

Youth On Fire: Embodied Global Leadership

By Melissa Michaels, EdD

How can we create an education for the kinds of embodied leaders that our world so desperately needs?

At the age of twenty-one, when my undergraduate studies completed, I was airlifted by fate to a small village in South India. For months I taught dozens of Tamil children. Our classes were held in the embrace of the branches of a huge Banyan tree. With no knowledge of their language, I turned to the only vehicle for communication we had in common ... our bodies.

Every morning, I was greeted by bright-eyed children delighted to imitate my every gesture. Without thought, I found myself moving in ways I never imagined possible. As a disembodied young academic, using my body for anything other than numbing my pain was a real stretch. Yet, my enthusiasm guided me to jump and roll, to do whatever it took to explain to these new young friends how numbers could be added and subtracted. I would contort my body into funny shapes, creating moving images to describe their vocabulary words.

Meanwhile, my young Tamil "students" were busy teaching *me*. Their nimble hands were busy crafting beautiful dolls from scraps, learning to sew and weave with their mamas. They were always tending one another, brushing and stroking with great devotion. Out of nowhere, their voices would spontaneously rise up together in the middle of cooking their meal of simple grains, simply because someone felt like singing. These young people were naturally embodied, a state of being that this Western girl would take years to access.

One particular morning when I was alone with the children and completely lost in my work of trying to explain things with my antics, a demanding voice began speaking to me from within. Disoriented, I leaned onto a wide root of our Banyan tree as this

wave of intense energy washed through me. I felt like I was hearing the cries of the children all over the world. The hunger and innocence being revealed to me was so intense that I could barely stand. A message was being delivered intravenously to my soul:

You will help raise the children that will help raise the children of the world.

This mandate has guided my journey ever since.

In that poignant moment far, far away from anything familiar to me, I came home to myself like I never had before. The children of the world were calling, and I knew that we already shared a universal language – movement.

Today, I have the privilege of working with hundreds of gifted and dedicated leaders around the world who aim to serve children and youth in their diverse communities through the somatic arts, particularly conscious dance. Some of my students will never see a university, their classrooms nestled on the red soils of their villages in India or on the crowded streets of their townships in Africa. Others already have master's degrees in somatic psychology but want to learn how to bring dance more effectively into their classrooms in public schools or in prisons across our nation, for example. Dedicated to the wellbeing of their generation, many of these young leaders know that 50% of all American youth are not physically active, setting them up for depression and other chronic and deadly disorders. They also see the research clearly revealing the power movement has in stimulating and developing the brain in critical ways that improve achievement. Honoring that dance has been a powerful doorway to their own health at every level ~ physically, emotionally, creatively, interpersonally, and spiritually, these emerging leaders want to know how they can translate their dances from the personal to the people.