

CIRCLE DANCES
AND ADOLESCENTS IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

Vaneri de Oliveira

Translated from the Portuguese by

Frances Rose Feder

“What counts in life is not the sheer fact that we live. The difference we’ve made in the lives of others is what determines the meaning of our lives”.

Nelson Mandela

Thank You Note

The content of our knowledge and experiences is deeply connected to those who are or have been with us in our journey. We are a flow meeting other flows, harmonically or not.

I am very grateful to so many people who have been in some way with me, contributing to this project at Casa Foundation (previously called FEBEM/SP), from 1998 to 2012 (mainly up to 2008). I take this opportunity to give thanks to those who helped me in different ways during all the process:

My parents, Tereza and Antonio, first of all.

Elza Tavares Bezerra

Isadora Prates

Marcos Roberto Hammer

Marika Gidalli

Marília Moreira Graciano

Marta Damasceno

Monica Goberstein

Neuza Saikali Critelli
Renata C. L. Ramos
Rodrigo Medeiros
Rosemary dos Santos
Valéria Di Pietro
Viktor Trindade

And to all my dear students, my incredible teachers at the Foundation, to whom I dedicate these memoirs and Nelson Mandela's epigraphy.

*

My first contact with the project *Circle Dances and Adolescents in Conflict with the Law* was in 1986, when I was hired as a primary teacher for 7 to 14 years old boys by the FEBEM Foundation (FEBEM - São Paulo State Correctional Institution for Juvenile Outlaws) in São Paulo, Brazil.

These boys in a risky social situation wandered in the streets practicing petty crimes. They were taken to FEBEM for a period from 3 months to 3 years, following a judicial determination. Sometimes the families themselves required their children to be taken to FEBEM, not having financial means to support them, or emotional conditions to control their difficult behavior.

In this correctional unit there were dorms, a dining hall, a huge patio and several workshops. This facility included a school, a vegetable garden, culinary classes, sport activities, among others. There were nearly 120 youngsters.

The literacy process of this group encountered many difficult problems:

- most of the youngsters had given up school many times before.
- learning qualities such as memory, concentration and cognition were precarious, as they had not been present in their previous education.
- they were imprisoned, having no freedom and no motivation to study, despite judicial order that they should study.
- there was a big emotional and psychological instability. The lack of family visits stirred an important mood fluctuation, resulting in poor school performance.
- their attendance at the classroom was very irregular, as they would very often leave for medical, dental, psychological, social assistance sessions, family visits, court sessions and so on.

- continuity issues: for instance, a classroom would start with 15 students and a few months after half of them had left the institution and others could be joining in at different moments.
- the teaching method that we used was the same as conventional schools used and following the same timing they did. We were teaching syllabic families: a-e-i-o-u etc. This method demanded qualities such as memory, concentration, continuity, time; in short, nothing they could give back.

How to reach a student who did not want to be there and much less devote himself to study? Even if I was able to draw their attention, there was a constant anxiety and tension in the air. What did he need to unload, to release, so that I could reach and offer him something?

And finally: what was the most important offering I could do?

To start finding an answer, a new question arose: "*When was it that they felt good?*"

I noticed that though they had no interest in the literacy process, they appreciated a lot physical activities such as playing soccer and running, artistic activities such as drawing, painting, cutting paper, and other creative activities as well as group activities when they were seated in circles singing to the sound of improvised musical instruments (bucket, tin, body percussion etc.), besides their own storytelling.

I started sharing some Brazilian folk chants and telling stories in the classroom and so I began to get some attention from the students. Above all I realized their deep need to express themselves, talking, releasing, manifesting whatever their pain, their difficulties, their yearning were. Their souls needed to express the many issues they had no means to process yet.

I was specially delighted by the *Square Dance (Quadrilha)*, a group dance done in couples, typical of inland Brazil, celebrated in June and July. Everyone participated at this dance, students and employees alike.

It was a magical and colorful universe, a "make believe" experience that created a certain equality in the relationships. As this was a couple dance, in which "I need you and you need me" to be successful, this had to be done together. The collective dance was more appealing than the individual one.

This was a time for learning how to care for each other as the rehearsals would imply effort, tolerance, attention, relationship. You needed your pair to be able to dance.

I reflected: "What is happening here so that this anxious and scattered boy may for a moment incorporate a new role that requires opposite qualities even if just for a short time?"

In 1989, I was relocated to another school within the same institution. This unit hosted students from different internship units. They would sleep in this building.

I started a literacy work with older students, from 14 to 20 years old of age, 90% boys. From now on, I'll be discussing this group.

This institution followed a rule from *ECA - Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente (Child and Adolescent Statute)* 1990, that established that the maximum period of internship was three years.

As for the previous younger age group, we found the same type of difficulties. Motivation, however, was even worse. Furthermore, their behavior was lethargic in the sense that they would resist to dialogue, would not speak a lot, would deny participating at the activities we offered, had more belligerent attitudes. The only motivation they had concerned leaving the institution, but they would not design an action plan for that.

As we understand adolescence as a transition period from dependent childhood to adult autonomy, we perceive that new attitudes and behaviors are required for a harmonious social coexistence.

There is a physical change, which begins with puberty, modifying the body in great scale, from physiology to anatomy and the whole behavioral attitude. While puberty is a physiologic / anatomical phenomenon, adolescence, which is related to this phase of life, is a social, psychological phenomenon, with strong emotional burdens, that not always find a path of expression.

A little kid that still lives in a small body can easily play and hide, or escape and hide in tiny places...when he grows into a teen, no more. If before his childish face granted him an easy access to a snack begged in the streets, not anymore. If before his childish behavior could grant him some signs of attention and affection, not anymore.

When the young teen desired to get rid of the institution, he still carried the typical magical thought of a child ("I want a candy!"), imagining all his problems would be solved out there. But he had difficulty in preparing the practical, typical

strategic thought of the adult, who structures the stages to achieve his goals. Between desires and changing attitudes, he was not able to build bridges.

- Who am I? Where do I go from here? How do I do it?

Different societies developed rites of passage that mark this transition close to puberty, aiming at the insertion of this individual in a new social role as an adult. Archaic rites placed young boys on trial, regarding demonstrations of courage, strength and the change of attitude required for the new role he would be playing as an adult man. From boy to warrior, the social group is involved in this transition.

In our Western world, there is a strong tendency of the educational system to “mold” people to play a social role that sustains the status quo of consumption and competition that are inherent to the laws of the marketplace. How to do this with one who did not go through regular schooling and does have a dysfunctional family in terms of material and affection structures?

Could the offensive act be considered antisocial, a rite of passage?

The offensive act also offers demonstrations of force, courage, cleaveriness and change of attitude, in spite of being turned against the society in which the young person is inserted (this society that did not give him the necessary queries for a formal social insertion).

Briefly, this was the profile of the young person placed before me to be educated. At that time, the school I was working for embraced Emilia Ferreiro’s educational approach. An Argentinian psychologist and educator, Ferreiro proposes that the individual take an active role in the apprenticeship process, building himself his learning (Constructivism).

The school relied also on the ideas of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher known for his solid work in popular education geared to the formation of political consciousness.

These two approaches helped me to quit the syllabic family (a-e-i-o-u) method and look to the world through the youngsters’ eyes. My previous experience had already shown me that it is important to prioritize the student and not the curriculum. To seek to understand him. “Who is he? What does he carry in his soul?” And then, offer him something.

That was how I started to tell them stories, sing songs with them, trying to get them out of the numb state they were in. I presented them to the Brazilian Portuguese alphabet, we read their names every day and I showed them how to

express the sounds of their names. We did different experiments with the alphabet letters displayed in cards and asked them what they could mean.

It didn't take much time for me to start doing theater with them. Finally, I began to get their attention, one by one, and sometimes the whole group. That was my way to get across and captivate them into a literacy process.

In the months of June and July I offered to perform the *Square Dances* in school, because everyone could participate and it was a moment of greater integration between students and staff without hierarchies of command. Little did I know that I was very close to work with the pillars of archaic Greek Paideia: the chant, the myth (stories, theater) and the dances.

In 1992 there was a great rebellion in the institution.

It was a mass escape. The youngsters set fire at the unit, most of the facilities were ruined, but the buildings of the school remained intact.

After the fire was extinguished, there was a long period of confinement. The students could not come to school. Teachers were divided into groups to carry out cultural workshops aiming integration, working self-esteem and reflecting upon the recent events, searching for a fresh new beginning.

It was then that I came across *Brazilian Traditional Dances* through Viktor Trindade and Isadora Prates, at that time his wife. The Trindade family does a root work related to these dances. Rhythms such as *jongo*, *maracatu*, *coco*, *ciranda*, *cacuriá*. Many of them are danced in circle. They enchanted me.

As soon as classes resumed, we were detached out of the classrooms to other activities and other teachers took on. I went on studying dances with Viktor and Isadora. When it was possible, I organized the *Square Dances* and included *Brazilian Dances*. I enjoyed very much the results as I saw many smiling faces.

Time went by.

In 1996, I took over the pedagogical coordination of a boarding school exclusively open for young women in conflict with the law, aged 14 to 20, managed by the same institution, FEBEM, but located at a distant neighborhood.

As a coordinator, my vision of education went beyond the limits of formal schooling and I began, with due consent of my director at the time, Maria Alves, to offer ways that could provide an effective link with the adolescents, thus minimizing conflict situations.

Imagine yourself being an intern: you spend your time with the same group composed of women only (except for some male employees). You wake up, make

meals, go to school, do your physical fitness activities, go to the class room, do your leisure physical activities, recreation, and finally go to sleep looking at the same faces! For unending days and years!

So, I started my work with *Brazilian Dances*. I and my students did researches on cultural roots of traditional and folk dances, we rehearsed steps and chants (there was no recorded music, everything was sung) and with appropriate judicial authorization, we took the group out for performances at schools in the neighboring community (pictures 1 and 2). This way, in addition to working a cooperative relationship among the adolescents, we also exercised a healthy social contact with the community, since we performed collective dances and invited all to participate.

As I had done several workshops with Viktor and Isadora, I gathered a good repertoire of dances, which I shared with these adolescent girls.

However, everything was sung and without the aid of musical instruments we had some difficulties with more lively dances as *coco* and *jongo*, since the time of our activity depended on how long we were able to keep dancing and singing. The guest audience, invited to dance with us, wasn't often able to sustain the singing for so long!

The purpose of these presentations was to help these intern youngsters to learn how to find and sustain goals and focus in life. They knew they needed to devote themselves to practice so that the whole group could perform well. These presentations were based on the idea that in a social group I need to contribute with my best to achieve good results as a team. They learned discipline with joy and affection, self-esteem improved. As the audience was invited to participate with us in a few dances, a good contact could happen with the community after the presentations.

The results among the youngsters were good and so we were invited to perform *Brazilian Traditional Dances* in other places. To reduce our efforts, I started researching recorded music.

It was in this quest that for the first time I met **Sacred Circle Dances**. They were described as "circle dances from different countries and peoples, some were folk dances, some were contemporary and even done to classical music." They conveyed "a connection to human values, a search for self-knowledge and a culture of peace."

My whole being vibrated with enthusiasm!

What is this that brings together so many different types of dances? What can be able to unite so many dancing possibilities? I want to find this! And so I did!

I first met Monica Goberstein in 1998, one of the pioneers of *Circle Dance* in Brazil since 1992. My first dance was the “Sun Dance”.

Monica is also a mentor of the *Dances of Universal Peace*, which at that time was considered as part of the *Circle Dances*.

It was a new universe for me and I felt that I needed to learn well that specific language and knowledge if I wanted, as I did, to teach those dances. So, I continued practicing with Monica. At that time, there were not many teachers available.

In June 1999, I first participated at a workshop run by Ana Lúcia B. da Costa and Renata C. L. Ramos at Triom, in São Paulo. Anna coordinated therapeutic groups and focalized *Circle Dances* at the University of São Paulo and Renata is till now a reference in Brazil, having discovered this type of dance in Findhorn in 1992.

I then came across several *Circle Dances* hits, such as “Al Achat”, “Shateland Wedding Reel”, “Irish Mandala”, “Escravos de Jó”. I continued having weekly classes with both, Monica and Renata. Monica gave me the initial basis and Renata taught me how to really be a focalizer!

I brought these famous dances to the students of the boarding school and they were very well received. We now used audio cassette tapes and didn’t need to sing anymore. *Circle Dances* were included in this Square Dance festivities of June, during the Spring celebrations and other festivities that would honor our Brazilian tradition as well as the traditions of other peoples (pictures 3 and 4).

We were invited to dance in different cultural events and so our outings grew. As we had no budget and our dances were Brazilian and folk ones, we had to improvise with our costumes, so we used flower printed table towels adapted as a dress. We even had a story written on us at a teenage pop magazine, telling about the boarding school intern youngsters routine, and *Circle Dance* was one of their activities (pictures 5 and 6).

There was much excitement. Daily life problems went on, but the dances were a therapeutic moment. They were an integrative, educational and playful activity.

The cultural department of the institution invited me to expand my work with *Circle Dances* to other units. We then decided to call these dances *Circle Dance* instead of *Sacred Circle Dance*. At that time, this work was very recent and almost unknown. The concept of “sacred” in Brazil was very related to “religion”. Any misunderstanding associated to religion in these units could set aside many people who could be helped by this activity.

And then the exclusively male units came about.

How to ask a group of young men considered as “criminals” to join hands and dance in a circle to the sound of a strange music???!!! Any joke from outside the circle would put an end to our experience! The male public demanded a careful approach.

My previous journey had already taught me to look at the student, at the group, and not at the curriculum.

What does his soul ask for?

Under this approach, “how” we transmit is much more important than “what” we transmit.

So, let’s look at this group.

The adolescent sees the institution as something that came to block the life he was living. The institution is perceived by him as an enemy and he wants to get rid of it, to feel free in his choices, even if they are not the best ones. Why does this youngster choose to act against the Law although he is aware of the consequences? What does that law violation mean at that time of his life? How to help him understand that he is not the violation? He is a growing individual who practiced a law violation! How to value the individual and help him reflect upon his acts?

My previous experience as a teacher helped me. This time, I was teaching how “to read and write” dancing steps and steps for life.

This custody unit for boys aged 12 to 18 years old (UI-7) had a specific feature: it held small and frail boys as both for correctional functions and to protect them from the aggression of bigger boys.

It was the period of the 200 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. We studied the history of the Olympics, its logo and its meaning. We set up a panel with written material and we then practiced dances inspired by the Greek tradition (pictures 7-9).

We chose to dance “Kastorias”, we talked about the deers in the forest and the shootings. We then associated this theme with their real lives, as most of them were there for their involvement and use of illicit drugs.

For the first part of the dance, we imagined that we were joyfully living our lives in the outside “big world” (as they would call life outside prison). In the second part, hands are raised and shake, we relate this to the temptation of drug use, or worse, of trafficking - situation most of them were confronted with. In the third part we clapped hands, we would reflect upon the question: “*Would you be able to say no to this temptation and scare it away?*” (picture 11).

The implicit invitation was to help the students to strengthen themselves, to choose NO, instead of enforcing a NO, even through dancing and its symbols. In this way, we tried to stimulate their inner will power to overcome their addiction to drugs.

It was also important to show them that these dances were performed by other people. For this, I decided to invite some *Circle Dance* friends to participate with me, telling stories, playing and singing (picture 10).

This group enjoyed a lot the dances. One of their favorites was “Roda do Valentino”, created at the Jequitinhonha Valley, in the State of Minas Gerais, although it was a couple dance and they were dancing it with other boys!

At the same time, the female group was invited to participate in a theater play promoted by the institution, involving more than 100 students in a large theater in São Paulo.

Based on Don Quixote de La Mancha, the various cultural workshops would participate as parts of the theater play (*hip hop, capoeira, music, circle dances, circus, coral* etc.). These workshops coordinated by the incredible theater director Valeria di Pietro, would fit together as a patchwork.

This activity would imply in a high risk of escape as we would have a large group out of the institution. However, the directors of the cultural department at that time, Rosemary dos Santos and Benauro R. de Oliveira, took the risk and trusted the students.

These youngsters’ commitment was outstanding. We had both success and failure stories, but they all conveyed wonderful teachings to all of us. I remember one teenager’s comment: “*Do you think I would escape at the most important moment in my life, having my mother admiring me?!*” That presentation was not only for himself! It would bear witness to a “new” him!

We created a meaningful space for these youngsters to contact a new possibility of being. Some local newspapers wrote that FEBEM/SP was reaching a better stage of relationship with these interns (picture 12).

During the rehearsals, one of the students left a note on the sound box (picture 13):

*The one who feels the cold of prison values the warmth of freedom.
In everything I try to learn only good things.
Things that I’ll fight for when I leave this place and I’m sure I’ll achieve.
All I wish, and I don’t want much, is to be a theater actor!
God be with you!*

Since the fire of 1992, the male units had never met the female units again, except for the rehearsals of this theater play that started in the year 2000. They were only allowed to look and touch each other during specific parts of the play. As soon as these parts ended, they had to go back to their respective groups under the surveillance of the keepers' eye.

Therefore, I proposed to the cultural department in charge of the theater play, to develop some *Circle Dances* with the whole cast. The department was very open to new ideas. My proposal was very important to help integrate the actors and help them loosen up. The department justified to the keepers of the units that we needed some joint activities, but they would be in circle in the presence of everyone.

I then willingly chose these couple dances: "Shetland Wedding Reel" and "Irish Mandala". It is hard to convey the meaning for that group of teenagers to dance "Irish Mandala" touching each other's hands and gazing into each others' eyes. The care and respect of their dancing was impressive. As impressive was the power of the gaze that tried to express all in the 15 seconds each pair had in this dance. Although there were many more boys than girls, the climate of magic was incredible. At the next rehearsal, all the students required to repeat "Irish Mandala" and to my huge surprise, some of the keepers asked to participate themselves!

I ended up creating a choreography for "Non Je ne Regrette Rien" sung by Mireille Mathieu, a couple's dance eyes in the eyes. These two dances became our hymns. "Irish Mandala" was then included as one of the dances to be performed during the play (picture 15).

During this play, my female students from the Circle Dance workshop, would have to perform the dream of Don Quixote for his beloved Dulcinea. And still today I get shivers reminding myself of this episode. I created the choreography for a specific song they would sing, at the rhythm of the *ciranda* in which they needed to express lightness, grace, passion ! A very feminine Dulcinea. These girls came from very poor areas filled with drug trafficking and criminality. They rarely had dolls as they needed to take care of their siblings. They would hardly look up into your eyes. Self-esteem was something quite complicated.

Many rehearsals, a lot of singing and dancing went on!

The question I raised was: "Where in each one of us lives a Dulcinea?"

And they were able to find her!

On the day of the performance, such was the grace, the lightness, the smiles and gazes that the public warmly cheered them up! (pictures 14, 15 and 16).

Sometimes too powerful patterns would interfere with their success. I remember a young boy who had to replace another in the role of Sancho Panza. He knew how to play it, but unfortunately, he was not able to face his anxiety; minutes before entering stage, he swallowed two deodorant containers and got totally drunk. A third boy had to replace him at once and surprising all, did it with excellency!

In the year 2001, I was working with two female units and one male unit, and in constant rehearsals for the theater play, when I was invited to work with another group of boys, older ones. It was a semi-custodian unit, meaning the inmates were able to leave for work or study during the day and had to come back to sleep in the institution by night. This was at USI - Belém. My role would be to assist those who stayed in the unit for some reason.

I proposed to work with *Circle Dances* to promote skills for a better social relationship within the group and with the surrounding community; as well as to offer values for their relations at work and at school such as: tolerance, patience, concentration, listening etc. At first, they required a *Square Dance*, but they warned me that they would not dance boys with boys and the female employees would prefer not to get involved.

One of the most difficult issues to be incorporated by the employees was “how do I behave in my role?” Educator or jailer? The employees had to act in both roles and sometimes the same employee had to act both roles.

I then created a *Square Dance* with all the basic steps, but instead of characterizing them as ladies and gentlemen, I decided to characterize them as farmers and herdsmen, all dressed in their typical garments (picture 17). At the end, I included some *Circle Dances* to be done with the public. And so, after the *Square Dance*, we would do “Al Achat”, “Roda do Valentino”, “Ena Mythos” (picture 18).

When the *Square Dance* time was over, I had a meeting with the students and offered to continue with the *Circle Dances*. They then answered me: “It’s cool, teacher! But can’t we do a *Rap* (Street Dance) or a *Forró*? The music you use is very strange! And also, we have to hold hands with another boy all the time! “

I was already used to the good receptivity in the other male unit and had forgotten that I needed to start all over again!!! “Who are you? What are you searching for? Where do you want to go?” These were the questions I had to ask the group and mainly to myself!

I decided to answer them knowing it was a new beginning. I was so lucky to accept this challenge as the next seven years in this semi-custodial unit offered me the most incredible experiences with *Circle Dances*, difficult to express here.

Just to start, I went learning *Street Dance* and *Forró*! I told the students we would create a mix of these dances with *Circle Dances*. We would present these dances during family visits (picture 20), or in outings that we were able to organize with the help of the pedagogical coordinator at that time, Marcos Roberto Hammer, a tireless supporter of Circle Dances in the USI - Belém unit.

I had to create choreographies using *Street Dance* (picture 19) and *Forró*, but using the shape of the circle. That's how were born "Xote das Meninas", "Cintura Fina", "Billie Jean", and afterwards "Lonely" and "Macarena". To balance that, we did "Al Achat", "Kos (Ena Mythos)", "Shalom Salam", "Beautiful Mountain", "Te Ofereço Paz" and "Meditation for the Trees".

Sometimes we need to create what I call "transition dances" to adapt to each specific group. We are living in a country where the public is far from classical music or folk dances and music from other cultures, not the type of dance youngsters usually like. I could not simply offer *Circle Dances* as they arrived to us from The Findhorn Community. I needed to create a bridge: to keep the circular formation of the dance but linking it to the culture and habits of that specific group. I included some very important elements of the *Circle Dances* such as holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, feeling the joy created in the circle and above all stirring the feeling of belonging.

I then felt the need of creating a context that would dialogue with their reality. For each dance a story, a book, a research, a team. The dance had to be meaningful for that group. Taking the example of the dance called "Al Achat" it wasn't enough to just teach them the choreography. The steps and the music needed to create a dialogue with the reality of the life of this student. For instance: as we dance "Al Achat", we make 16 steps to the right and then 16 steps to the left.

So, I would ask them: "How many times do you go one way in life, searching for a path and everything goes wrong! And then you go to the other side and it also goes wrong! No use to repeat the same ways, thinking you are going to reach a different result! It is time to make it differently, so to achieve a different result!"

And then in the dance we go to the center and we come back. So, I would say, for instance: "Go search a different path, an ideal one, and bring it back with you".

If I want to move in the direction of a new purpose, I need to nurture, to take care, to value a higher "I", or "Self". A purpose, according to Mário Sergio Cortella, a Brazilian philosopher and educator, comes from the Latin, meaning "that what I put ahead of me". If I don't do this, old habits and behaviors easily may come back and they are so powerful!

Following with the example of the dance called "Al Achat", we then draw the shape of the infinite ("leminiscata"), turning to the right and then to the left. "It is

not enough to have your goal. You need to try to “move and act according to it, wherever you go, be it to the right or to the left in life!”

And so now “Al Achat” had a new meaning for these youngsters and that group. I was once more using Paulo Freire’s pedagogical approach based on reality but this time dancing. Continuing to answer their questions: “What is the sense of dancing to this bizarre music? Why do I have to dance with others and still holding hands?”

Music wouldn’t sound strange anymore. And he could perceive that everything his individual body would do was linked to the bigger collective body, be it in dance, in community or in life.

For an activity, in this case the dance, to feel meaningful for one of those students, it needed to be important to him! And as Cortella would explain, what is *important* has to do with *importing, bringing inside*. If not well nurtured and cared for, the old “I” may take over again.

To be able to nurture and give value to the new, self -esteem needs to be high and so my previous experience helped me once more to remember that one important way to strengthen this new “I” was to interact with the audience. We prepared dances and gave presentations in schools, cultural centers, public places, where interacting with the audience was possible, creating healthy and good relationships for the students.

One of the ways to strengthen this “I” beyond the presentations, was the moment that one of these young protagonists could show and present his or her art of dancing (not only through *Circle Dances*) or focalize one of these dances. So, they could show who they were.

With the help of the coordinator of the unit I worked for, I made contact with other institutions that would be able to offer a different type of audiences to watch our presentations and participate in the Circle. And so, the students would present a *Street Dance*, would show their own abilities (pictures 21 and 22) and would then invite the audience to participate in the *Circle Dances* with them. Sometimes, they would focalize a chosen dance and afterwards interact with the audience (pictures 23 and 24).

The “São Paulo Cultural Center”, through its director and actress, Lizette Negreiros, who was very touched by our project, offered us more than one opportunity!

We were also invited to a meeting called “Building a Planetary Culture” sponsored and coordinated by the group *Rede Paz*, (Peace Network) with Unesco support (pictures 25 and 26). We could present *Circle Dances* there. The dances were introduced as a tool for working with these FEBEM young boys who were able to present themselves and even dance with the audience, having a great success.

I would like to point out that for this event I received the support and encouragement of my friend Frances Rose Feder, an outstanding translator at international *Circle Dances* workshops in Brazil and a member of the Rede Paz team who felt very touched by the *Circle Dances* at FEBEM/SP.

Another opportunity of outings were the external *Circle Dance* classes we sometimes went to, invited by my teachers Renata Ramos and Monica Goberstein who would very much encourage me.

In other occasions, we would trade a dance presentation from the boys with their participation at lectures on drug addiction related themes, and we would always include *Circle Dances* (pictures 27 and 28).

Another important experience with the students of USI was the contact they made with elderly people living in nursing homes (pictures 29 and 30). The two different groups made contact and they had so much in common: they were deprived of freedom, there was an absence of a more affectionate touch and atmosphere. Self-esteem was poor, they needed to obey rules and customs they had not chosen. They were deprived of having their wishes met. (What would they choose to eat, with whom would they like to spend time with, how would they like to be etc).

It is important to remember that before each external outing, we had a meeting with the students and we were very careful in telling them how they needed to behave when we went visiting someone and when we would go somewhere. They were warned that if any of them ran away, all outings would be suspended for the whole group. With this, we helped them learn about group unity and the feeling of responsibility. We also did another meeting after the outing, to evaluate and to listen to their experience.

I could recall many incredible experiences, but I'll just choose one of them. Once we went to one of those nursing homes and we got to know the place and its structure and we then did a dance with the seniors. Two students sneaked out and I followed them without being seen. I was so surprised to find out they went to the place where the funerals were held. There, they kneeled down and prayed and then came back to the group.

During the evaluation meeting, I asked them why they went there and they answered they had prayed for all who were there and for the ones who had already left. One of them said:

"They are in a different type of internship. They didn't steal or kill, but their imprisonment is for life and ours is not."

In my work with *Circle Dances*, another female unit came about in 2001, in São Paulo. This unit had students that were more dangerous and were longer

term interns. With the support of the directors of this unit, we were able to have some amazing experiences with these girls.

We were invited by Lizette Negreiros to present once more at the São Paulo Cultural Center, this time with the girls. As I explained before, I chose this approach that one young performer who wanted to focalize a dance could prepare herself for that. She would study the origin of the dance, the steps, how to deal with the audiences, the tone of voice. But we did not know what type of public would be there.

Some of the dances we rehearsed were: “Al Achat”, “Shetland Wheel”, “Lo Yisa Goy”, “Escravos de Jó”, “Boneca de Lata”, “Te Ofereço Paz”, “De Babura Se Faz Melão” and others. Not all the students wanted to focalize and this was respected.

A huge surprise awaited us!

The audience was composed by children aged 9 and 10 years old, so younger than them, and also by youngsters from their age, who had physical and mental limitations (mainly Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy). They looked at me and their expression asked: “What now?!”

I took a deep breath and decided to start with “Al Achat.” I focalized it. And then I suggested the students to choose more simple and childish dances to focalize. (picture 37).

It was a wonderful and deep communion (picture 38).

This was a meeting of children and youngsters from very different realities. These dances created an amazing interaction among worlds that would never had come together.

Experiencing a dance to an Israeli, Brazilian or any other music, very quickly these people were dancing together, holding hands, looking into each other’s eyes, hugging each other without even knowing their names and sharing their common humanness.

When we had our evaluation meeting, I wrote down some of the students’ comments:

“It is good because we can touch people”. Being imprisoned deprived them of the basic freedom of touching other people. The dance allowed this.

“He was cool and fun”. This young girl was referring to one of the disabled boys at the presentation. Through the dance she was able to see and connect to the person and not to his disability.

I find it very important to discover what is the perception of the students about the activity and to help them reflect upon it.

I created a written tool for those who participated at the Circle Dance workshops trying to help them show their views and reflect upon this activity that allowed them to experience so many rich contacts and feelings, including with myself as a teacher. At the same time, this would help me evaluate and enhance my work.

So, I designed a board with all the dances I had taught during a certain time and I asked them to point out the ones they remembered they had danced and to draw an "X" on the ones they liked most. I then asked them to write their answers to certain questions.

"Why do you like better these dances? Is there any you disliked?"

"Why do you do *Circle Dances*?"

"What will you recall from the classes?" (in relation to the symbols, the story of the dance, the country, the teacher, the presentations)."

"Do you notice any changes in yourself since you participated in the classes?"

"Give your opinion about the class and how could it get better."

Sometimes I asked them to draw what *Circle Dances* meant in their path. I chose two examples from the feedback I received. (pictures 39 and 40).

Male teenager, 17 years old, January 2002.

This student presents a high level of intelligence and sensitivity. He does not relate well with other students of the unit. He is HIV/Aids positive.

The dances he most liked: *Shalom Salam (Israel)*. "...has interesting movements and brings me joy..." *Highland Lilt (Scotland)*, "the movements are simple, I close my eyes and meditate". *Escravos de Jó (Brazil)*, "*not only is this dance funny, but also it helps bodily coordination*". *Beautiful Mountain (Africa/USA)*, "it connects me directly to the Supreme".

"Why do you practice *Circle Dance*?"

"Because it allows me to express myself totally. It helps me to know different countries and their diversity and helps me feel better integrated in the group. I learn to have more discipline and bring this into my daily life."

"What will you recall from the classes?"

"What really impressed me was to see how touched our teacher felt, showing she was so proud of us. I also was impressed observing how everybody changes

in the circle, even the grumpy and the untouchable ones expose their best feelings when they enter the circle. “

Let’s remember that several students wouldn’t get close to him and with the dances they started having a better interaction.

“Do you notice any changes in yourself since you participated in the classes?”

“Yes, I noticed that *Circle Dance* provided me with a philosophy of peace and love and also physiological betterments.”

“Give your opinion about the class and how could it get better.”

“We could go deeper into the explanations.” (The student very much appreciated the explanation about the symbolical elements associated to the dances). (picture 39)

Female teenager, aged 16, entered the institution in September 2002.

She suffered from a state of depression and a lack of motivation for the activities. The dances she liked the most: *Bala (Israel)* and *Te Ofereço Paz (Brazil)*.

” Why do you practice *Circle Dance*?”

“In the beginning, I thought I went to class just because I had to. But after I found out that I liked these dances, even if I had never heard about them before. When I wake up I’m sad and lazy. But when I attend this class, I feel as if I am taking off a big weight from my back. And then my day becomes joyful, this is only Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“What will you recall from the classes?”

“What most impressed me was the dance *Bala* from Israel. It was really cool, as well as *Te Ofereço Paz*. I loved them and I’ll never forget these dances.”

“Do you notice any changes in yourself since you participated in the classes?”

“Yes. I feel more alive. I feel as if I were in a park full of trees and grass, feeling the pure air of Nature. It’s so good, really good. And when I leave here, I’ll try to continue to do these dances because the teacher said there are parks where we can practice *Circle Dances* and I’ll continue.

“Give your opinion about the class and how could it get better.”

“It could be done in a park full of trees, but as here it is at this square court at FEBEM, there’s no way! But it is ok, better than this, impossible and with such a wonderful teacher, it is far too good. (picture 40)

I have many other reports and examples to present, but I'll select two of them:

A 17 years old boy from the unit USI – Belém/SP was always enclosed upon himself and in bad temper. He didn't like to talk and had always an aggressive tone. He was sent to the *Circle Dance* classes and would not participate a lot. But as time passed by, he started getting very much involved with the dances, even participating in our outings. He began smiling sometimes.

As he would not write well, I asked him to draw his feelings related to what *Circle Dances* offered him.

As you can check at the attachments, his drawing presented two very different moments: at the left side of his drawing, "war moments", where we see Osama bin Laden thinking about the Twin Tower attack in New York (this was January 2002). At the right side, he wrote "peace moments" and drew people performing a *Circle Dance* (picture 41).

This drawing would show two different moments, two worlds in conflict and the connection was just symbolized by a thin thread holding little colored flags! Flags are popular in Brazil during the winter festivities. We don't see the ground and there are many teeth appearing in the drawing!

I would not normally ask psychologists and social workers what the youngsters had done to be there, because I knew I had to work with the person who was there and not with the offense he had committed.

As I am a psychologist, I felt very disturbed by this drawing and so I decided to go and talk to the responsible professionals, because maybe this drawing was showing that something "could be hanging on a thread".

So, I was informed that the reason this young man was still at FEBEM was in fact to protect him. He had not committed any serious infraction and his situation was already solved. There was another difficult situation involved. He had lost his brother, who was a crack drug addict, killed because of debts with drug dealers. The boy lived an inner conflict, he wanted to revenge his brother's death. But in the *Circle Dance* classes, he felt clarity and peace of mind.

This case was really a lesson for me. As a teacher, I always required the presence and participation of the students, expecting them to offer their best. I was not aware that the little he could offer in that context meant a lot.

Another case refers to a letter to each one of the students from the USI/Belém unit at the end of the year 2001. As I could not offer a Christmas card to each one of them, I wrote a letter wishing them Season's Greetings and I included the name of all the dances we had done, each one with a blessing or a positive message for the

incoming year, 2002. I made a copy of this letter for each student. We read the letter together, each one received his or hers. It was a very touching farewell ceremony, as many of them would not come back after the Christmas celebration.

Two years after that, I was having lunch at a snack bar when a man approached me. He was one of my former students. I could hardly recognize him as he had changed a lot, but he recognized me. He then told me he had moved to another State for security reasons and now he was again in São Paulo. So, we had a drink together and we recalled moments we had experienced with the dances, but my biggest surprise was to see him opening his almost empty wallet and from there taking out that letter I mentioned before.

All this time he had carried this letter with him as something meaningful (I still have a copy of this letter).

There were many amazing moments beyond just dancing.

How to evaluate these experiences?!

Circle Dances offer us opportunities: which ones? With whom? And how? It all depends on our approach.

The living experience I had with the dances showed me that they are a transdisciplinary tool with multilayered levels that interpenetrate. They first explore the more playful and physical elements (laterality, spatial perception, coordination, rhythm), but they then invite us also to shift to the educational and cultural levels (countries, costumes, world views) as well as to the psycho-social levels (the way we perceive the world and how we can integrate to a group). They can also conduct us to other unexpected possibilities!

Our path in life is a dance... my dance life started in 1992 with *Brazilian Dances* and migrated to *Circle Dances* in 1998. It was so important for me that I finally left this work at this Foundation in 2002 as an employee and went on working there as a freelancer until 2012, needing a lot of courage to do that.

I needed to be free of the Foundation, so to be able to continue acting in it. But when our heart tells us what we need to do, the universe conspires in our favor. Until the moment came when I had to leave, opening up to other experiences with my dancing.

Here I share a part of my path, an overview of the meaning of this work.

The paths change
As the world changes

Turn, turn, dance
...changing, we change
willingly or not
we always dance!
