

Dancing with people with disabilities

Yoshiko Muto (Japan/Brazil)

Nine years after I moved from Japan to Brazil, I met Circle Dance. Suffering from cultural and emotional struggles in Brazil, this form of dancing helped me to find self-esteem and to feel at home with my inner being. Within a short time I experienced a noticeable improvement in health and wellbeing.

Now, I dance and teach regularly at Instituto Dança Viva in Holambra, a tiny ex-Dutch colony in São Paulo state. We believe in our mission to offer people joy and healing through dancing, and we offer Circle Dance to various regular groups of adults, elderly, children and people with disabilities. I and my colleagues have also danced with patients hospitalized at a nearby psychiatric hospital.

Since 2011, I've been taking Circle Dance to my home land, Japan. I and my collaborator, a Japanese classic ballet teacher, seek to dance with those who have less access to activities which can be beneficial to support health and wellbeing. Among them, a group of victims of the Tsunami, communities of working class foreigners and a day-care centre for elderly people.

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Last time I was in Japan, we were invited to dance with a group of young dance lovers with intellectual disabilities. They practice dances such as Hip-Hop to give performances, so that CD was less challenging for some of them who are used to more complex choreographies. However, they enjoyed simple steps and different music. Dancing hand in hand in a circle was a new experience for them.

After I put the music on for the final dance I noticed that one teenaged girl with Down syndrome started sobbing. After we closed the session, she still stayed on crying on her mother's chest for a while. She couldn't find any words to express what had happened to her, but her mother said to us that she was touched by the beautiful music.

Just a few days earlier, when I offered the same dance to a group of adults with intellectual disabilities, a middle age lady came to me after the dance. She looked at me directly and said "It Was Such A Beautiful Music, It Almost Made Me Cry!"

With both groups, I invited them simply to walk to the rhythm in a circle. Since the first time I learnt this dance from a German choreographer who is based in the Netherlands, I loved the music. I always wanted to share it widely, even with groups who would face difficulties with the original choreography. So, with respect, I had talked to the choreographer about the adaptation beforehand. She kindly found no problem with it, and I witnessed that the very simple movement helped them to allow the music to touch their heart and let the harmony flow.*

Another observation I had was at the occupational therapy day center for people with disabilities in my town in Brazil. At this centre, people of different age groups with intellectual, physical and psychological disabilities join together for therapeutic activities and work. Each one can choose different activities, and Circle Dance is the one program where all of them get together twice a week. Naturally they help one another. A lady with mild intellectual disability pushes the wheel chair of someone who had a severe car accident, and we see a young Down syndrome fellow stepping to the music leading his blind friend with his hand on his shoulder.

At the very end of the session, the focaliser asks the participants to close their eyes and to think of a person that they would like to say "thank you" to. Within the salon where they dance, each person seems to have their own defined place for this moment. So, each goes straight to her/his place to sit down and stay still for three or four minutes until the chosen calm music finishes. I simply can't imagine it working so naturally and peacefully without music being played.

These experiences always remind me of the importance of the aptness of the music for Circle Dance. In general, when we plan activities for people with intellectual challenges, it's not easy to escape from the tendency to always choose lively and rather childish music and movements to hold their attention firmly. But working with many groups I see that that for the 'soul' there is no lack of ability. Each individual can see and feel beauty. I urge Circle Dance focalisers to continue to develop resources which offer a wide spectrum of experience to each person and group, without prejudice; to foster their self-confidence and bring about wellness.

While writing this piece, the Ministry of Health in Brazil has just announced that they have added Circle Dance to the list of complementary therapies which they officially recognize for our national health service. Wow! Needless to say the difference and segregation between well-off and most badly-off in Brazil, a developing country, is enormous and the users of free social services are mostly of the lower classes.

The fact that Brazil is considered as the country where Circle Dance is most widespread in different areas of society, and where the authorities recognize the benefits, is due to the hard work of many Brazilian pioneers. They have been dancing not only within a cozy nest but have really worked hard to make it available to society at large. I'd like to close my text with a great respect and gratitude for all those who have dedicated in it over decades. Thank you.

YOSHIKO MUTO is from Japan and has resided in Brazil since 1999. Circle dancing since 2008, she enjoys both classical meditative tunes and joyful Latin rhythms. Her dream is to see all the people in Japan dancing hand in hand with smiles on their faces and meditating in movement at the same time! She is a Member of the International Dance Council – CID UNESCO.

**With gratitude to Nanni Kloke, internationally celebrated teacher and choreographer for introducing me to 'Kiss The Rain' by Korean composer and pianist, Yiruma.*

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Feedback from participants:

Feedback from dance participants:

I am reporting mostly about the circles I have made in Japan since 2011. The lines which start with **Feedback** are the “feedback” from participants. I only have few written ones from those who I have personal contact, so I put the “oral feedback” together in there. Actually, we don’t ask feedback at each workshop, in order to respect the interior process. In general Japanese people do not express themselves easily.

In 2012, I started visiting Ishinomaki city in the North East region, which had the biggest victims in number among the cities affected from 2011 earthquake and tsunami, but here down I also write about my very first circle just before the disaster in 2011.

2011 January (Yoshiko)

- The very first circle dancing in Yokohama city (30km from Tokyo)

Participants: Friends of Yoshiko (ballet teacher and students, friends from Waldorf school, a university Prof. and his students who have interest in Brazil, etc.) and a group of frequent visitors to Findhorn whom Yoshiko had found on internet.

Feedback 1

Young lady (early 30s) who was interested in Findhorn:

“I always wanted to dance since I was a little girl, but never did. Dancing to those beautiful music, I found today a little girl dancing happily within myself. Thank you very much”. (This is one of few written feedback. She loved the classics and Friedel’s dance such as Amor Dei)

2012 June (Yoshiko)

- 1st Circle in Ishinomaki city, Miyagi Prefecture (400km up North from Tokyo)

Participants: A group of foreign wives with their children who are the victims of 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami. They were from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. About 50 participants. 8

volunteers including me. Three of them are from another volunteer group who helps foreign children in the region, they live in nearby capital city and also are victims of the disaster.

The North and North East region is known for its severe winter with lots of snow and many men traditionally needed to go long way down to the South (within Japan) to work during the winter to support their families. Still today, many fishermen and agriculturist have difficulty to get a bride because of their not-easy-life.

So, since the middle of 80's, there have been many foreign brides mainly from Asian countries, live there by arranged marriage. The life of foreigners in Japan, which is a mono-ethnic and mono-culture society, is not as easy as in other multi ethnic societies, especially for daughter-in-laws in small towns or villas.

Their life already was hard before the disasters. This gathering in 2012 with about fifty moms and kids was almost the first time after the disaster, so we had many more activities other than dances, especially for children together such as storytelling and reading picture books in various languages, and one of our volunteer who went together with me was a Wardolf teacher, so she sang and played. Then, I had little time for dancing. We danced few music including Samba and closed with Canon.

Feedback 2

Young foreign mother:

“I felt well. I understand that it's OK to be happy. If we mothers feel happy, then our children and our family will also feel happy.”

2014 October (Lucia Cordeiro and Yoshiko)

●3rd Circle in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture

Participants: The group of foreign residents with their children (Victims of 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami) and citizens of Ishinomaki

Feedback 3

90-year-old lady: "I thought it wouldn't be easy, but I found Brazilian rhythm within me.

I'm so glad." (she danced all the dances with Lucia, holding an excellent physical posture. She was totally involved!)

Feedback 4

Participant:" I managed to forget everything of my daily life, it was joy!"

Feedback 5

Participant: "I felt freedom. I'd like to train to teach the dances to other people."

Feedback 6

Volunteer: "Our hearts became one."

●UNESCO International Dance Congress in Tokyo

Short lecture (20minutes with translation): About Circle Dance (see attached PPT, please)

Workshop (30minutes): Brazilian Rhythm

Feedback 7

Participant: "The best workshop of my life. Absolute joy!"

●Brazilian Community in Hamamatsu city (200km from Tokyo) We danced with Brazilians and Japanese from high school students and young amateur Samba dancers to a community dance teacher.

There was an extremely shy Japanese-Brazilian high school girl who was born in Japan. (it seems that she never lived in Brazil) According to the people who knew her, she was struggling to encourage herself to participate in social activities in the community. Simple steps with joy of Brazilian rhythm gave empowerment to her. She herself almost didn't open her mouth, but she danced the whole time with animation.

- Elementary School in Yokohama city (located in the middle of commercial area of lower-income group of both Japanese and foreign workers)

Feedback 8

Teacher: "Next day, a boy was showing to his class and his teacher how to take hands in the circle (we had explained in the circle: "right palm facing up to receive something good from the person on your right side, and give it to the person on your left with your left palm facing down, so we all get connected in this nice way")

2015 March 19th (Yoshiko)

- Community Workshop for people with disabilities in Ichikawa city, Chiba (20km from Tokyo)

Feedback 9

Participant: "Such beautiful music, almost made me cry."

(German music from Nanni's dance, and we simply walked to the music without any choreography)
