

Dance Brings out Creativity in Village School Children

By George Bennett 4th-6th Grade Teacher

In a famous TED talk in 2016, on creativity in education, world-renowned education expert Sir Ken Robinson asked why dance is not taught in schools every day.

‘Creativity,’ he said, ‘is as important in education as literacy,’ and he cited dance as a vital form of physical creativity.

Anna Hendricks, founder of Great Falls Creative Movement in Turner’s Falls, would agree with him. She characterizes her work with children as ‘creative movement’, which, naturally, includes elements and principles of dance. Recently Hendricks conducted a week-long residency at The Village School in Royalston, that demonstrated the value of dance for children, in classes range from preschool to 6th grade.

As 2nd-3rd grade teacher Shannon Johnson commented, ‘Some of the work the children did with Anna goes beyond dance, and can be incorporated into their everyday lives.’

This was Hendricks’ second opportunity to work at the school, funded by a ‘STAR’ residency grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and she was able to build on the principles she had taught the previous year, which a surprising number of the older children remembered.

This year Hendricks based her work with all the grades on four concepts: focus, balance, rhythm and energy. She demonstrated these in various ways so that everyone, from preschool to 6th grade, was able to work with these principles and put them into practice.

Just consider ‘focus’, something that children of all ages find increasingly hard to maintain. Hendricks had the children work with an internal focus, a single point external focus, and a wider external focus. She then asked each student to take a gesture, or posture, while maintaining one or another of these.

Having a particular focus helped the children to maintain their attention, so that when they came to show their gestures to partners and later, small groups, they were able to repeat them accurately. Each of these groups thus built up a short routine of gestures and movements to which each child contributed.

The groups then took turns to teach their routines to the rest of the class, so that everyone contributed a piece to a dance routine that was performed by the whole class. In the preschool and K-1 classes these were, of course, quite simple, but in the 4th-6th-grade class, the children produced complex dances that could be described as ‘guided’ improvisation.

Each student was given a slip of paper with a particular instruction, which they then put into practice. A dancer might be asked to take a series of balancing postures, or to cross the room at a run, but to incorporate two falls and a roll. Other children were asked to copy another dancer, or to wait for fifteen seconds before joining the rest of the dance and making their own move, and so on.

The resulting dance was a demonstration of individual and group creativity that spontaneously developed a surprising degree of coherence, in which the children

demonstrated a focus on their own gestures and a wider focus on the whole room and the other dancers within it.

Taking various postures and gestures involved the other principles that Hendricks outlined each day. The children worked on balance in various ways, holding positions with one, two or more body parts – feet, hands, head, hips, etc – on the floor. These skills, too, were incorporated in the complex dances that continued to evolve during the week.

The concept of ‘energy’ showed itself in the different ways the children could move their bodies, from sharply to smoothly, and from fast to slow. The idea of rhythm speaks for itself.

Each class was able to take part in a number of sessions during the week, culminating in a short presentation to parents and the rest of the school. With each succeeding class, the children became more confident, and more fluent in the way they were able to embody the concepts Hendricks developed.

Even the few reluctant children - generally in the older, more self-conscious, grades - were clearly enjoying themselves by the end of the week, as they saw their own gestures being taken up by the rest of the class, and as they realized that dance was actually fun. The whole of the Village School is grateful to the Massachusetts Cultural Council for funding this residency and supporting the arts in general.

Hendricks left both students and teachers at The Village School feeling inspired to find ways to work with creative movement in the future, and keen to welcome her back next year. Ken Robinson would have been pleased.