

IT'S TOUGH TO FIND ANYONE MORE blunt than a fifth grade boy. I recently sat down with some fifth graders at my school, Four Seasons A+ Elementary, to talk about their experiences with Dancing Classrooms, a ballroom dance curriculum created by Pierre Dulaine in 1994. When asked about his first reaction to the news that his class would participate, my student Angelo said, "I thought it would be horrible...I thought it'd be something like, come on, here we go again, something stupid." Let's say he wasn't exactly giddy with anticipation.

Many of his classmates echoed his sentiments when asked about their initial feelings. Emilia said, "I thought it would be really bad, and I thought I would hate it, and I wouldn't want to ever do it." Don't even get me started on their first reactions when they found out they would have to *touch* a person of the opposite gender!

When I got an email last spring about the Minnesota nonprofit Heart of Dance bringing Dancing Classrooms to Minnesota, I jumped at the chance. I had seen the 2005 documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* and loved it, but the program wasn't yet available in our state. Our school signed up, and Dancing Classrooms came to St. Paul.

Now, less than a year later, I was listening to these kids reminisce about their experiences. Angelo admitted, "...but then, as it progressed, I got into it, and I liked it more than any other kind of dancing, because I found out I was better than I thought I'd be." Emilia agreed, "When we started I found out that I really liked it and I was good at it."

All of the students, without exception, dreaded the physical contact. One expectation of the program is that students walk in "escort position" in the school hallway. The first few times, this did not go well at all. This

Dancing with the Fifth Graders Teaching Ballroom to the Next Generation

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surprised me, because these kids have been dancing together for years, doing folk dances and playing dance games in class.

Once the initial "eeww" factor of touching a boy or girl passed, they enjoyed the challenge of learning steps and moving in a different way. Over the next ten weeks, the words merengue, foxtrot, rumba, tango, waltz, and swing entered the fifth grade vocabulary,

as they learned how to "shake their buttons." Da'Vion, another student of mine, liked "...learning more dance moves" that he could use when he grows up. When they found out there was a competition involved, that took things to a new level. Now things had gotten serious.

The ten-week Dancing Classrooms program ends with a competition between participating schools. This



first Minnesota cohort included a team from each classroom, so Four Seasons sent two teams, one from each fifth grade classroom. As we got closer to the competition, we were still short one boy, so I made a desperate plea, literally from my knees. Up went a hand in the back of the classroom. When I saw who it belonged to I was shocked!! This was a boy who I had struggled with in the past—he was definitely not one who danced in class willingly. I constantly had to prod him to move at all, let alone with a partner! He joined the team and has been a different kid ever since. He sees himself as a dancer now, which he hadn't before.

The day of the competition was so exciting. The practice room vibrated with excitement as dancers grabbed the closest classmate to review their steps and practice their hold. "I felt like a real ballroom dancer girl," Jenny said when I asked what she remembered about that day. However, one dancer stood nervously in the corner and wouldn't move. I tried, but I didn't have the right words to help him find his courage. Fortunately our music teacher was there, and he knew just what to say. Gradually the boy moved toward his partner and soon he was dancing. Meltdown averted!

As the competition began, the fifth graders heartily cheered each other

on, only needing a few reminders that cheering too loudly wasn't helping the rhythm of their team dancers on the floor. All their practice was paying off and they looked wonderful. Then, after rounds and rounds of tango, merengue and all the other dances, it was time. When the awards for first and second place went to Four Seasons A+, there weren't two teams, but one big team of gloriously happy kids. Kids who weren't afraid to touch each other, lead or follow each other, or shake their buttons. Kids who were confident in their dancing and were happy to show it. Kids who will remember their Dancing Classrooms experience for the rest of their lives, and smile when they think of it! ■