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Contact Improvisation as a Force for Expressive Reciprocity With Young Children Who Don't Speak

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Abstract

Movement can be a powerful force for sensory connection and expression in young children who sometimes don't speak. Their kinaesthetic curiosity naturally experiments with—and forms spontaneous relationships through—touching, sensing, and moving-with the world around them. This article wonders what might happen if children's connective movements are invited through the speculative method of contact improvisation, not as an alternative to speech or way of interpreting meaning, but simply as a space for the transmission of forces, sensations, intimacy, and reciprocity. I consider what these shared forces or sensations of expression are that generate intimacy, joy, and reciprocity beyond words.

Background

Contact improvisation (CI) is a touch-based, relational form of dance; a dialogue of sensations and sensorial inquiry where bodies listen to each other's proposals, acquiesce, or counter-propose. CI movements are both spontaneous and intentional, inviting and responding to the other and, as such, help to amplify the connectivity and differences of bodies moving together in the world. Such movements can intensify sensation by playing with each other's forces of momentum, inertia, friction, and gravity, or a process of "exploring new and other possibilities of what a body might be and become productive of" (Taguchi et al., 2016, p. 710).

Although CI is an arts-based method, it is also an effective pedagogical practice that can explore, over a longer term, theories of sensory/movement-based learning and the implications this might have for reconceptualizing "not talking" as a positive, relational force in schools and early years settings. I do not use the term "non-verbal" since all bodies are constantly making sounds and movements of expression at different frequencies as they interact with the world, whether we can hear/see them or not. Also, several of the young children in this research verbalized fluently when relaxed and immersed in their aesthetically open movement play, which I will discuss later.

Across the globe there are up to 2.2%¹ of families whose children are often silenced or frozen by a new environment generating anxiety, such as the transition to their first school or a visit to the hospital or extended family. This research focused on six of these children, of whom four had received a diagnosis of selective mutism (SM) by the age of three, which describes the inability to speak in an unfamiliar environment. Despite a dearth of research in this field, the pathologization of SM positions it as a child-oriented problem which needs "fixing" and "normalizing" by increasing their exposure to talk-based environments. Following several years of experiencing non-speaking children speak freely when

immersed in arts-based environments, my research takes the view that *not* talking is not the/a problem for very young children and so exposure to talk is not the solution. Rather, opportunities to reduce the sensations of anxiety in the body through movements that build trust, confidence, connection, and risk-taking, all play an important role in a child's expressive being.

The strength of young children's multimodal (specifically kinetic and sensory) languages as a means of being in, and making sense of, the world prior to using words, is well documented (Hackett & Rautio, 2019; Olsson, 2009; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). For this reason, they may be more critically attuned to the sensations of anxiety which often emanate from the environment and manifest in somatic and sensorial ways. Current interventions for SM generally focus on speech goals and minimizing negative environmental impacts where possible. However, this research does not aspire to therapeutic modes of communication nor does it seek to develop talking skills in children. Rather, it has been designed to nurture generative experiences between parents and children through contact-based movement that may or *may not be understood*, and which invited moments of sensory intimacy and reciprocity that were perhaps beyond rational articulation.

This approach also aims to reconceptualize some perceptions of embodied cognition, initially coined to describe experiences that are known and made sense of by the corporeal body (Batson & Wilson, 2014). Whilst there exists an important rationale for the existence of bodily knowledge through muscle memory, genetic codes, or the intelligence of the nervous system (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011), I fear the phenomenological defence of this concept can unwittingly serve to prolong the Cartesian separation of body and mind. Thinking with posthuman practitioners, I propose instead to consider these ways of knowing as part of a whole system of relationships where biological, sensory, cognitive, incorporeal, and imaginative faculties cannot form knowledge without being in relation with each other and the molecular, life-giving forces of their environment.

Leaning on Spinoza, Hickey-Moody (2009) considers the connections between corporeality and imagination, thought, sensation, and memory as "bodily affects." Affects are "brought about through corporeal relations and the material residues of experiences that live on in human imagination. These material residues are traces of experiences past that provide points of departure, and points of reference, for future experiences" (p. 2). This reflects Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that, "the mind is the 'idea' of the body; human consciousness is a product of corporeality" (as cited in Hickey-Moody, 2009, p. 8). Since these residues, traces, and ideas are in a continual state of being and becoming, it seems unlikely that we can talk with any certainty about complete bodies of knowledge.

Indeed, the concepts of *embodied knowledge* and *understanding* can be misleading, as if the body were in a privileged position to form concrete facts about the world through its movements within and amongst it. Rather, this research demonstrates that the more a human body moves, explores, and partners with its surrounding material and virtual worlds, the more its sensory perceptors (as much limiters as enablers) become attuned to the fine details or differences, and the less it seems to *know* in relation to these contexts because it is *not in the centre* of those interactions: a human body is often subject to, not the object of, the world's interactions. That is not to reduce sensory or experiential ways of knowing the world, but to question whether *what* we might know is perhaps not as interesting or important as *how*

we might know it. Therefore, I will refer instead to “bodies of experience” where the body-mind has ways of knowing what is taking place but cannot necessarily rationalize or generalize this because, “experience remains elusive, tangential, transient and evanescent, subject to fluctuations in attention and memory” (Batson & Wilson, 2014, p. 79).

We will see how the practice of CI can unfurl these bodies of experience by inviting non-speaking young children and their parents into different ways of communing, affecting, and tuning in with each other and the material world which might make a difference to how they, and we, think about communication. I will examine this not in terms of measuring the intensities and forces of reciprocity in biological terms, that is to say, when made visible in the human body (which is the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “embodiment”), but by attending to what happens when bodies, sensations, ideas, and tiny gestures emerge through collaboration—often beneath and beyond worldly visibility. I also challenge the sense of embodiment that suggests an intelligent capacity or agency is attributable to individual bodies in the event, and instead explore a posthuman perspective where expressive bodies/matter are multiple, interdependent, and have distributed and shared agential qualities. Finally, I explore different notions of expression and attunement through contact improvisation, and ask what the implications of such might be for children who communicate differently when in the nursery or classroom setting.

Ways of Knowing Through Being-With Bodies and Materials

Over several months, six families with their three-to-five-year-old children met with me as researcher on a weekly basis, at first individually over Zoom and then face-to-face as a group, in a large art gallery space, as Covid-19 restrictions allowed. We played with different notions of reciprocal movement through contact improvisation, gradually reducing my own talk within the environment as children became familiar with me, and parents’ inhibitions about dance or concerns about their children’s responses diminished. Before and during each session, I made it clear that, even when I might ask questions, the children (and parents) were free to respond (or not) in whatever ways they wanted to, with no expectation of speech.

Unusual objects were wrapped up and sent in small suitcases to the families in advance, one to be opened in each session as a stimulus for the collaborative movement play. Objects were chosen to have the least predefined “roles” or actions attached to them (including silk scarves, feathers, bubbles, socks, sticks, ribbons, and drawing maquettes) to ensure as much openness to the somatic imagination as possible. In some cases, it still took a while to move beyond predefined expectations of how some toys, games, or play routines should move or be moved, but this became easier as trust was built in the improvisational method and ideas flowed more freely. Recorded background music was used to begin with, but, due to this causing anxiety for one of the children, improvised singing and humming became a more useful tool to ease into the movements taking place. This approach seemed less intrusive and prompted curiosity as to whether parents’ humming and singing, for instance of lullabies before any talk began, might have developed children’s familiarity and ease with that mode of music.

The fieldwork sessions encouraged movements as starting points for helping us to *listen differently* with bodies and open possibilities for attunement, intimacy, and intra-action between young children and their adults. This more speculative, in-the-moment approach, framed by an ethics of care in relation to touch-based methodologies, afforded an active resistance to some of the goal-oriented systems which can limit the blossoming of non-word-based modalities. In removing the expectations for speech and foregrounding *ways of knowing through being-with*, rather than searching for blocks of unsituated knowledge, surprising things happened. Parents discovered a deep reciprocity in this group of unrelated kin, bodies became immersed in movements never before imagined and carried on moving together outside of the sessions, families unfolded new perspectives on the tremendous capabilities of their children, and five of the six children began speaking to me after only a few sessions, even continuing after the transition from Zoom to face-to-face sessions.

In the next section, I will put the notion of reciprocity to work and consider what happens when connecting bodies become immersed together in an environment that does not resist them but holds the space for whatever might emerge.

Movement as Emergent Entanglements

In movement, bodies/matter are in a constant dance of resistance or submission to gravitational and other forces, intensities, and sensations. There is an intricate and ceaseless repositioning and corresponding of muscles, tendons, nerves, blood cells, oxygen, electrical impulses, pressure and pain receptors, chemical concoctions, enzymes, vibrating molecules, and organic matter, dancing with the spaces, gases, energies, and materials around each one.

More than building a set of muscular, locomotion, proprioception, and sensory-motor skills, contact improvisation takes dance beyond a performative thinking-in-action (Batson & Wilson, 2014, p. 37) towards a less predefined, more emergent way of being entangled together as “collective assemblages of desire” (Olsson, 2009, p. xxiii). Sheets-Johnstone (2011) proposes that, “thinking in movement is not an assemblage of discrete actions happening one after the next, but an enfolding of all movement into a perpetually moving present” (p. 425). But this still revolves around the nexus of the human body as if, by tuning in to our somatic senses in constant motion, we have a “perceptual system by which [we] are literally in touch with the environment” (Paterson, 2009, p. 768). This carries an inuendo of independent control or agency, with a clear separation between the human body and the world around them. However, CI is a method that attempts to go beyond the “skin as container” in the search for more-than-human connections, or assemblages, where we “describe and analyse sensory experience in ways that do not begin and end with experience as organized by an autonomous human subject” (Ash & Gallacher, 2015, p. 1).

Manning (2016) extends this space for assemblage beyond the corporeal in her intra-agential concept of *thinking-with movement*—opening up to other possibilities by noticing the differences and potentiality of bodies (as in, matter). This is movement as a more complex, distributed encounter where “experience is in the tense of life-living, not human life per se, but the more-than human life: life at the interstices of

experience in the ecology of practices" (p. 3). Manning refers to this ecology of practices as "not straining toward homogeneity but toward a bringing-into-relation of difference" (p. 234), which more closely expresses the aims of this project.

By its ecology of practice as a *living body of experience*, contact improvisation, as employed in this project, therefore becomes effectively situated prior to meaning, based as it is in sensorial ways of knowing that can be experienced but not articulated. Furthermore, this living body of experience, by its very nature of existing momentarily, may even be enough in itself, not needing to be interpreted, understood, or valued by a cultural signifier. As MacLure (2013a) explains (with reference to Barthes), "the West moistens everything with meaning" so that, "difference chance and alterity struggle to free themselves from the clammy coating of causes and effects, reasons and hierarchy applied by Western rationality" (p. 169). Unfortunately, and especially in the world of early childhood, humans are so drenched in, and driven towards, the golden chalice of meaning, that it is hard to let go of the need to stabilize an experience, of wondering how to do it "right" or why it does or doesn't "work." This is a fundamental tension in much embodiment research—attempting to analyze the sensational in order for something to be understood, validated, and perhaps repeatable (ironically, just as I am doing in this paper), rather than allowing the experience to emerge and disappear without remark. It creates even greater urgency for a speculative praxis, to open up possibilities through the suspension of certainty, albeit for a small window of space and time whilst we hold back the imposing, oppressive, imperialist search for meaning.

Holding this tension in view, my participants bring their bodies as a starting point in order to play without words. We begin playing with small movements, materials, and spaces that, at first, allow a deeper attunement to the body. Not in terms of mastering a certain skillset or discipline for performative action, but in terms of *tuning out* from the verbal, language-based modes that dominate western ways of being and thinking. Movement alongside each other also introduces many levels of playing-with that are highly productive of communication, "offering a counter to the dominant advice in early years pedagogy that adults should work to engage young children in direct eye contact in order to encourage them to speak" (Hackett et al., 2020, p. 12). It takes a long time to get used to not talking and describing movement kinaesthetically with young children but, as this becomes more familiar, parents begin to play-with, observe, and experience interactions between all the bodies/matter involved in touching/not touching each other. For adults who have not danced playfully since they were young children, this can feel quite unfamiliar territory. It requires time to build trust in the method, the space, the researcher, the research purpose, and our own bodies, and to let go of performative expectations on ourselves or others. I will now turn to thinking about how such sensory connection leads to reciprocity through an affective charge which can be triggered or switched off with each touch, and which seems to be more accessible through in-the-moment improvisation.

Contact Improvisation Creating Possibilities for Reciprocity, Care and Intimacy

CI is a particularly interesting speculative method since the touch cocreated between participating bodies not only evokes a “specifically powerful sensorial experience,” but also an “affective charge that makes it a good notion to think about the ambivalences of caring” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 98). By “ambivalences,” Puig de la Bellacasa indicates that physical touch does not necessarily mean being *in touch* with one another. This implicates a level of responsibility and care when including touch-based movements with children (or anyone) who may not enjoy tactility or find that it triggers sensations (or memories of sensations) that cause discomfort. From an ethical perspective it requires us to be in touch with the possibilities and tensions of touch before they are touched upon. So, from that point of view, this speculative research is never entirely unanticipated, nor is access to the research field made entirely equitable. But this is an important consideration since, whilst other senses that are also an important part of the process of being *in touch* can be dialed down or switched off (such as vision, proprioception, or thermoception), physical touch exists all the time and not just on a physical level.

CI offers a unique mechanism for touch to go beyond the skin-sack and correspond with feelings. To touch in motion requires at least some of our intermittently animated senses to be triggered, perhaps more intensely than in static situations, in order for bodies to remain open, for imaginations to become animated and curiosities reciprocated. An affective charge is a trigger that sparks a body closer towards its potential or *what a body can do* (Massumi, 2005) and feelings are “the registration of intensive affect; they are the effects of affect” (Olsson, 2009, p. 77). Cocreated movement awakens this affective charge and leads to a deeper immersion in the presence of the other, to care about what matters or to be more *in touch*. Also, touch is always relational—to touch is to be touched (referred to as the *reversibility* of touch)—which is a kind of autonomic reciprocity. To this end, Castenada (as cited in Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) argues that the experience of touch “cannot be detached from its embodiment,” but neither is it “reducible to the body itself” (p. 113). The skin, as an active living surface, “becomes a site of possibility” (p. 113), perhaps because of how touch awakens the reciprocity of bodies.

Whilst dance can remain quite a formulaic technique, the use of improvisation in connecting bodies can create imaginative and aesthetic qualities in the moment, which generate a kind of affective reciprocity because one cannot anticipate the movements of the other or their impact on one’s own body. These are forceful sensations which Shotter (2012) suggests are

[. . .] events that we cannot deliberately set out to cause to happen but that happen spontaneously to us and amongst us as a result of our inextricable immersion in a particular flow of energy occurring around us and in our surroundings. (p. 2)

To create possibility for these encounters to happen, Shotter describes how we might relinquish the “whatness” of an event whose objective is “‘formulated’—in an already shared language—as a ‘problem’ within an existing system of conceptual terms” (p. 2). In doing so, space is opened for a new, less certain experience of “withness,” where bodies’ first language of the senses can be attended to. But not in a way that requires *interpretation* into words because experiential knowledge comes from moving with, and

being moved by, sensations moment by moment, all the while resisting the fear of not knowing *what* they represent. Contemporary dance as an art form can open such a space but is not always accessible as a performative event where observers see/feel/sense the experiences of the dancer(s) from a passive distance, whereas the collaborative intimacy of small, relational dances in CI honours the present, situated, and contextual experiences of all the bodies involved.

Indeed, Deleuze et al. (1994) argue that, “art is the language of sensations” (p. 176), and that immersive art experiences contain *percepts*—“a tiny fragment of the world imagined through an artwork” (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p. 2) and *affects*—“the sense or feeling that is enmeshed within the materiality of the artwork” (p. 2). Through this, an artwork can offer “blocs of sensations,” or unique ways of feeling that reflect the worldviews and sensory landscape of the bodies involved and enables these bodies to relate to the artwork as it calls to their perspectives, histories, feelings, lived experiences, and perceptions. The subjective qualities of this affective charge are perhaps augmented by contact dance in ways that are not so apparent in other forms of interaction, partly because of the shared intimacy that can be created between touching bodies, and partly because of the ways in which dance opens bodies up to experiences that are as yet intangible and unknown (Hickey-Moody, 2009; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

By resisting a traditionally defined method and language (Manning, 2016) and refusing adherence to predetermined rules and expectations, it is this speculative nature of contact improvisation which attunes to potential (or the “more-than”) in the other. In this act of tuning in, a space opens up for being *in touch* with, affected by, and open to spontaneous, unanticipated possibilities that deviate from the rules and lead to being cocreative in the moment.

In order to tune into more unique, sensorial ways of knowing and augment the unfolding of witness-thinking, Shotter (2012) offers three considerations:

- *Overcoming the cartesian anxiety* [of knowing completely] – we must learn to think *partially* while still in the midst of *uncertainty* as a way of feeling one’s way forward in the present moment.
- *Repositioning ourselves as ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside’ thinkers*: we need to position ourselves not as subjects regarding an objective, external world, but as participants *within* or *inside* the boundary zone between the subject/object split...
- *The agency of our surroundings*: the flow of activity within which we are currently at work, is also at work on and in us; we are not just *in* the world, we are *of* it. (p. 5)

These considerations strike me as being at the heart of contact improvisation where every moment is unique and made more so by the immersion of the mindful body into the sensations of each moment, countering the “psychologist’s fallacy,” that humans can stand outside of, and objectively know/describe, their experiences as a singular reality. Improvisation in the fieldwork sessions offered possibilities for rehearsing this immersive participation and collaboration in increasingly attuned ways. We became accustomed to how our sensory inquiries and responses, our ways of knowing without words, came to feel in the body—the ways in which muscles, nerves, skin, heartbeats, and subconscious desires were positioned ready to interact and be interacted with. It was a space for building sensory anchors with which to remain inside the experience, each time for a little longer or deeper as relationships grew.

In what follows, I will explore how the unknowns of improvisation become the strongest anchor points for affective reciprocity by introducing different ways of listening.

Improvisation as an Act of Protest by Listening Differently

Attuning to sensational interactions like this is a form of political activism because, by listening to the multiple identities of bodies—human and nonhuman—without words, we resist the partial definition, reduction, and representation that can dominate early childhood environments (Hackett & Rautio, 2019; Olsson, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2016). Through such moments of sensory intimacy, flow, and mutuality, contact dance reaches beyond the pathological lexicon, unfastening the binary assumptions, fixed expectations, and represented judgments, that are tightly held in word-based languages.

As a practice rather than a performance, this improvisational approach offers *pedagogies of attunement*—ways of *listening differently* to the tiny moments of connection and intimacy. It opens spaces for perspectives that are irreducible to faulty biological parts—an antidote to the oppressions of colonized practices. These are spaces to notice what Manning (2016) terms, the precarious, “nuanced rhythms of the minor” (p. 1); gestures which emerge from deep in the gut to just under the skin (Ellingson, 2017; MacLure, 2013b). Minor gestures are almost unnoticeable to the human eye, evident in goosebumps, a tiny trace of sweat on the forehead, the mouth going dry, the gut sickening, the increased heart rate, the unsolicited flickering of an eyelid, the dilation of pupils, the raising of body temperature, or the twitch of a finger. Yet, these are the small dances of correspondence shared between bodies which are otherwise frozen or invisible in unfamiliar settings. In my view, the dominant mode of spoken language can never represent the full measure of bodies, always living as it does *behind* the veil of sensation—an interpretation of what is taking place in one particular time and space; a *representation of life*.

To illustrate the power of listening differently, I introduce a four-year-old child from this study who hides her head and face in her hands whenever the conversation turns towards her but whose body cannot stop itself from jumping over the furniture and running in and out of the camera shot during our Zoom-based sessions. In our first face-to-face session in an art gallery, this little girl watched the other children exploring movements with their parents. Being there with new people in this unfamiliar space, seemed to generate discomfort and an irresistible desire to run around the parameters of the art gallery, accompanied by high-pitched screeching sounds that were released with little jumps. More than a proprioceptive mapping of the space, this was a protest against passive body methods or spaces for talk and, as she ran, her face began to open wide with joy, looking at me full on to share the sensations buzzing all over her body.

Whilst other bodies found ways of hopping, spinning, rolling, crawling, flying, snaking, pushing, or pulling each other along the floor, this little girl remained focused on jumping. She invited her mum to lift her up by the hands, so she could jump even higher, often climbing up on her mum’s knees and thighs to jump off. The sense of movement through the air was so important to this girl whose body felt compelled to expression beyond the bounds of her small stature and the words she could not say, and above the spaces occupied by other bodies. In that busy silence, I listened to her body and began to

unwind balls of wool, wrapping them around the various structures in the room to create a giant 3D web. Without hesitation, our little girl jumped in and out of the lines of wool, enjoying the feeling of entangling and disentangling herself and jumping free.

Rather than try to counter this with a request for calm amongst the webby mess, her mum joined in with the winding and unwinding, understanding that the sensation of liberation was important for her daughter and, therefore, for her. Their bodies were tuned into the sensations brought about by this spontaneous movement, and a reciprocity of limbs, looks, and intentions followed that kept them deeply connected to each other. By the end of this session, the girl quietly but confidently walked around the space, touching my arm to show me things and helping me clear up all the materials we had used. These body-listening sessions became an important space for the efficacy of expressive forces, ideas, correspondences, and sensations to emerge and for identities to become repositioned and recognized.

Expression not of *Who We Are* as Individuals but *How We Are* Collectively

According to Massumi (cited in Hackett et al., 2020), “Expression does not come from ‘inside’ us. Rather, to speak is always to be part of an event that exceeds, and precedes, our own consciousness and intentionality, in which forces strike the body and spark sensations” (p. 4). For the little girl above, finding the right spaces for such forces to move, even explode, seemed to “restore some of the ‘sense of life’ that animates language, in which language moves through and across bodies as a collectively-felt force” (p. 8) even when it cannot be articulated in speech.

In our case, these body languages and this “sense of life” are akin to what Massumi (2005) calls “the force of expression” (p.xvii), which is not so much a tangible, outward demonstration of what is felt inside but more of an event marking the changes happening inside the body as forces are transported through it. Perhaps this is a series of electrical, nerve, chemical, and sensorial exchanges that feed from (and to) the forces in and around the body in proportion to the changes in the molecular structure of sonic, visual, olfactory, and haptic registers in the air around us. If this is the case, then this radically alters any perception that a child is in control of, or responsible for, their talk (or lack thereof), which has important implications for how early educators consider their curricular goals. Hackett et al.’s (2020) research concludes that, in none of these situations

[. . .] is the unfolding action under the control or agency of any individual (adult or child), but rather, the ways in which adults and children are moved by a more-than-human milieu, caught up in something bigger than themselves, and how this affects how bodies feel and relate to each other, is what is at stake here. (p. 14)

This happens again during a session with another of my research children, also four years old, getting caught up in the playfulness of climbing over and rolling under her mum who is on her hands and knees. After discovering her arms and legs are not long enough to reach the floor, the child wriggles harder in order to propel herself forward, over her mum’s back. In an assemblage of flailing arms and legs, twisting of clothing, thrashing of hair, and bumping and jiggling from mum’s back to try to help move the little

body round, there is an eruption of giggles and shakes as the two bodies become entangled in a fight against gravity. Tentatively balancing on a single hand, mum puts out the other arm to help the child cling to her upside-down podium as she crawls round and under mum's tummy. Within a moment, the child's weight pulls towards the floor and mum catches and cradles her in both arms, sitting back on her heels to balance as she does so. Child is rolled up in mum's arms, brought close to mum's face, kisses exchanged amidst the laughter, and hair stroked back into place again. The child's limbs unroll themselves, eager to climb up and over mum's back once again, ignoring attempts to adjust clothing, and expressing sensations of joy and enjoyment in the intimacy and challenge of the game. In this short, 30-second episode, so many sensory possibilities are triggered through improvised contact that might never have been experienced through words.

Sensorial correspondence happens at a deep level, through tactile tremors traveling through parts of bodies that only close kin may have access to, sensations of weight, balance and coordination with resistant forces, a trust in the strength and movement of the other, and a sense of possibility and desire to risk the unknown. Feelings, visuals, and sounds are reciprocated and contagious (such as wide eyes and giggles), extended by connection and vibration through the skeletal structure, through chemical reaction, and through shared "sensory tropes" (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p. 2) that emerge through the entanglements, which seem to hold a deeply shared correspondence, or knowing, without words. These are examples of what Spinoza referred to as "affectus," the capacity to simultaneously affect and be affected which, when activated, "gives rise to collective experimenting, intensity and unpredictability" (Olsson, 2009, p. xxiii) and seems to increase in intensity in proportion to attunement.

According to Ash and Gallacher (2015), attunement, defined as "the capacity to sense, amplify and attend to difference" (p. 73), is an ideal methodology for embodiment research, inextricably linked as it is with affect. Tuning-in isn't about simply reading bodies, feelings, or atmospheres, but about inviting and reciprocating them—a way of sensitising oneself to the other. As such, "attunements are not just individual or psychological states of mind, but are also shared and collective" (p. 71). Manning (2013) describes this affective attunement as "an open field of differentiation out of which a singularity of feeling emerges and merges. A tuning not of content but of expression-with" (p. 11), namely, a collective relationship between matter, whether material, human, nonhuman, virtual, or imaginary. The closer the kin, it seems, the deeper the possibilities for attunement and affective transmission.

The cocreated, attuned presence that emerged during our fieldwork sessions challenged the notion of agency being attributable to a single being or action, and strengthened the intention to move away from taxonomies of singular embodied cognition towards manifold embodied experience. As Manning (2016) articulates, "Artful practices honor complex forms of knowing and are collective not because they are operated upon by several people, but because they make apparent, in the way they come to a problem, that knowledge at its core is collective" (p. 13).

Conclusion

Opportunities for attuned attention afford a richer perspective on the connections between the material, sensory, physical, and imaginary capacities of matter and the generative disturbances caused by collaborative bodies which go beyond cognitive or rational thinking. It opens bodies up to the experiences of being multiple, rather than singular beings, that can share expression and ways of knowing in communion. It is essentially a practice of tuning into the life-giving expressions, intensities, and contagions of this animate world and playing speculatively with that animacy (in our case through CI), in the knowledge that, “All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you” (Butler & Jemisin, 2019). The aesthetic openness of the new imaginaries afforded through CI encounters are essentially the condition for this reciprocity, and for change, to happen, since “blocs of sensations are the language with which art speaks” [. . .] they are “vectors of the forces that these bodies produce. They establish new economies of relation through which bodies... can be known” (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p. 2).

As an antidote to the pathologized spaces of reduction with which many of these families are familiar, speculative movement allows us to occupy the in-between spaces that are still full of collective possibility and capability. Contact improvisation is a powerful pedagogical strategy for early educators in building connections, confidence, and a raft of body-listening and sensory skills, providing a much-needed counter to resist the reductive tropes around communication, language, and disability. This strikes me as being important for all children since,

[. . .] in a politics attuned to emergent difference, we must begin instead in the midst, where force has not yet turned to form. In this middle, where the event is still welling, there is potential for new diagrams of life-living to be drawn. (Manning, 2016, p. 15)

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Note

1. See Appendix of <http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/info-multi-lingualism-and-sm/>

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