



4-1-1990

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Meredith R. Cherland

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### Recommended Citation

Cherland, Meredith R. (1990) "Ann Weather and Dnace Education: Community and Risk in an Elementary School," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol4/iss3/4>

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**ANN WHEELER AND DANCE EDUCATION:  
COMMUNITY AND RISK IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

by

**Meredith Rogers Cherland**

Introduction

There is noise out on the playground, but it's cool and quiet in here. It's 1:00 p.m. on Monday afternoon at Unfolding Flower School. The multipurpose room is large, dusty, empty. One by one the third and fourth graders burst in, kick off their shoes against the wall, and lie down. Ann Wheeler comes in and quietly turns on a tape of strumming harp music. She stands and watches. Soon there are fifteen children with windblown hair and flushed, perspiring faces spaced over the brown carpet. They lie flat on their backs, knees bent, hand folded over their stomachs, faces toward the ceiling, eyes closed. Noisy breathing subsides. One child speaks to another. Someone makes a hooty noise. Ann says, "Remember, this is our time for constructive rest." Then the children are silent. The harp music plays on.

Ann moves to each child in turn. She stands over the child, gently helping him to adjust his position. She puts knees together, strokes shoulders, and speaks quietly to each one.

Five minutes later Ann sits on a pile of blue gym mats against one wall. She turns the harp music down slowly until it disappears. She says, "After you slowly come out of this position, just come over here by me." Creative movement class is about to begin.

This scene occurred regularly, and I observed it several times during my interpretive study of one teacher's meanings for dance and for dance education. In seeking to answer the question, "What does dance education mean to this teacher, Ann Wheeler?", I came to understand her views of education, and gained some insight into two current notions in curriculum theorizing, "community" and "risk", and what they might mean in an elementary school setting.

Ann Wheeler was the Program Director at the private elementary school my children were attending. She had told me of, and I had seen, her joy in working with "a community of learners." She had told me about the importance of the arts in the school's curriculum. In fact, her school's staff modelled the kind of literary reading and artistic writing in which they hoped to engage the children. Like other teachers who have written about modelling their own artistic passions for their students (see Atwell 1987), Ann, a dancer, was teaching dance as part of the "regular" school curriculum.

Ann's use of the word "community" made me think of the democratic school community that John Dewey (1913) had described, and that Goodman, Sheets, and Berman have since envisioned for elementary school classrooms. In fact, several disciplines are now employing the theoretical concept of "community" in a variety of ways. Linguists speak of "speech communities", philosophers of science speak of "epistemic discourse communities", composition researchers speak of "discourse communities", literary critics speak of "interpretive communities" (Balester 1986). All have in common the idea that understanding occurs and new knowledge is created best within a group where knowledge is already shared. I became curious about what knowledge and beliefs Ann's "community of learners" might share.

### Background to the Study

Ann Wheeler is 37 years old, small and neat and casual, a serene, soft-spoken woman with freckles and wide smile. She is the Program Director at Unfolding Flower School, a private elementary school in a large southwestern city that she and a friend began eleven years ago in her garage. Ann's work life and her family life are comfortably intertwined--her husband Jim is the school's Administrative Director, their two daughters have attended Unfolding Flower and they live two blocks from the school.

As Program Director, Ann shapes the school's curriculum. In the fall of 1986, inspired by her own intense interest in dance, she began to provide creative movement classes for all the children at the school. Thinking that movement education might well become the subject for her Masters thesis, Ann wrote careful lesson plans, and wrote reflectively about all the lessons she taught.

By January of 1988 Ann had a stack of data six inches tall. It was at this point that she welcomed me into her Monday afternoon creative movement class as an observer and agreed to let me interview her about dance education and its meanings for her.

Ann told me that she hoped my presence and our talk would help her to think clearly about a structure for her thesis. I told her that I wanted to study her because she was such an unusual teacher (not many teachers found their own schools) and because creative movement was such an unusual addition to an elementary school curriculum.

### Methodology

Between January 20 and April 18, 1988 I spent eleven hours interviewing Ann and 22 hours observing her teach creative movement classes to the third and fourth graders at Unfolding Flower School.

#### Participant Observation

Participant observation was the heart of data collection for this study, although I had not expected it to be. I had expected that the interview data would prove most important, that it would provide the evidence I could use to generate theoretical assertions about Ann

Wheeler's meanings for dance education. But what Ann did told me more than what Ann said about why she thought dance education belonged in elementary school.

Like most of us, Ann did not talk about her motives and her feelings and her beliefs about her life in concrete terms. She spoke in our interviews in generalities, in words that sometimes had little meaning for me. She described her relationship with the people in a dance class she had taken, for example, in these words: "There was just such a strong connection between us. It was totally communicative, we were just so plugged into each other." I felt I understood Ann while I listened to her, but in listening to the interview tapes at home I came to see that I would not be able to use Ann's words to explain what dance education meant to her. I came to see that participant observation would be the most important source of data for this study.

I was able to watch Ann Wheeler teach her creative movement class on eleven Monday afternoons in February, March and April. All the classes I saw involved the same group of third and fourth graders known as "Michelle's class" (for their teacher Michelle Hebert). Sessions usually lasted from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. All took place in the multipurpose room at Unfolding Flower School.

While I was observing, Ann and the children planned, developed, rehearsed and produced a performance based on the children's book Jumanji by Chris van Allsburg. I was able to attend the performance for the parents on Friday, April 15. On Monday, April 18, I completed my observations by attending Ann's oral defense of her Masters thesis, which dealt with the introduction of creative movement into the curriculum at Unfolding Flower and with the conclusions Ann had reached over two years about the benefits of movement and dance education for children.

### Observer Effects

I believe I spent enough time in Ann's class to lessen the initial observer effects. I became a regular feature of the class for Ann and the children. I was there long enough to become familiar with the structure and rituals of the class, and to catch a variety of moods, to come to know the children, and to see an elaborate project develop and come to completion.

My third grade daughter Elisabeth is a member of the class. Although other children occasionally spoke to me during class, Elisabeth was the only member of the class who remained consistently conscious of my presence throughout the study. The other children soon came to ignore me. I was a vaguely familiar figure to them as a parent who dropped off and picked up kids at the school every day. Ann introduced me at the first class as "Elisabeth's Mom". During the first few sessions individual children came over to look at my clipboard, admire my colored notepaper, and see what I was writing. They soon lost interest. When two asked why I was there, I told them I was writing about their class for a special project.

Ann, too, came to take me for granted. She told me more than once that she enjoys teaching with an observer in the classroom. It makes her feel sharper, more inspired. But

I was there long enough to see that effect evaporate. Ann had occasional tired, down days, and I never felt she was orchestrating anything for my benefit.

### Interviews

Ann and I had seven interviews, all but one held on a Tuesday morning in the Early Childhood Education office on the fourth floor of the Education Building at the local university. Ann would teach her Early Childhood class, and then we'd sit down in one of the empty offices there with the tape recorder going for at least an hour. Ann came dressed up, fresh from teaching, ready to sit and think and talk. Our rapport was good. We now had the Monday afternoon classes as shared experiences, and we added that to our daily contacts at Unfolding Flower. Ann never rushed me, or seemed to begrudge the time for the interviews. Once she apologized for having to leave after 45 minutes.

Ann was willing to tell me her story and did most of the talking. She provided me with some of her own life history, the history of the school, and the history of her involvement with dance. She commented on what was happening in class. She explained the conclusions she was coming to for her thesis, and how she was planning to structure that document.

I asked questions I hoped would get her to talk about her meanings for dance education. I asked her to tell me why she had added creative movement to the school curriculum. I asked her to explain what she felt like when teaching those classes. She answered those questions, but Ann tended to speak abstractly, to use language that glossed over those ideas. She was willing to share her thoughts and feelings, but she did so in language that was circular. I did learn from our interviews, but in data analysis I would rely more on the demonstrations of Ann's beliefs that I saw during participant observation, and on the words she used in her personal writing.

### Document Analysis

Ann provided me with a wealth of documents that were directly related to my research question: What does dance education mean to Ann Wheeler? These documents fell into two groups: Ann's formal writing for a public audience, and Ann's personal writing, for herself or for a very small audience.

Her formal writing included the write-ups for two semesters of "pilot studies" (conducted with the children in their dance classes) for her Masters thesis. It also included the school brochure, a term paper on dance, and the drafts and the final version of her Masters thesis. Her personal writing included journals kept for three dance classes, informal lesson plans, reflective writing about lessons taught, and several poems. A complete list of the titles for these documents is included in Appendix A.

These documents gave me information about what had already been taught as creative movement at Unfolding Flower School. They gave me alternate accounts of incidents mentioned in the interviews. Lesson plans let me see what Ann had intended for

a certain session, and her reflective writing let me know to what extent she thought she had succeeded, and which incidents with children had moved her.

### Researcher Role

At the time of the study, Ann Wheeler and I had a business relationship, a professional relationship, and a friendly relationship. I was the parent of two children at Unfolding Flower School. I paid tuition. I chatted with their teachers daily and I took a personal interest in the school curriculum. Ann no doubt had this in mind when she arranged my access for two other small research projects at the school. In a way, I was a paying member of the Unfolding Flower community.

Ann and I also had a professional relationship. We were both graduate students in elementary education. Ann is a writer who knows the benefits of discussing ideas as they develop. She was about to write her thesis and I was a researcher in need of a subject. Ann was interested in qualitative research and was attempting some. Our professional relationship was a model of reciprocity. I listened to her with great interest as she formulated her ideas. Occasionally I responded to her writing. In return, I got an open and cooperative research informant.

Yet our personal interaction never felt cold or calculated. It was warm. Ann made it quite clear that she trusted me with her intimate thoughts. She was open about her limitations, her failures, and about sensitive occurrences at school. She had faith in my discretion. She expected the best of me. I found that hard to resist. I was drawn to Ann. I wanted to do her justice, to be worthy of her faith in me. I was filled with admiration for her accomplishments. I liked her.

### Data Analysis

During the first weeks of field work I tried to list for myself Ann's views about elementary education. I had read the school brochure and the parents' handbook. My children attended the school. I could see what was going on there. I thought this exercise of spelling Ann's beliefs out in words would help me see the framework surrounding her meanings for dance education. I coded early field notes according to what Ann and the children were doing in the class: exploring, composing, collaborating, interpreting, risking.

Next I coded interview writeups with the synonyms Ann used for dance: healing, energy, release, connection.

Document analysis came next. I coded documents according to curriculum parallels: Dance and Language, Dance and Literature, Dance and Writing, and realized that all the connections had to do with Language Arts.

In early March I thought about the types of data at my disposal. I distinguished between Ann's official statements about dance and education, the little stories Ann told about children in the dance classes, and Ann's own behavior in the movement class. I also

began to think in terms of two roles: Ann the Dance and Ann the Teacher. I constructed the following matrix.

What does dance education mean to Ann Wheeler?			
ROLES	OFFICIAL STATEMENTS	ANECDOTES	BEHAVIORS
Ann the Dancer			
Ann the Teacher			

I focused more on Ann now in my observations, less on the children. I reread her dance journals and wrote about what I thought Ann believed about dance. The beliefs came under three headings:

- Dance leads to growth.
- Dance is a joy.
- Dance belongs in education.

I showed the headings to Ann and she accepted them.

In late March I realized that all my data fell into one of four categories:

- Dance.
- Education.
- Creative Movement Class.
- The Teacher's Role.

I sat at the computer generating propositions in each category and then took each list of propositions and read back over the entire data record, jotting down illustrations for the propositions and noting the few discrepant cases.

I made a list of "stories to be told." I wrote those stories. And I wrote the Meanings section of this report. When I had finished the first draft I changed names and the name of the school.

Glaser and Strauss say that writing is analysis. The act of writing did change some of my ideas. For example, I didn't come to see until I wrote about Ann's teaching that direct instruction has a (small) place in Ann's beliefs. I'll start at the beginning.

In February I knew that Ann's teaching was going to tell me a lot about her meanings for dance education. I spelled it out in a March 12 memo: "Ann's teaching in this class doesn't exist in isolation. It's based on what she believes about dance, what she believes about education, and what she believes about people."

I could see that Ann was giving very little instruction in dance, per se. She didn't teach the group technique. Sometimes, in talking about the work they were doing, one child would compliment another on a beautiful movement or a magnificent leap, but Ann never taught kids how to move or leap. Sometimes, in a certain context, Ann would show one or two children a movement. When Shaun and Randy were being snakes, she showed them how to roll over each other without getting crushed. But she didn't teach dance directly.

I could see what Ann was doing in this class: she was coaching, encouraging, praising, confronting, challenging, suggesting, guiding, refereeing, asking questions, providing structure, pairing children, expecting, comforting and protecting.

Here is an example of the category protecting from my February 19 field notes. The group is discussing their performances for each other.

Alicia: I didn't really get what Natalie was supposed to be.

Shaun: Yeah, well, you wouldn't get it, Alicia.

Ann: Shaun, I don't want to be getting a sense here of attacking people for their comments. We all have feelings, and we have to be careful of how we treat each other. Suppose we let Natalie respond to Alicia . . . .

It was my protecting category that led me further. I had many instances in the data of Ann protecting one child from another. There were also the speeches that Ann made to the kids about how a person ought to make comments, about what construction criticism was like, about how sensitive people's feelings were, about how problems from outside this class should be left outside the door.

I couldn't decide how those speeches could be made consistent with a model of Ann's teaching as guiding. It was when I sat down to write that I realized that those speeches were not guiding remarks. They were information that the children were expected to internalize and act upon. This was direct instruction, the only form of direct instruction essential to and consistent with Ann's meanings for dance education.

Here is an example of "direct instruction" from my March 14 field notes: (In the middle of a discussion session.)

Ann: I just want to remind you all that you need to be very careful about how you deliver your comments. Some people are sensitive, and you don't want to hurt feelings. You speak one at a time. You try for constructive feedback. You try to say something that will help people. You don't tear people apart. You keep your voice friendly.

I had come to see that Ann Wheeler gave children direct instruction in how to get along with each other and in how to help each other do good work. Dance education was another arena for "building a community of learners", to use Ann's phrase. Dance education was a place to teach people how to work with people.



## Ann's Meanings for Dance Education

When Ann Wheeler speaks of "education" or "dance" or "teaching" or "creative movement" she has meanings for those words that a majority of the members of her society would not share or understand. Those four words, with all their attendant personal significance, name four interrelated aspects of the meaning of dance education for Ann Wheeler.

### Education

Ann's beliefs about education form the basis for her beliefs about dance education. They can be summarized in four propositions:

1. Education requires that people work together.
2. Education involves body, mind, and spirit.
3. Education is a process of growth.
4. Education is productive.

What Ann calls "education" is not something an individual accomplishes alone. A person cannot study a book and become educated. Education involves working with other people, what Ann calls collaboration. When people work together harmoniously, you have community.

Community unites people in mind and in spirit. Education, for Ann, is not a matter of simply feeding the mind. She speaks of "wholistic education" that involves the body and the spirit, as well as the mind, and that recognizes the interdependence of all three. Education is a process of exploring, expressing, creating, collaborating, reflecting, and growing. Exploring and expressing and creating are risky. You risk and grow more easily if you trust the people around you.

Education is productive. It leads to publications and performances. Children own what they produce in school. It belongs to them. Education doesn't put things into people. It helps what is already there come out. These beliefs inspire Ann's writing. Ann wrote the text, for example, of the fourteen page brochure that advertises and explains Unfolding Flower School. The text appears in short blocks interspersed with clear black and white photos of children writing, painting, sorting beads, arranging doll furniture, looking through microscopes, pouring water, potting plants, climbing on playing equipment, and typing at a computer. Of 23 pictures, only two are of children working alone. 21 pictures show children busy together in pairs or more often in groups. Of six adults shown in these pictures, five are in direct physical contact with a child.

Under the heading What Makes Unfolding Flower Unique? the text reads, "As a result of the philosophical foundation on which the school is built, there is a strong emphasis on human spiritual development, as well as physical and mental growth. While Unfolding Flower is not affiliated with a particular religion or creed, there is a strong underlying commitment to the development of a deeper understanding of the spiritual self...Children...are allowed to have a voice in their learning environment...Rather than

children being filled with information from a pre-packaged textbook, there is a process of open discovery occurring...."

The name "Unfolding Flower" provides the metaphor that encapsulates Ann's beliefs about education. Children are like flower buds. Within each one is the potential for beautiful fulfillment. All that is required for the child to become a healthy, productive, fully realized adult is already there in the child. All that is required of education is to provide the right environment for the bud to unfold. Like flowers, children are beautiful and children are delicate, and so education needs to avoid damaging them as they reach their potential.

Ann tells stories about children that illustrate her beliefs about education. In one story, Ann applauds Natalie (age eight) for the risks she took in performing her "autumn to winter dance" for the school's Winter Solstice celebration in December 1987. She explains that early in the fall Natalie had tended to work alone, and to work superficially. Her aunt had died in a September plane crash, and Natalie, new to the school, struggled to understand and cope with that event. In November, Natalie published a poem in the school newsletter, and enjoyed the attention and praise that came her way. Ann wrote, "When we started working on the Autumn piece (in creative movement class) she blossomed! All of a sudden there was an incredible little dancer emerging within her and each time I watched her it nearly brought me to tears. When I see her dancing I can feel her spirit so strongly and it seems that she is able to connect her feelings with the movement really clearly...Natalie is very sensitive to the people she works with in small groups...She does best with friends who allow her the respect she deserves as a dancer."

Another of Ann's stories concerns a group of boys at work. She wrote about this incident in her reflective writing, but this version is reconstructed from my field notes:

February 1: Ann is watching Andrew, Shaun, Michael, and Charlie talk and shout and negotiate and stomp around. Charlie turns circles in his wheelchair. Andrew waves his arms. They are trying to represent The Adventures of Ulysses with creative movement.

Andrew has a plan. He wants them to march around, pumping their arms up and down in exaggerated fashion to show that they are soldiers. Charlie pulls himself out of the wheelchair, and leans against the wall. Andrew says, "OK, let's try this real slow now." Charlie is having difficulty. Andrew shows him, "You use strong hands like this. One, two." He looks into Charlie's eyes and says quietly, "Can you do it with two?" Ann smiles and turns away with tears in her eyes.

Ann is convinced of the value of this kind of education. Children struggle together to express themselves, and to produce something worthwhile. They take risks, like Natalie, and like Charlie. They reach out to each other in loving support, like Andrew. They grow.

## DANCE

The dancer's world is a world transfigured,  
wakened to a special kind of life."

Susanne K. Langer  
Form and Feeling

Ann awoke to dance early in 1985. Jim had given her a box that Christmas with a tag that said, "What's in this box will change your life." In it was a membership for the Center for Body Awareness in their city. Ann started taking dance classes there to "balance her life." She had been feeling that her mind and her body were too disconnected in her daily life, and that her spirit was suffering because of that. She was drawn to modern dance. It seemed that dance would feed all three aspects of her Self. It did.

Ann's meaning for dance correspond to her experience as a woman beginning to dance in her early 30's. For Ann,

Dance is risk.  
Dance is joy.  
Dance is healing.

### Risk

Amy Anders, a ballet teacher, told Ann that the point was to master dance technique, to make it second nature. "Then you can dance from the inside out." Ann loved that phrase and used it often.

When you dance from the inside out, your body does as your mind and spirit direct it to do. Your body exposes your inner being to those who watch you. That is dangerous. People can see your vulnerability and hurt you. Being hurt isn't the end of the world, of course. It's part of living. It can make you strong. But it's easier to dance expressively if you aren't afraid of the people who are there with you. If you trust them, it's easier to risk letting the inside out.

Like Lynn Burnham (1983), Ann believes that teachers and students need to take emotional risks in their interactions. Ann's always taken chances. When she could have gone to college close to home in Nebraska, she took off for Colorado. Instead of getting a teaching job, she founded a school. She invited a researcher to watch her teach. And she began to dance in her thirties.

Taking dance classes at the university made her vulnerable. The university's Dance Department wasn't as comfortable as the Center for Body Awareness. There were accomplished young dancers in the technique classes at the university. Some ignored Ann. She felt that being older and less skilled made her invisible to several of them. That was hard to handle. But, says Ann, "I chose to stay with it." She desperately wanted to dance.

Her vulnerability there made her fragile. One day her improv teacher hurt her badly. This story is reconstructed from Ann's dance journals and our interview tapes:

On April 9, 1987, Ann was a little late to class. The others were there in the large, high-ceilinged room before her. Ann rushed in, bare feet slapping at the hardwood floor, hot and sweaty from her bike ride, and found that Sally was late too. They did the first exercise together and relaxed. Natural light warmed the pink plaster walls. Then Ann asked a question. Later, she couldn't remember exactly what she'd said. It was something like this: "I don't understand the connection between the exercises in the sequence."

Joshua exploded. For what must have been five minutes he raged and scolded. Ann finally began to cry. She walked out of the classroom, sat alone on the cold cement floor outside in the hallway, and cried. She felt she had been personally singled out for criticism. It hurt. She sobbed and suffered for at least twenty minutes in the blank beige corridor. The fluorescent lights hummed. One of the class members came out into the hall and tried to talk her into coming back in. Ann refused. She wondered if she'd ever be able to go back to class again if she just went home today. She decided she wouldn't be able to. So she pulled herself together, called up all her courage, and returned to class.

Ann stayed there, although she says she felt frightened and vulnerable and on the verge of tears for the rest of the class.

Later, Ann was glad she had stayed. She says the incident made her feel stronger. And she found two friends that day. Joshua saw to it that she worked with Heidi and Sally for the rest of the class, and somehow these two women reached out to Ann in her distress and showed her that she could trust them. The three danced together in openness and joy. Ann remembers that dance with gratitude and pleasure. Ironically, her best moments in the class followed her very worst.

### Joy

Ann is in love with dance. Her dance journals are full of references to "the pure joy of movement." She wrote to her teacher Kathy about the joy she felt in the release of tension, in the creation of beauty, in the communion with other people through dance. She wrote, "I don't dance because I'm particularly good at it, or because it will be helpful to anyone but myself. I dance because it is vital to my personal well-being." She found in the spring of 1987 that she missed dancing when she skipped a day. She wrote, "I think I'm addicted!" She concluded her journal by thanking her teacher: "I'm realizing more and more how important dance is to me...This class is an oasis in my life!"

### Healing

Ann came to dance after she had experienced stress-related illness and emotional trauma in her life. When she began her classes at the Center for Body Awareness, she felt

they had a "healing" effect on her. She says she decided to "give" herself two years to dance and to study, to heal as well as to learn. She turned to classes at the university because the CBS classes weren't enough. "I wanted to work on modern dance on a more intense level."

As the 1986-1987 academic year passed, Ann "immersed" herself in dance and felt its benefits. She wrote in her journal, "I'm so happy about my dancing this semester...what a change has occurred in my self-concept! Dancing has allowed this whole new person to come forth...I like myself a whole lot more than I did a couple of years ago." Elsewhere she wrote, "I turned to dance because there was a part of me that was incomplete...now I'm becoming a whole new person."

Ann has many stories to tell about how dancing has healed individual children. Her thesis chapters on Natalie and Charlie tell stories of healing. Ann knows, because she's experienced it, that dance heals psychic wounds and lifts tired spirits. It's good for people.

### Teaching

Ann will tell you that she thinks teaching is intuitive. At her thesis defense, Ann told her committee that she tries not to plan too far ahead in her teaching. She says, "What I do next has to be based on what's happened so far." She told me that in planning for her Monday afternoons with the third and fourth graders, she liked to read what they had written in their journals after Monday's class, then "let it sit" till Sunday night when she would decide what to do the next day. Teaching requires thought and reflection, and an intuitive response to what the children have been doing in class.

Ann's teaching is quite consistent with her beliefs about education. And her teaching of creative movement to children is quite consistent with her beliefs about dance. Her teaching is intuitive in that it responds to children through feeling (and secondarily through intellect), but it is also consistently structured.

Ann bases her teaching on what she believes about education:

- Kids grow.
- Education is a process.
- Education leads to products.
- People learn through working together.

Ann expects that her students will grow and do well. A teacher helps little flowers unfold. She "guides from behind, and lets the kids lead the way", to use Ann's words. There is little connection between the "content" a teacher teaches and what it is that kids learn. The kids make a lot of the decisions. Nowhere was this clearer than in the two Christmas programs for 1986 and 1987 at Unfolding Flower School. For the first one, the kids wrote the script, choreographed their dances, made the costumes, and "owned" the show. When they had problems (especially toward the end) Ann smoothed the way, or stepped in and helped. For the second program, Ann chose an inclusive theme, then left plenty of time for the children to choreograph their dances and plan their costumes.

Allowing time for the processes of exploring and creating to occur is sometimes hard on a grown-up. Ann writes, "It's not easy to find the balance between being pleasant, expecting a lot, expecting results, being patient, and being willing to hold the vision of your pupils' potential for a long time as you watch them fumble through the learning process."

Of course, knowing that education leads to products, a teacher can encourage herself and the children by making it easier for products to materialize. The Jumanji production, for example, was to be the children's own. But Ann offered them a list of possibilities for how they might structure it. She let them hear a variety of musical excerpts from which they could choose what they wanted to accompany their pieces. Some chose. For those who couldn't decide, Ann chose. The children decided that she should read aloud from the book to bridge the scenes they were presenting. Ann chose the passages. The children decided on colors for their costumes. Ann provided crepe paper strips and construction paper bases in the right colors.

Ann believes that kids learn best through group work, and that learning how to work together in groups is the most valuable thing that they can learn. The teacher's task is to set things up so that children are working in groups to accomplish something meaningful to them. Ann doesn't teach dance directly. She coaches. She guides. She uses the vocabulary of dance in explaining warm-up exercises and in praising their work, and the children learn that vocabulary. Very rarely does she teach anything like specific movements or techniques. Once she showed Shaun and Randy how to put their heads together to twirl like snakes when they were trying to be snakes, but usually the children invented their own movements, together.

Ann recognizes that working together is difficult for children. Because it is so important, and because it doesn't come naturally to people, Ann gives direct instruction in interpersonal skills. She doesn't teach dance or literature or math. She teaches "working with other people." She feels wonderful when the children work well together. She feels awful when they're unkind to each other.

April 11: Ann is watching each of the groups perform and doing a little last minute coaching for the performance on Friday. The kids who are not dancing are working on their costumes, seated in back of her around piles of brightly colored crepe paper strips. Kurt and Charlie are next to Ann, using colored markers on white poster paper to create a Jumanji board game for the opening scene. It looks almost complete. Suddenly Kurt has an intensely annoyed look on his face. He throws down his marker and says to Charlie, "You stupid jerk!"

Ann moves quickly. She sends Charlie away and crouches facing Kurt, her back to the rest of us. We can't hear what she's saying, except every once in a while when her voice rises and we hear, "Look at me please! Look at me!" After a minute she stands up. Kurt's eyes are on the floor. Ann turns around with the board game paper in her hand. She holds it out to Charlie. Her face is white and her hand is shaking.

In the creative movement class, Ann also bases her teaching on what she knows about dance: that dance involves risk, that it is a joy, that it is hard work, and that it heals.

Ann works hard at "keeping people's spirits safe" in the creative movement class. The children are encouraged to discuss their work and to reflect on it and to offer other people constructive comments about their work, but they are not allowed to criticize each other or to hurt each other's feelings. Ann protects children: she steps in and speaks directly to someone who says something critical in a less than helpful tone. She offers her own suggestions, but never says another word when they are ignored. She works to help people feel safe, to help children think well of themselves, to build their confidence.

Part of this involves downplaying the very real fact that in our culture adults have power and children do not. The children call Ann "Ann", not "Mrs. Wheeler." She offers choices and leaves decisions to the children as much as is possible. Ann uses her adult power to silence the child who is "out to get" another.

Ann wrote to her own beloved dance teacher at the university, "...I am very grateful that you have been my teacher this year. I have felt from the very first of the year that I could trust you and that I was safe in your keeping. It hasn't been easy being the only person over 30 in a class of 18 and 19-year-olds, but your caring and understanding has helped me a lot. You have established a classroom environment in which I was able to risk making a fool of myself at times and it was OK. I have also been able to push myself into new dimensions without being afraid of what you or anyone else thought. I can't tell you how important it is as a student to have teachers who are able to establish this sort of trusting, supportive classroom situation. Joshua's class has been a real contrast and it has made me even more appreciative of your teaching. If you really want to make a lasting and growth-inspired effect on students you have to let them know that you believe in them and care about their individual growth. I think that is one of the things you do best."

Dance involves risk, but dance is also a joy. Teaching requires that the teacher let kids have fun. Technique is never as important as having fun, as self-expression, as working with others.

Dance is hard work. A teacher encourages, supports, guides, coaches, and challenges. The teacher supplies what the children are too young or inexperienced to supply for themselves (she schedules time, finds materials, handles equipment).

And dance is healing. It's good for everybody concerned, including dance teachers.

February 29: It's hot. It's 2:00 p.m. and we've been at it for an hour. There are kids clustered all over the multipurpose room. They talk and bounce and jump. Smiles flash. Arms flail. A child breaks away and zooms across the room to the opposite wall. Ann moves to watch one group, then another. Each group is trying to plan a sequence of movements that will represent a happening in the children's story Jumanji. Ann says, "All right, let's show each other what we've got so far."

The kids move to the unbroken wall and sit on the floor. Peter and Vanessa and Jennifer get up and stand in the center of the room, ready to show the others their work. Peter says, "This is the part where the volcano explodes and comes down the fireplace and hits the rainwater on the floor and makes steam."

Ann says, "Listen to this for a minute, you guys. See if you want to try it with this." She slips a tape in the player and we hear sixty seconds of the theme music from "2001". Vanessa and Peter and Jennifer nod enthusiastically. They do want to try it. Peter says something to the two girls, and waves them off to the side.

The music starts. The three children walk to the middle of the floor holding hands. They look serious. Their movements take on a drama not there before. The music reaches a dramatic high point, and Peter, who is standing encircled by the two girls holding hands, "erupts" just as the music crashes. He breaks free and whirls away from them. Later Jennifer is the one encircled. The music crashes again, and Jennifer inclines her head so that her long red-blond hair will whirl out as she twirls away from the others. Ann turns around and grins at me delightedly.

#### Creative Movement

We love to dance, we love to sing,  
We love to taste the living spring,  
We love to feel our union flow,  
While round, and round, and round we go.

Millennial Praises, 1813  
A Shaker song.

In March 1987 Ann quoted this little Shaker verse in her dance journal. She used it to emphasize her joy in her daily technique class at the university. She could have used it to describe her creative movement classes.

When I asked Ann what the difference was between "dance" and "creative movement" she said that dance was art. It was for the dancer but also for the audience and for itself. Creative movement was for the mover. Self-expression meant more than technique. But the difference wasn't a great one. Some of the kids were dancers.

There were times when Ann used the terms interchangeably, as in the first draft of her thesis. One committee member asked her to be more consistent, and her thesis advisor told her he preferred the word "dance". Ann used the word "dance" in the final version of the thesis.

Ann believes that in many ways working in creative movement is like working in science or math and or in any other facet of education. It requires the processes of



collaborating, exploring, expressing, creating and constructing (or composing), reflecting, producing, and risking.

But in other ways creative movement is unique. In creative movement class, the physical part of the child's being becomes central. The body allows the mind and the spirit to express themselves in a new way.

Creative movement has unique connections with the language arts curriculum. Ann wrote about these at length in her Masters thesis. For one thing, creative movement links language to the physical body. Ann found that when the children invented names for the movements they were creating, they were able to refine those movements and to remember them. They began to understand the concept symbol. Over time, as they learned a vocabulary for dance and named their own movements, the third and fourth graders were able to understand and respond to abstract, open-ended directions from Ann.

It helped that their classroom teacher, Michelle Hebert, also spoke to them (about their writing) with a special and abstract vocabulary. Creative movement linked the writing process to physical expression. Like writing, dancing was a means of making meaning. Michelle and Ann both spoke to the children about "rough draft", about "revising", and about "publishing" their work. The connections their teachers made between writing and dancing helped the children understand that dancing is a form of self-expression, like writing, and that writing, like dancing, can be beautiful and personal and artistic. Creative movement gave the children physical, concrete access to abstract concepts beyond their years.

Creative movement also gave the children a physical means for exploring literature. Ann says it helped them "understand story" by requiring them to get inside a story, to decide what was most significant in a story so that they could represent that and interpret that through movement. They were at the same time reading and discussing outstanding children's literature with their talented and experienced classroom teacher. Ann felt that creative movement supported and enhanced their appreciation of literature and their ability to analyze and understand it.

Ann points out that physical expression is the easiest, most accessible form of expression for many of the children. For others, creative movement provides the only occasion in their lives in which physical expression is required. At its best, the creative movement class provides children with the physical means for joyful release, for self-expression, and for creative action.

## Summary

<b>The Connections: What Dance Education Means to Ann Wheeler</b>			
DANCE	EDUCATION	TEACHING	MOVEMENT CLASS
Risk	Explore	Support Love, Protect	Risk & explore together.
Involves Body/Mind	Involves Body/Mind	Provide for the body. Challenge the mind. Nurture the spirit. Love the whole child.	The body, mind, and spirit are engaged.
Individuals work and struggle.	People work together.	Teach group skills. Keep peace.	Children collaborate and perform.
You perform. You make meaning.	You produce. You make meaning.	Structure. Coach. Challenge. Guide. Applaud. Respond to the meaning and help with the form.	You perform and produce. You make meaning.

Dance education is Ann Wheeler's gift to children. Her school is full of beautiful and meaningful additions to children's lives: books are everywhere. Teachers read carefully selected works of children's literature to the children every day, and as soon as it can be managed every child is encouraged and enabled to read for herself. Children have materials and help and support from the adults around them whenever they have something to share, or to express. Their beautiful art work covers walls, countertops, hallways. Their publications are part of the classroom libraries, every child knows that what she writes will be valued. At Unfolding Flower School, love is concrete. Children are surrounded with beauty and meaning because they are loved and valued, and school is a place where love for others (what Ann calls "community") is expressed through shared creation. Dance education fits right in.

Dance adds a new dimension to what Unfolding Flower can offer children. Ann feels secure about the intellectual work that goes on in Unfolding Flower classrooms, and about what is being provided for children's cognitive development. She can feel the loving spirit of the school, and feel confident that children's spirits are safer here than they would be in another school. But children are physical beings too, and many seem to be more physical than they are intellectual and spiritual beings at this time of their lives. For many, the physical is the best route to the mind and the spirit. Now, to her great satisfaction, Ann

finds that she has special talent and ability in an area that can provide a physical dimension in the curriculum.

She has knowledge that allows her to provide children with a physical outlet for their creativity, with a physical means of working together, with an insider's knowledge of how beauty finds expression through the human body (as well as through words and through color and line on paper). Dance education balances the curriculum by calling for physical work that engages the mind and frees and elevates the spirit. Dance education provides another means of building a classroom community of learners.

And, dance education allows Ann to do more than balance a curriculum. It is her gift to the children, but it is also her gift to herself. It allows her to work with dance, the art form she loves. It allows her to try something new, to work as a teacher with a form of learning that education knows very little about in 1988. It puts her right where she loves to be: taking a chance. It puts her on the verge of discoveries, on the edge of the unknown, working from the inside out to learn more about teaching and about learning and about life.

"Risk" then, for Ann, is something that teachers and learners must engage in. Risk involves emotional and intellectual stretching, extending oneself beyond what is known and safe to what is new and creative. It is easiest to risk in a "community".

Ann's "community of learners" shares knowledge: they share vocabulary for dance, they share experiences with dance, and they share assumptions about what education is. They are learning to trust each other. They all believe that making meaning is their central task in school, and that meaning is found, not only in individual expression of the self, but also in the communion of mind and of spirit they achieve in working together.

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The author acknowledges and thanks Carole Edelsky and Mary Lee Smith for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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### Appendix A

#### Documents Analyzed for this Study

##### Ann Wheeler's Formal Writing

"Unfolding Flower School"  
Spring 1985  
(A brochure for prospective Unfolding Flower parents.)

"And So the Dance Begins"  
Part I  
Fall 1986  
(A pilot study with the children of Unfolding Flower School, in partial fulfillment of requirements for a dance education class at the university.)

"Three Educators' Contributions to Children's Dance: A Look at the Lives and Work of Rudolf Steiner, Hughes Mearns, and John Dewey"  
March 13, 1987  
(For a university class, Cultural Concepts of Dance.)

"The Dance Continues..."  
Fall 1987  
(Log from Creative Movement sessions with Unfolding Flower third and fourth graders: documentation for thesis project.)

"Emerging Theories"

February 29, 1988

(An early draft of the Conclusions section of Ann's thesis project.)

"An Emerging Community of Dancers: The Development of a Creative Movement Program in an Elementary School"

March 13, 1988

Thesis written in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Elementary Education.

Revisions to "An Emerging Community of Dancers"

March 31, 1988

Final revisions to "An Emerging Community of Dancers"

April 14, 1988

#### Ann Wheeler's Personal Writing

Ann's Dance Journals for Dance Technique (Fall 1986), Dance Technique II (Spring 1987), and Dance Improvisation (Spring 1987).

Ann's Lesson Plans and Reflective Writing for Monday afternoon Creative Movement classes at Unfolding Flower School, February and March, 1988.

Ann's Poetry, "The Time for Her Dance Has Come", "Transition", "A Glimpse through the Door"