thomas’s very first comment to us solidified that, to conduct a community-based dance program with integrity, you need to hold yourself accountable to not only excellence in what you know—the dance program—but with perseverance that respects the culture of the organization you are working with and the students you are teaching.



Teaching artist Renee and child connect in a low level shape. Photo credit: LDI.

COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM

By Cherie Hill

Every MPACT class is co-taught by two teaching artists, maintaining a structure and partnership that is based in relationship. On a typical Saturday, teachers can hear families speaking an array of languages, see children ranging from newborns to 17 years of age, and teach parents and children who might or might not be biologically related. At the heart of these classes is the co-teaching relationship. Through our teaching partnership, families are given different models for performing creative movement; instructors switch between leading and assisting; and together they discuss each class through a nonjudgmental reflective process.

MPACT's class content is based in improvisation, creative dance, and parent education. At the core of our curriculum is creative dance—the art and craft of self-expression through movement. Many families who participate in our

community classes speak different languages, and because our prompts are verbal, each teacher can show how to perform a movement concept in his or her own manner. This has proven helpful for families who do not understand English or Spanish. It does not matter that they do not fully understand what we are saying; they look at our bodies for cues of what to do. Seeing two variations also helps them understand that they are not required to copy our exact movements. For example, as a lead teacher, I might model a high shape standing on my tip-toes, while my co-teacher performs a high shape that is twisted. Our dissimilarity helps families quickly catch on to the idea that there is no “right way” to do the dance, encouraging participants to create their own movements. Having two teachers also assists in modeling the relationship-based actions. For instance, the lead teaching artist might act as the “grown-up” of the pair and hold a low-level shape with numerous holes, while the other teacher plays child, traveling around, over and through her shape.

Many of our classes are filled with crawlers, waddlers, and toddlers. At this age, children are excited by their surroundings, beginning to discover speed and momentum. We do not expect them to follow all the dance ideas, but sometimes their parents do! When we plan our classes, we consider modifiers and activities that relate to all ages, pulling from our knowledge of child development. We know that the nine-month-old is not going to gallop and punch, but we can make sure to insert crawling and rolling on that child's level. As a teacher, I have repeatedly come across adults who become anxious when their child isn't doing everything as instructed. When this occurs, the co-teacher assisting can approach the family to reassure them that their child is fine and exactly where they need to be for their stage of development while the lead teacher can continue with the group. Alternatively, to calm their angst and be transparent, we might make an announcement to the entire class: "Jake is only two and he loves running, which activates his vestibular system. We know all young children need the space to run and feel free."

The MPACT curriculum continues to expand and evolve, largely due to our evaluative and reflective process. In the early stages of developing the program, artists free-wrote their class impressions, but we realized that these reflections were subjective and sometimes judgmental. In response, program founders developed a reflection survey to assess the class and support instructors with objectivity. After each class, all co-teachers complete a thorough reflection, and each year the form is assessed and adapted to suit current program needs. It is also designed to massage out and recollect all the components that occur within the class. One of my favorite focus areas asks us to comment on observations of parents in "I," "We," or "Us" space. This question nudges me to recall what might seem like a small moment when teaching, but in actuality proves to be very significant. It also cultivates inspiration, because although the class might have been difficult (e.g., parents extremely tired and lacking enthusiasm), when you remember a mother holding hands and swinging her child in circles, and the beaming look on the child's face as he or she giggles and grins with pleasure, you realize the power the connection prompt given has to entice families to bond using dance. The reflection template also asks us to identify what curriculum worked well, determine what challenges emerged or were resolved, and reflect on our co-teaching, collaborative process to continue the cycle of composing classes that are the most effective for our clients. At the end of a session we ask adults to fill out an anonymous survey that provides valuable information in regard to how the class is received. Questions asked include these: Were the services respectful of your personal background (language, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, etc.)? How much difference did the program make for you and your family? Do you feel more confident as a parent? Do you have a better understanding of your child's development (social, emotional, physical, or cognitive)?

The MPACT co-teaching relationship continues beyond the dance room and into the administrative and interper-

sonal parts of our jobs as teaching artists. There are many struggles and frustrations, victories, and humbling moments that we witness when working with families and in centers that deal with trauma. My learning through this program has influenced my teaching and relationship building in schools, our studio, and with my colleagues. The collaborative nature of MPACT has influenced me to be a stronger educator, leader, and person, taking the time to reflect and embrace collaboration even when it is not explicit.

CONCLUSION

Allowing time for MPACT to unfold and evolve as a relationship-based and inquiry-based research and design project has been key to its success. We gave ourselves time and space to explore the possibilities of parent-child dance in varied and diverse communities. Over many years, MPACT has partnered with a parenting high school program, a residential facility with a California Department of Corrections contract, fathers at early childhood centers and faith-based social service programs, community centers, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and public libraries. Teaching artists in California have studied with Luna through MPACT internships to bring family dance to their communities, and we have held two Family Dance Institutes, attended by teaching artists locally and abroad. We also conducted two research projects. The most recent study, "Engaging Families in Dance: An Investigation of Moving Parents and Children Together," conducted with lead researcher Edward Warburton, was published in 2014 in the *International Journal for Education in the Arts*.

At present, we have partnerships with Project Pride and Magnolia Women's Recovery Center (MWRC), residential centers for women in recovery; TRYBE, an early childhood agency; and public libraries in Oakland. Interestingly, MWRC's facility in Oakland is the same facility that housed the Solid Foundation families when we began in 2001—the same place Nancy stood outside with her baby when all the families had chicken pox. We know that MPACT will continue to grow if we stay committed to our focus on authentic, trusting relationships with all the dance partners: parent to child, teacher to child, teacher to parent, teacher to teacher, agency to agency, and all of us to dance.

Relationships are integral to human health, well-being, and happiness. Our survival is based on connection. Relationships are essential to our organization, and great efforts are made to build and nurture authentic connections with agencies, funders, and the community. We believe that through strong relationships, our programs will succeed beyond what we could imagine.

Address correspondence to Cherie Hill, Luna Dance Institute, 605 Addison St., Berkeley, CA 94710. E-mail: chill@lunadanceinstitute.org and Nancy Ng, Luna Dance Institute, 605 Addison St., Berkeley, CA 94710. Email: nng@lunadanceinstitute.org