

# Can Waldorf Education Be Practiced In Public Schools?

## Learning Through Dialogue

Patti Smith

In 1997, through the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Waldorf Education Research Institute (WERI) began a three-year study to investigate Waldorf education. The purpose of the study was to determine to what extent the pedagogical principles and practices of Waldorf education could be made general to public schools, particularly those serving poor minority children in urban settings. Data derived from a survey of 20 individuals involved in Waldorf and Waldorf-inspired schools provided three themes for the investigation: (1) education that addresses the needs of the whole child; (2) education that integrates the arts in curriculum, and (3) education with a clearly articulated philosophy of child development and teacher self-development. Such an investigation should help to inform the existing debate regarding Waldorf education's relationship to public schooling.

Four teachers - one from the independent Rudolf Steiner School in New York City, one from the public Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, one from the Westside Community School in New York City; and one from the Harriet Tubman Village Charter School in San Diego, California - with varying degrees of experience in Waldorf education have volunteered to participate in the study.

Once a year the teachers meet with the researchers to identify the main lesson content, teaching and assessment strategies, and teacher professional and personal development activities that they would like to address. Subsequently, these teachers participate in two hour long teleconferencing session four times during the year. In the process of discussing the children in each other's classrooms, the environments that each teacher must cope with and the overall demands of each individual situation, the teachers are able to share curriculum and questions as they relate to their specific populations of students and parents. Teachers discuss how Steiner's philosophy influences the decisions that they make on a daily basis in their classrooms.

It is hoped that by the end of the three to five year study, a large body of documented information will emerge regarding factors that facilitate or constrain the development and continuation of Waldorf educational practices in these various settings. The intent is to present the characteristics of Steiner education in such a way that members of the wider educational community will be informed by the philosophy and practices. It will be important to find language that is true to the practices in Waldorf education but that can be understood by educators who may not be familiar with the language that is traditionally used by Waldorf teachers.