
Reading the Signs of the Times

Literacy Learning in the Waldorf Early Childhood Classroom

— Astrid Lackner

Note from the Editor—This article by Astrid Lackner is being reprinted from the previous issue of Gateways, Issue 76, with sincere apology. The authorship was misattributed and we wish to thank and honor Astrid for this contribution and for the gracious and generous way she responded to this editorial error.

In Waldorf education, as teachers we continuously seek to find 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 overheard a well-seasoned Waldorf educator respond to an enquiry coming from a curious mainstream kindergarten teacher: “What do you do about reading and writing in kindergarten?” was her question. 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 now to share what I have learned.

Literacy taught in a Waldorf kindergarten 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 language-arts rich program. We offer oral stories, rhymes, riddles and songs that teach

syntax, structure, and word order. All these language offerings also teach phonological awareness, the term used to indicate exploring language and sounds. Through phonological awareness we can identify and manipulate units of sounds and whole words.

Literacy learning in Waldorf Schools is also intertwined with other experiences, such as gesture and movement as means for self-expression and for a wide variety of sensory encounters. Therefore, we are able to meet children in the many different styles in which they learn. In imaginative ways children manipulate and explore symbols, thus gaining insight into the meaning of diverse signs (i.e. a picture in place of a name tag, a pinecone whose absence tells us that someone is in the bathroom, and much more). 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 the source of creativity and joy and are fundamental to later reading and writing abilities.

In a 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 the manifold families from diverse cultures and backgrounds enables us to teach a culturally relevant curriculum.

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 will offer the possibility to all children to identify themselves with the main characters. In children's imagination, the characters in the narrative can be of any skin shade or culture and can be experienced as all-inclusive if our picturing of the scenes we describe is universal and inclusive in our own minds. We see, therefore, that by paying attention to the current terminology that is used in the mainstream, we are able to meet and exceed the expectations of literacy learning taught in public schools.

This outline of our literacy education describes only a small portion of what stands behind our curriculum. We need to deepen our own understanding of what stands behind the well-known activities in Waldorf

early childhood. 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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