

Care to Dance?

By Joy Packard

I wish I could convey, in words, the sound of the drummer's djembe as he leads the children into the performance space. It gives me goosebumps. Every time. It's a ceremonial calling, plain and potent: *"Here we are, we're coming, witness us as we dance."* Expectancy and curiosity fill the air. There is something so special about a drumbeat. It resonates with our bodies - and the collective body - in a way that music through an ipod doesn't. It wakes us up at our very core.

Aged from five to eleven, the children have been preparing for this moment all morning. At the call, they rise. They seem, to me, like little peace-warriors sallying forth in that full-bodied and whole-hearted way children have when immersed in something they enjoy.



I'm based in the UK and this is a junior school in rural Yorkshire. We are about to dance in the spirit of peace. Their drawings from this morning are pinned to the fence in the field, tea cups at the ready for later, and a sprinkling of parents sit shivering in the English summer weather.

In national curriculum - speak the workshop facilitates three elements of the Global Dimension: creativity and critical thinking; global dimensions; and identity and cultural diversity. In Joy - speak it's about meaning-making through movement and opening up new and creative ways of understanding ourselves, each other, and our world.

The seed of possibility for this project began in Angola in 2007 when Dana Swain invited me to work with her on an arts project with 50 Youth Ambassadors for Peace, inspired by Anna Halprin's participatory dance 'Circle The Earth'. For all the differences between my life and theirs I saw, too, the similarities and the power of the arts to heal. I wanted to do something locally in my native north east. When I showed some photographs, that I'd taken in Angola, to one of my classes shortly afterwards, my eldest mover, a 95 year-old, said: *"this would be great in schools."*

One thing led to another.

What has evolved is a workshop that can stand alone or be integrated into a longer scheme of work. Captured in the video is a morning of expressive arts activities followed by our dance. The school is twinned with Mahandakini School in Kenya through a British council programme. This link provides a practical reference point for the children.

The afternoon is a moving and joyous occasion. You never know how many people are going to turn up to support and join in. Imagine looking down from above when the dance is in full swing. You see three concentric circles of dancers, moving in opposite directions, each circle with a different step: the outer circle for running; the middle one for walking; and the innermost circle for standing still. The drummer is in the

centre. This is movement as metaphor for the change process: the urgency of running; the dignity of walking and the recuperation of stillness.

The children move between the three circles of their own volition. There's no counting steps, they move in response to their felt body needs. In one workshop when I was standing next to the drummer, I felt a small hand take hold of mine. I'd noticed the girl earlier running very fast in the outer circle, getting a bit pink and sweaty, her bounces bobbing up and down in time to the drumbeat. She peeled out from the running circle, switched direction and joined the middle walking circle. Then I lost sight of her until she held my hand. For me, this is what embodied learning is all about - she was making choices about her dance based on her awareness of breath, pulse, stamina, the drum beat, the people around her, her intention, and her energy level. She stood next to me watching the drummer for a while as her breath slowed, and then, without a word, returned to the walking circle, then back out to the running circle.



This 'moving mandala' happens three times. What makes it so moving is that each child comes forward individually and announces their dedication. Firstly, to someone in their own world, then to a cause in our shared world and finally we all run together for the children in their twinned school. At this point each child holds out a hand to their parents and friends and invite them run or walk together. Depending on how many people turn up to support the event, the school hall might be a sea of maybe 50 or 60 people spanning three - if not four - generations moving as one community of peace makers. The boundary between 'performer' and audience dissolving. I've learned to trust the process: children are persuasive and it's good to see them in a leadership role.

I notice different teachers evaluate our time together differently. It's as if it were a mirror: a PE teacher might remark on the physical aspect; a dance teacher the choreography; art teachers the resulting art work. A minister from the Churches' Regional Commission once commented, "...*moving and inspiring. You can see the grace of God running through the dance.*" In the school in the video the Head Teacher saw it's unifying potential. Whole school. Whole curriculum.

As this year draws to an end, I'm reminded of the way we close Peace Week: holding hands in a big circle. A reflection of unity. Uneven in our differing heights and ages, big hands holding little hands, long arms next to short arms, bouncy youthful energy complementing the older, more settled, energy. A bit higgledy piggedly but united in our intention. When the drumming fades we swing our arms skywards and allow the peace within to flow out through the fingertips, upwards and outwards, so that it might land where it's most needed in the world.

As a way of ending this article - as it's the holidays - I hold out my hand to you, on my left, and to you, on my right, so that we might do the same.