
The Importance of a Large Movement Vocabulary: Reflections on the Sense of Self-Movement

~ Lani Hill

With observations from the author's classroom. The students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Rudolf Steiner's view of the twelve senses is a radical and profound examination of the phenomenon of human perception. The fascinating complexity of the interrelatedness of the twelve senses could be a life-long study. Of the four foundational or will senses, self-movement, touch, balance and life (well-being), I have come, through both research and observation, to consider self-movement to be perhaps the most basic sense.

The nerves responsible for both producing actual movement and for the perception of it are the first to become myelinated in utero. Our survival depends on our ability to move and to perceive ourselves moving: to eat, to breathe, to communicate and to relate to others. Life is movement, and only in death is there complete stillness. While healthy movement development was once common in young children on the whole, for some years now early childhood teachers have been seeing increasing numbers of children with hindrances and disturbances of this vital sense.

The sense of self-movement gives us the internal feedback regarding the level of effort being produced by the muscles, whether the muscles are shortening or lengthening, that is, overcoming or going toward the direction of gravity; and also the position of the limbs and angles of the joints. Different neuromuscular excitation patterns, which involve the number and pattern of nerve fiber stimulations in muscle fibers, give different sensations. As Edmond Schoorel writes in *The First Seven Years*, "We cannot separate the sense of movement from the actual movement, because the sense of movement does not perceive anything when there is no movement."

*"When movements
and the sense of
movement are well-
developed, the sense
of freedom will
arise as a capacity
of the soul."*

*- Edmund Schoorel,
The First Seven Years*

Young children must learn through trial, error and exploration, ideally through play, what degree of effort and precisely what joint angles are optimal for the various skills and tasks they encounter, be they stirring dough, hammering, picking up a baby chick, jumping rope, or stomping in the snow. They must also learn to integrate their movement sense with the other senses such as balance and touch. I have come to refer to this process as "building the movement vocabulary." It is especially interesting to think in terms of "vocabulary" since, in Rudolf Steiner's view, the sense of self-movement is closely linked

to the sense of language—one of the higher senses described by Steiner. It's easy to see this link whenever one observes someone gesturing while talking (even on the phone!). I have often thought how amazing it would be if parents and educators were as concerned about children building a solid movement vocabulary as they are about their linguistic vocabulary. There is concern if Jimmy is five and has not yet mastered basic grammar, syntax and verb conjugation, but how about mastering running, stopping, gesturing and jumping with appropriate effort and spatial awareness?

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Remy "floated" around the classroom, visiting the play scenarios of others briefly, but seldom interacted with the other children. She hung on the fringe of whatever activity was happening. Outdoors, she continued to float lightly around the playground, hovering close to me until I invited her to move a small wheelbarrow filled with sand, alongside me with my big one. She took hold of the handles and, beginning to lift, suddenly dropped them, a look of shock and surprise on her face. The sensation was interesting enough that she was curious to try it again. It seems that the perception of engaging many muscle fibers

firing at once in order to lift a heavy object was a new experience for her. She eventually succeeded in mustering the necessary force to lift the handles and propel the wheelbarrow, but had to stop to rest several times along the way. Her triumphant, beaming smile at her own accomplishment was a delight to witness. Over the next few weeks she branched out to some other brand-new experiences such as walking the stump circle, at first tentatively and with help, then finally alone with confidence. Not long afterwards she embarked on the process of mastering the rope swing. As her physical prowess grew, so did her social skills and her general engagement with the life of the class. By the time a new, friendly, girl arrived in the class, Remy was ready to play.

In the early 1980's I was involved in a research project in the field of Movement Behavior that, although small in size and not terribly momentous, has influenced the way I look at movement in adults and children to this day.

The study's hypothesis was that people who ranked high in scores of self-actualization as described by psychologist Abraham Maslow would also have high levels of capability in a wide range of movement qualities. In other words, the subjects who were well-rounded and well-developed human beings would also have at their disposal a wide variety of physical adaptations and responses. To test the movement aspects, we asked the subjects to perform tasks ranging from pretending to push a piano to carrying a tray full of feathers. They also had to flick water off their hands and do very light, airy movements as well as strong, precise actions. There were several others that I can no longer remember, but the point is that we did discover a strong correlation between high levels of self-actualization and a broad movement vocabulary.

Willi Aeppli, in *The Care and Development of the Human Senses*, cites Steiner as saying: "That [you can] experience yourself as a free soul is due to the radiation of the sense of movement, that is, the raying of the muscular contractions and extensions into your soul" (p. 47). That is certainly something to ponder as we work with the incarnating child. The healthy development of this essential sense has a huge and long-lasting impact on the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing of these future adults. Aeppli continues, "Today's children have

to be furnished with quite different forces than hitherto, so that as adults they not only strengthen the life of civilization that has progressed further, but that they can master it" (ibid.). That's quite a call to us as early childhood educators, especially given the conditions we humans have created for today's children to inherit.

The mixed-age class ventured out of the playground gate for the first forest walk of the school year. While most of the children gleefully careened or rolled down the big hill that dropped away in front of us, Isa stood frozen in her tracks, eyes wide at the sight of the steep slope. After much hand-holding and reassurance, she made it to the bottom and even agreed to try it again a couple of times, holding tightly to the teacher's hand. A bit further on into the walk another small slope had her stuck again, this time whimpering "help, help." Although she was six years old and quite tall, Isa's apartment-living, sidewalk-traversing lifestyle apparently had offered few experiences of slopes or uneven ground. Stepping over roots and logs was a novelty for her, and it took several more walks until she could manage the hill by herself without fear and trembling.

Edmond Schoorel speaks eloquently about the sense of self-movement: "It is very important that children can develop their own movement pattern, in their own way, and at their own pace" (Schoorel, p. 193). He cautions educators and caregivers not to try to teach movement skills before the child is ready for them. His recommendation for optimal development of this sense is that "[a] mood of joy and lightness around the child will stimulate it, as this mood indicates that those around the child have a well-developed sense of movement themselves" (ibid.).

As imitation is by far the strongest learning mode for the child under age seven, our task as teachers is to model a wide range of movements for the children. We also will seek ways to provide opportunities for free movement development with objects to climb over, under, or through, objects of various weights to lift, and so on. Is there a light, precise gesture in circle somewhere—perhaps contrasted by a strong, slow heavy one? Fortunate are those who have eurythmy and therapeutic eurythmy available in their school communities. These offer precise and archetypically true movements for the children's imitation.

When we are outside, the teacher can make a point of doing some wide-arcing, full bodied swinging of a rake or a broom. So many of these types of movement used to be easily observed in daily life. Children walked (or skipped or ran) to school past the farmer working or watched the baker making some delicate piece of pastry or mom shaking out the rugs. So much work is now done by machines that there is a paucity of good, solid physicality for today's child to imitate. One boy I know only ever sees his father do any gross motor movement on the treadmill and exercise machines in their basement. Otherwise it's just fingers tapping on a keyboard. Then there is a whole list of topics, too long to do more than mention here: the increase in C-sectioned births, the results of a few generations eating processed food, pesticides, the loss of the childhood illnesses due to vaccinations, the impact of screen usage, etc., that all affect the development of healthy senses. It is no wonder that a healing education is so necessary nowadays.

So it appears that these children who come to us with movement and sensory integration issues are calling for all of us who work with them to be ever more conscious of our own movement and our own sensory integration. We are called upon to be more aware of developing embodied intelligence (a burgeoning field of research) in ourselves in general.

Some of these little ones come to us with a type of sensory malnutrition, just as if they had tried to develop a verbal vocabulary but hadn't heard enough spoken language.

I have no doubt that the stories of the children above are repeated in various forms in classrooms around the US and other so-called developed countries. The situation calls us to grow beyond our own current capacities and to increase our ability to serve those children who appear before us. My hope is that we can find ways to stretch to meet their needs and, at the same time, be grateful and rejoice in the self-development towards which they push us—toward more freedom. ♦

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Resources:

- *Aeppli, Willi, Valerie Freilich, trans., The Care and Development of the Human Senses (Scotland: Floris Books, 2013).*
- *Schoorel, Edmond, The First Seven Years: Physiology of Childhood (Fair Oaks: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2004).Page 13*