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Circle Dance in Occupational Therapy: Practice and Research

Dr Ana Lucia Borges da Costa, lecturer in occupational therapy and circle dance teacher, shares her experience using circle dance in practice and research.

Dance has always been part of my life. My experience with dance started in my childhood, when I was 6 years old, joining a local ballet dance school. This was the beginning of a long and rewarding journey, experiencing different styles of dance and taking part in performances, from classical ballet, jazz, modern dance, dance influenced by the Laban Movement (Fernandes, 2015) and, of course, circle dance!

I was introduced specifically to circle dance in 1992 during a work experience placement (as a qualified occupational therapist) in the mental health service of Trieste and Imola (Northern Italy) where I was invited to take part in the inauguration of a sheltered accommodation unit in Imola for adults with mental health problems. A community circle dance group was invited to entertain the clients, their families, visitors and health professionals in the first instance. They came because they had discovered that circle dance contributed to creating a sense of community, a relaxing environment, and was an invitation for everybody to join in dances from different countries and cultures. I was fascinated and enchanted by the experience: it represented a turning point in the sense that I saw the potential link between this form of dance and my practice as an occupational therapist (Borges da Costa, 2014).

So, what is circle dance? Circle dance is a revival of a very ancient art form, which for thousands of years allowed people from different cultures to express themselves through movement and dance. Characterised by being vast and diverse, the circle dance repertoire includes traditional dances from different countries and cultures in addition to contemporary

choreographies. As a shared occupation, the integration and inclusion of the participants is a fundamental aspect of circle dance (Borges da Costa & Cox 2016, p.198). In the U.K., the Circle Dance movement was started after a former German ballet master, choreographer and researcher into folk dance, Bernhard Wosien, led a dancing event in October 1976, at the Findhorn Community, in Scotland. Currently, the Circle Dance network includes active groups in Africa, Australia, Europe, North America and South America. In the U.K. there are around 270 circle dance teachers (Borges da Costa, 2014).

I started incorporating circle dance into my practice as an occupational therapist in 1995, initially in a mental health clinical setting, in São Paulo, Brazil, where I am originally from. The positive feedback which I received from clients as well as from other professionals inspired me to continue using circle dance in a clinical setting and to extend its use in community settings. Furthermore in 1995, I introduced circle dance to the curriculum of the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy programme at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Circle dance was included in one of the undergraduate modules, in which the students experienced and explored a range of expressive activities, such as music, dance and drama and reflected on their therapeutic potential and their application in practice. This experience became the main topic of my chapter (Borges da Costa, 1998) in the first book published in Brazil about circle dance. Circle dance was also integrated into a community programme and a postgraduate programme. Furthermore, as a lecturer in occupational therapy in another university (University of Sorocaba), I also introduced circle dance in the undergraduate occupational therapy course and in the University of the Third Age programmes.

From 1997 to 2000, as a member of the one of the research academic groups in the School of Occupational Therapy at the University of São Paulo, I designed and delivered extra-curricular (or continuing professional development) circle dance training courses for students and

healthcare professionals working in the Public Health Service¹ in São Paulo. The professionals whom I trained in circle dance, occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers, speech language therapists and health educators, started subsequently using circle dance in various health services throughout the city of São Paulo. Over time, this has turned out to have had a major impact on the Public Health Service in São Paulo. In 28/03/2017, circle dance, along with Yoga, reflexology, meditation, music therapy, art therapy and other complementary therapies, was officially recognised by the Minister of Public Health in Brazil as one of the twelve complementary therapies to be made available within the National Health Service of Brazil (Ministério da Saúde, 2017). This represents a major and significant step in understanding circle dance in the field of health promotion and well-being. Furthermore, it validates the practice of many professionals who have introduced circle dance in various health and social care settings.

In 2003, whilst working in a mental health service (adults) in the U.K., I started incorporating circle dance into their occupational therapy in-patient programme. One development of this was the establishment of a community circle dance group, which was a partnership between the Mental Health Service (NHS Trust) and the Social Care (Mental Health division). This partnership also included collaborative work between myself, as a circle dance teacher and occupational therapist, and the staff from the Social Care Service, who provided all the necessary support for those service users who wanted to attend the sessions. This group offered fortnightly evening circle dance sessions for adults with mental health problems. Over time, circle dance, became a very important leisure activity for group members who attended on a regular basis and who showed great commitment to the group.

Following a re-structuring of the Social Care Service, the circle dance group became an independent community group. This was possible, thanks to the involvement of the local Community Volunteer Service, which played a vital role in securing funding for the group for

¹ Equivalent to the National Health Service (NHS)

many years. It was also vital to the sustainability of the project to have the invaluable contribution of volunteers. This group remained active for 14 years², offering fortnightly evening circle dance sessions for adults with mental health problems.

The work with this circle dance group inspired me to design a pilot study in 2004 in order to try to understand how the participants perceived the benefits of circle dance and their motivation for attending the community group. The results of this pilot study were first discussed in an article published by the *Occupational Therapy News* (Borges da Costa, 2004). This was also the seed of my PhD, completed in 2014, in which I investigated the potential contribution of circle dance to well-being through the subject field of occupational therapy and occupational science. The focus of my study was on the experience of people who are engaged in circle dance, outside the context of the health care system, in order to provide an understanding of the process of being engaged in this form of leisure occupation and its relation with well-being. I also investigated the pedagogical element of circle dance and its impact on people's experience (Borges da Costa, 2012; Borges da Costa, 2014; Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016).

My doctoral journey was one which brought many rich and rewarding experiences along the way, thereby promoting my own personal, professional and academic growth. It has enriched me as an occupational therapist, as a circle dance teacher and as a researcher (Borges da Costa 2014, p. 260). I have had the opportunity to publish articles and to present my PhD at various events and conferences, in the U.K. , Europe, South Africa (WFOT 2018 Congress) and in Brazil. This has helped me not only to hone my research skills but has also given me the opportunity of spreading the word far and wide about the findings of my research with regards to the positive impact circle dance has on our well-being.

In 2017, I ran a circle dance occupation station at the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) Annual Conference, held at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham. The

² This project finished in December 2016.

session was structured to provide an opportunity for delegates to experience circle dance and to reflect on the therapeutic use of this form of dance. Twenty five delegates attended the session.

I have also introduced circle dance to BSc (Hons) and MSc Occupational Therapy programmes at the University of Cumbria as a tool for working with groups. Students learn the dances, reflect on their experience and consider the therapeutic use of circle dance in an occupational therapy setting. The students perceive circle dance as a potentially valuable tool for working with groups in various settings. However, they highlight the need for further training which would give them the necessary skills and confidence to apply circle dance in a therapeutic way. At present, I am embarking on a very exciting project at the University of Cumbria, designing and delivering circle dance training aimed at students and health professionals.

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