



RAISING healthy children

BY ANNIE DWYER, MFA

Educators from Carolina Friends School, in Durham,
explore the relationship between health and education

movement

There was a point during a Carolina Friends Upper School dance rehearsal last week that 15 bodies were moving in a tangled, amoeba-like spatial pattern. Confined to a relatively small space, each individual was trying to figure out how to roll over and under one another without crushing anyone. We were laughing and at the same time systematically discovering how to sense the moving presence of multiple human beings in relation to our own body. A few minutes later we were engaged in pinning down the exquisite details of a dance phrase so that we could all dance in unison as a contrast.

These absolutely clear moments of revelation in the presence of dancers touch the soul and remind me what I love about the art form. Whether we are moving in unison or alone, we need each other to communicate, thrive and solve problems.

To dance is to experience the wholeness of body and mind in a transcendent experience. There is a "magic" to this kind of experience that stands up there with moments when the breeze caresses my face in the forest or I feel my heart beating in time with my own children. The presence and understanding of this magic as a vital component of moving through life is woven seamlessly into the lives of the community at Carolina Friends School.

Movement is our first language. It is how we begin to know and express ourselves in the world. The idea of the uniqueness of your body being a curious subject to explore and know is different from treating your body solely as an object to be controlled and manipulated. Taking the time to come into a three dimensional awareness and feel our bare feet touch the floor lets us know where we are before we begin to move to the next step. You have to know where you are before you can move through and to

with any sense of purpose.

Why dance? Dance is a way to be with oneself in the community of others. My students teach me time and again that there is an ancient, intuitive wisdom in their natural world that guides them. As they listen and sense the truth within, they can move into the risky business of self-expression and developing their voice as a dance designer. Through the study of anatomy, kinesiology and technique, student dancers come to know, appreciate and develop their body. In my mind, this is always a vehicle to the creative expression that is their birthright. Dance belongs to all of us as participants and audience. To witness one another as we take the stage and breathe life into a work of art can be a transformative experience if we can open to it.

The children in the Lower School consistently remind me of their direct access to the imaginative world. The division of practice and performance is nonexistent. All the joy, beauty and strength of self-expression can happen in the context of free dancing within an improvisational structure. Their playful delight in exploring shapes, levels, pathways and directions is evidenced in the choices they make when propelling their body through the space. Last week when 16 nine- and ten-year-old children were jumping over each other and slipping underneath the still shapes of their classmates, I remembered the power of trusting a group to make choices that are intriguing, powerful and potentially dangerous. At Carolina Friends School the teachers dance with the children in Lower School to experience both themselves and their students in a particular kinesthetic way. Touching, sculpting one another, traveling to and through imaginary worlds is a special way of knowing each other. It is amazing to me that children are equally drawn to the quiet moments of lying down, focusing on the "little dance inside their

bodies," and engaging in creative visualization.

As young adults go about the incredible task of constructing a self, it is imperative for them to access a positive relationship with their ever-changing body. Capturing your thoughts in movement and words is an integral component of the journal writing and dance connection in the Middle School. Young writers realize that their inner world can be expressed on both paper and the blank canvas of space. This sophisticated process of translating images from one mode of expression to another becomes a cornerstone of their creative process.

The opportunity to touch, lift, carry, partner and move expressively together is often absent in the culture of young adults. To trust someone with your body and to be trusted with theirs can be breathtaking. Dancers speak with their bodies and refine that sense of the mind and body being connected rather than separate. The images we feed ourselves ultimately shape the person we become. What better way than dancing to let you know where you end and someone else begins? Students often return to CFS to visit and share crystal clear memories of the relationships that were formed in the arena of touch and trust.

So I ask myself, why are we not dancing more in a culture that is hungry for meaning and connection? As we grow older why do we forget that we are part of the natural world and that celebrating this awareness can bring us closer to understanding where to move as individuals on this planet? Perhaps if we can dance and come into the present tense of our existence, we can better see the multiple pathways to our future.

Shall we dance? Can we move and accept that the awkwardness of beginning is just part of the process of opening to ourselves? *hkh*

Annie Dwyer has been facilitating dance experiences in both public and private schools in North Carolina since 1978. She has been on staff at Carolina Friends School since 1990. Carolina Friends School is an independent Quaker school serving students 3-18. Contact the School at: 4809 Friends School Road, Durham 27705; Telephone: 919-383-6602; www.cfsnc.org.