

To Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund  
19<sup>th</sup> October '07

Dear LUTSF

Thank you for the generous grant of £700.00 which enabled me to undertake 'The Children's Skinner releasing teacher training' - a 6 weeks program at Washington University, Seattle, USA, 16<sup>th</sup> July to 24<sup>th</sup> August.

The purpose of my studies was to

- Learn how the adult's skinner releasing program is adapted to facilitate sensory and creative movement experiences for the early years: explorations for parents and children (toddlers) and children aged 4-5 years.
- To participate in seminars, observations, assisted delivery and solo delivery
- And to re immerse in the ongoing skinner classes for my own personal processing.

Highlights for me were comparing the similarities and differences in the children's and adult's programs. The resulting reflections and questions are enriching and have given me a greater insight into the Skinner Releasing approach. The whole experience has activated my own personal process of enquiry in terms of application and development of this pedagogy.

One of the most invaluable aspects of preparation was in fact writing the application grants for both the LUTSF and The Arts Council – both of which I was successful in being awarded. The time I invested was a vital part of my self-reflection – as a refining and galvanizing process it helped me shift my focus in readiness for a learning adventure in the midst of a busy delivery period. Asking for testimonies allowed me to sense the quality of the landscape I'd been cultivating over the years and why the current explorations were so "in time" with certain aspects of my aspirations. It is so easy to miss the things we do the most naturally. So, ask colleagues and friends for feed back, and enjoy receiving the mini or mighty testimonies that return to you!

In terms of sharing the information, I can offer the gems of this program / approach on many levels:

- Teaching – mainstream and community – I am currently working in Arboretum Nursery over several terms offering the Children's SRT and will setting be setting up a parent and child class in Nottingham in'08
- Training/Courses as in inset and professional development programmes – Dance 4 Nottingham, Falling Wide, Breathing Space London have expressed interest.
- I would like to write an article, as I am currently one of the few people trained in both the adult and children's work.
- Through my current practice in the work I do in education and health service - one cannot help integrating SRT as an ongoing approach to life.

Once again many thank for your invaluable support.

With much appreciation

Usha Mahenthiralingam

## **Report to the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund**

By Usha Mahenthiralingam 19/10/07

### **Project Description**

The course 16<sup>th</sup> July- 24<sup>th</sup> August - Washington University, Seattle, USA.

The Opportunity to Specialize in the Skinner Releasing pedagogy for children offered me a unique training in early years creative movement.

The Children's Teacher Certification Program involved six intensive weeks of study and experience with teaching an adaptation of the Skinner Releasing Technique to children. The training focused primarily on young children and the parent/toddler program.

Jodi Blackburn and Sally Metcalf two highly skilled faculty members have developed the children's work since the 70's and designed this, as a first training opportunity in collaboration with Joan Skinner "SRT for children is a remarkably rich pedagogy of creative movement experience for children. Creative movement assists children with the development of the brain as well as the body. Research has shown that children with aesthetic and kinesthetic experience improve their academic performance across the board including in math and language. We find that our work cultivates the child's natural proclivity for intense focus and creative problem solving. Children are HUNGRY for this kind of experience."

Sally Metcalf senior Skinner Releasing faculty

We had a tightly structured week - 9.30am - 4.30/5.00pm covering the following

- In-class observation of experienced children's teachers
- Seminars on class planning, theory, pedagogy, music and teaching technique.
- Readings and discussions.
- Classroom experience as assistants to teachers and practice teaching
- Ongoing Level Releasing classes designed for the teachers in training

Over the course of the six weeks we studied with three groups: a parent and child group and two nursery groups. The diversity of the groups themselves gave us breathe of insight into applying this approach in different ways. Each group brought with it a characteristic of it's own and it was invaluable to see how the classes were shaped in response to those differences. The Hutchinson Hall, part of the Drama faculty of Washington University provided an expansive space of luxurious dimensions to hold such a process.

## Benefits and Outcomes

### *The challenges and rewards of being "a first"*

It was the first time a training of this kind had been offered since the 70's, and in many ways the faculty was piloting an approach in terms of finding a model of delivery. The original course would have been delivered over a 10 week period and on an apprenticeship basis. The faculty made a sterling attempt to deliver our course in six.

The course was challenged both 'climatically' and structurally. We were small group of students and at the mercy of life changing events. Initially 4, then down to 3, we were a delicate little ecosystem – the absence of any one member had a dramatic effect on the whole (there were two bereavements experienced during the course). Structurally, the faculty had not anticipated opening its places to students who had not completed the Adults training, this brought its own dilemmas.

Key feedback from myself was that a different model and structure would be needed for students who did not have the experience of the Adults training – without such a foundation, the course itself and the students found themselves challenged. Much has been learnt as a consequence of putting out there "a first model" and I sense the experience has brought the faculty to review how it may present future trainings.

The rewards were the achievement of launching a first sharing of the children's pedagogy. For my part it was a fascinating process that dovetails into certain aspects of the creative learning research I have been involved in over the past few years in my own practice.

### *A Record*

As an avid documenter (in my professional capacity as a mixed media and movement artist) I sought permission to photograph the classes. Being sensitive to the process, I tracked as much of the 6 weeks as I could.

This was a contribution I could offer to the faculty both as a learning and archiving tool and for first time the practice of the children's SRT was able to be recorded.

## Unexpected Outcomes

### *Process supporting everyday life*

I did not expect a dear friend (whom I have known since the age of 11 years old) to die of sudden heart attack tragically leaving behind her 16-year-old daughter. Such news is shocking and turns one's world upside down especially when you are so far from home. Just over half way through the course I returned to England to attend the funeral and be present for my god daughter.

What I found unexpected during this time was just how supportive the Ongoing Skinner Releasing Classes (part of the adults pedagogy which we took twice a week) was in helping me process this personal bereavement. From a wordless place, it helped me reconnect with myself and my experience of loss within life's bigger picture, it supported me "be with" and integrate some part of the "unexpected" over those days in a particular way I am grateful for. For me, this was a testimony of how SRT can infuse on so many levels, weave in both practical and profound ways – its gift is its approach. It informs on so much more than one's movement experiences and development, there is something in the space it offers between inner and outer worlds that is holistic and creative and regenerative.

### *Similarities and differences*

In the children's skinner releasing the biggest difference is in approach to time spent in the floor and use of imagery. Young children do not have the capacity to respond to the abstract. The Children's SRT focuses on developing a dictionary of movement vocabulary through direct experiences often demonstrated through objects that embody the kinaesthetic essence of the movement. Sensory experiences further facilitate both qualities of movement and begin to plant seeds to support the imaginative realm, whilst time in the floor (rag doll) to begin to support the capacity for stillness and restfulness. Through a process of evolving transitions receptive states are cultivated in readiness for "mini" guided explorations.

I have found both approaches have informed the other and I am looking forward to evolving the adult's work (where appropriate) having been inspired by the children's.

## Sharing and dissemination

- Teaching – education: Arboretum Nursery Nottingham
- Community - set up parent and child classes in Nottingham in 2008 (in partnership with Sure Start)
- Training / Courses as in inset and professional development programmes – Dance 4 Nottingham, Falling Wide, Breathing Space London have expressed interest in developing links.
- I would like to write an article, as I am currently one of the few people trained in both the SRT adult's and children's program.
- Through my current practice in the work I do in education and health service - one cannot help integrating SRT as an approach to life.

## Currently

Between 2003 and 2005, as part of a Creative Partnership program, I developed a multi-functional space to support creative learning experiences. The space hosted installations, exhibitions, drama, dance/movement, story-telling and music events for, and with, the pupils of the Arboretum Nursery in Nottingham.

2 years on and the Nursery has developed the space with capacity for lighting and projection effects. This provides a host of opportunities to not only hold but develop the children's skinner program in terms of offering "total environments" and sensory worlds to compliment and enhance the pedagogy.

I have been invited to share the fruits of my summer's enquiry with their staff and pupils and develop it in a residency spanning 3 terms.

I am delighted to return to such a progressive Nursery, we are already enjoying the progression of classes and the responses

of the children as they develop with the pedagogy. Staff have commented on the children's readiness and enjoyment of restful and relaxed states ... quite something for 3+4 year olds! I also want to set up a parent and child group to embed my own practice in this specialized area in partnership with Sure Start. Once I have completed these two residencies I look forward to disseminating my findings and the richness of this pedagogy across more extensive fields within the early years settings.

Once again many thanks for the support you have given.

With gratitude

Usha Mahenthiralingam, Mixed media and movement artist