

Using Physical Listening to Support Executive Functioning in the Classroom: Developing Teacher Practice to Empower Student Learning

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Overview of Physical Listening

The movement based method called *Physical Listening* addresses the foundation of self-regulation and contributes to the development of executive functioning skills through a focus on nonverbal communication. Developed by choreographer JoAnna Mendl Shaw, the work draws on Shaw's extensive experience as a dance educator and a Movement Analyst.

Physical Listening explores the responsive conversation that takes place inside the complex and visceral non-verbal interactions we encounter in our everyday lives.

Physical Listening focuses on spatial awareness, working with congruent intention and action, personal grounding, and empowered decision-making. Through creating "situations of necessity", the mover is asked to merge improvisational invention with strategic thinking. In group process, decision making informed by constant awareness of other moving bodies makes for powerful and effective teamwork.

Shaw directs a dance company that often performs with equines. Much of the *Physical Listening* practice emerged from her work with horses. Communication with this animal of flight requires empathy, effective leadership, acute spatial awareness, and a merging of creative and strategic decision-making. Shaw and her company members have developed an extensive repertory of classroom methods to teach this work for 3rd-7th grade.

Physical Listening Program at May Center for Learning

The May Center for Learning is a school and outreach center in Santa Fe, NM that empowers students with learning differences to reach their potential through communication, collaboration, and community. Our work is grounded in best practice for working with students who learn differently; as such, we approach learning as a multi-sensory, explicit, systematic process. The teacher's relationship to her students is a diagnostic, responsive one, dedicated to careful observation and response to each individual. Our goal is to empower each student to take responsibility for self-regulation and their own learning in order to make meaningful connections with their communities.

The Physical Listening collaboration at May Center has the following objectives:

- To improve teacher communication with students
- To increasingly empower students to take responsibility for self-regulation
- To create authentic, "situations of necessity" in which students are empowered to own their learning experience

To begin this collaboration at May Center, we are focused on examining three questions related to our school environment:

- How can teachers use nonverbal communication to improve relationships with students and enhance learning outcomes?
- How does strategically structuring the classroom environment empower student self-regulation?
- How is the development and refinement of bodily awareness, coordination, and physical listening skills connected to the development of language and executive functioning skills? How does an increased emphasis on the development of the former lead to the latter?