

The Relationship between the Lead Teacher and the Assistant

Elizabeth Stubbs

A while ago, a friend who is an assistant asked me if I could think of any questions that should be asked when a lead teacher and an assistant begin their work together. As I have had experience working as an assistant, a co-teacher and a lead teacher with and without an assistant, I felt that my perspective might be useful.

First of all, this relationship is an intimate dance, which has often been likened to a marriage and communication is key. Both parties should

be very clear about what the expectations are before they work together. After that, there should be regular check-ins to make sure you both are still on the same page and, most especially, if there are questions or one of you is chafing about something. The children will benefit enormously by seeing two adults working together in harmony, and both adults will be happier, too.

Initially, the lead teacher should very seriously consider what it means to have an assistant. The

old model is of a shadow figure, with no authority, who is a silent helpmate, subservient to the “ego” of the classroom. My own personal opinion is that a good assistant is every bit as important as the lead teacher and should be treated as an equal who has a different task to fulfill. Others may not agree with this model. I see an assistant as just that, an assistant, a helper, someone with whom to share the work, definitely not a servant. Much also depends on what the assistant wants from her experience. If she hopes to eventually become a lead teacher herself, she may wish to hear more about the pedagogy than someone who does not.

In most Waldorf early childhood classrooms, the responsibilities of the assistant include preparing food and cleaning. These are no small tasks, especially considering the numbers involved, but there are a thousand other small duties to be performed each day as well. The lead teacher needs to be mindful that the assistant needs some time to accomplish her work and be sensitive about overloading her with too many requests such as, “Please find a job for Johnny to do,” if it means that snack will then be delayed by a half-hour. Each must be constantly aware of the other.

There are many other questions that should be asked and discussed from the beginning. What are the hours the assistant is expected to work in the classroom? What are the pay, benefits, sick, personal and snow day policies? What are the responsibilities involved in preparing food? What is the menu? Who will shop for the food? How to get reimbursed? Who will do the laundry? What is the cleaning schedule? (i.e., daily vacuuming?) What is the daily (weekly, monthly) rhythm? How much autonomy does the assistant have in her “domain”? What about outdoor time? How many teachers will be with the children? Are there guidelines for personal appearance, including clothing, jewelry, makeup and fragrances? What does the teacher want the mood of the classroom to be like and how would she like the assistant to help create that mood? What are the lead teacher’s priorities for the children? (Creative play? Social development) How much help should the children receive tying shoes, etc. Is the assistant expected to substitute for the lead teacher? If so, is she compensated differently on those days? Is she

comfortable doing so? Will she need support in this? How much talking to parents should the assistant do? Is the assistant expected to attend faculty meetings or parent meetings/conferences? How is authority handled in the classroom? How is discipline handled? Is the assistant expected to be a part of Circle? Story? Puppetry work? Does the assistant have special talents or gifts that she would like to share? How should the assistant or the lead teacher bring up issues with the other?

I work alone now, and I really miss having someone to share the work with, but even more, having someone to talk to. An assistant often can have a different relationship with a child than the lead teacher does, and she can be another valuable pair of eyes when you are trying to observe a child. When I had an assistant, I used to discuss the day with her as we cleaned up together every day. I valued her help so much, and also the opportunity to share the frustrations and the joys of working with the children. I was grateful for her perspective.

Flexibility will stand each adult in good stead, most especially if either one is inexperienced, but it is important to understand that it takes even those who are very experienced quite a while to begin to understand each other’s ways. It generally takes the children around six weeks to settle into a new classroom situation. It may take two adults at least that long to start working in synchrony. It is always a work in progress, one that can never be perfect. Humor will help too. Sometimes the two of you will just need to laugh about what you find yourself in the middle of. Trust is essential as well, trust that you both are competent adults and can manage to work things out. Trust each other enough to share your thoughts and feelings with each other. Hopefully you won’t need to forgive each other much, but do it freely when you must.

Being an assistant can be like painting someone else’s painting. There are many “Introduction to Waldorf Kindergarten” courses available that can give the assistant an introduction to the pedagogy.

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