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# Literacy Learning in Waldorf Early Childhood

~ Trice Atchison

We Waldorf educators continuously seek ways to bridge our knowledge practices of education with the language of mainstream education. Recently, I attended a Waldorf early childhood conference and had many good conversations with colleagues and friends. During a lunch debate, I heard a seasoned Waldorf educator respond to a question from a curious mainstream kindergarten teacher: “What do you do about reading and writing in kindergarten?” My colleague answered: “Oh, not much, we leave that up to the grades.”

I was taken aback. It astonished me to hear a Waldorf educator not proclaim the important work we undertake. Too often I hear, “All you do in early childhood is bake and sweep.” I believe it is time that we stand up and learn to express ourselves eloquently when speaking about our curriculum.

Literacy education, which is practiced so richly in Waldorf kindergartens, is one concrete place where we can start. I was fortunate enough to attend a mainstream “emergent literacy” course this past spring that really helped me put into words what we already know and do. I would like to share what I have learned.

In the Waldorf kindergarten, literacy education is based on the emergent literacy model. This means that children are always learning language in many different ways. Embraced in a warm, loving kindergarten environment, children experience, among many other things, a program rich in language arts. We offer oral stories, rhymes, riddles, and songs that teach syntax, structure, and word order. All these language offerings also teach phonological awareness, which means exploring language and sounds.

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Through phonological awareness we can identify and manipulate units of sound and words.

Literacy learning in Waldorf schools is also intertwined with other experiences, such as self-expression through gesture and movement and a wide variety of sensory encounters. Therefore, we are able to meet children with many different learning styles. In imaginative ways children manipulate and explore symbols, thus learning the meanings of diverse signs (such as a picture in place of a name tag, a pinecone whose absence indicates that

someone is in the bathroom, and so forth). We offer opportunities for three-dimensional presentations while working with bread dough, beeswax, and sand. In our weekly rhythms, children are engaged in artistic experiences, such as drawing and painting. These countless “multimodal” ways of learning literature are a source of creativity and joy and are fundamental to reading and writing abilities that develop later.

In the Waldorf early childhood classroom, children not only learn literacy and language arts in multimodal ways but also the social contexts of a Waldorf school. We are especially fortunate to have strong school communities, which provide cultural context for our children. Families, administrators, and teachers take part in community life through picnics, dinners, school celebrations, craft circles, work parties, and much more. Through these activities we share in meaningful, common experiences and build relationships and cultural contexts in which our children are firmly rooted. As teachers, being sensitive to families from diverse cultures and backgrounds enables us to bring a culturally relevant curriculum.

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One of the greatest gifts to our children is that we *tell* stories. When a story is told, rather than read, the narrative is not necessarily culturally bound. Therefore, a story that is told offers the possibility for all children to identify with the main characters. If our picturing of the scenes we describe is universal and inclusive in our own minds, then we open the children to the possibility to experience this as well. By looking deeply at what lies underneath our use of language, we serve the children well in preparing them for literacy learning.

Much more stands behind our curriculum. We Waldorf teachers must deepen our own understanding of what stands behind the Waldorf early childhood curriculum. We are professionals in the field of early childhood; we need to be able to articulate all facets of our work in a competent manner. Learning this mainstream vocabulary and expanding our own consciousness of the great substance that stands behind our work is our present and future task. ♦

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