

***Multi-Culturalism In Waldorf Education***  
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*The 1989 Children's Act requires that adults working with young children show an awareness and sensitivity towards multi-culturalism in the community. This awareness must embrace not only racial groups, but also cultural and religious minorities.*

In order to begin to address multi-culturalism we need to ask ourselves certain basic questions:

- Do we create an environment in our kindergarten which affirms the humanity of an African-American family? or one of Asian descent? etc.
- Our past and present is filled with racism, imperialism and nationalism - and minority families are asking us "How can we heal these situations for our children's future?"
- We must recognize that today there is hardly a spot on our earth where people of diverse cultures have not converged.
- We must recognize that diversity exists within us too. "Learning about another culture makes us more conscious of our own culture and our own heritage".
- We need to develop an inner attitude of respect and reverence towards people of all cultures (adults and children) so that the children can perceive this and imitate it.

We can review certain aspects of our work in the light of sensitivity to multi-culturalism, e.g. the stories we choose, the celebration of festivals, and equipment.

### **Fairy Tales**

There are archetypal truths in fairy tales which belong to the "soul world" of man - they are appropriate for all children anywhere in the world because they speak to the child's budding Ego and encourage its development. They have a universal nature. However they still carry something of the European culture, the creamy skin, golden hair, etc. Also we must be sensitive to stories that can be offensive to some, e.g. Mother Holle where the industrious good girl was rewarded with gold, whereas the lazy girl turned black.

When you tell a folk tale however, to a minority culture - something which reflects their own cultural background, you see the child "light up" - the story acknowledges their own cultural background. These folk tales and stories also help enrich the children from European backgrounds and enable them to live into other cultures, however we do not need to give the children information about the stories' origins or cultural background. It is not yet time to teach the children, but what the stories provide is a nourishment to their inner life, in the same way that fairy tales do.

When telling a fairy tale or story from another culture we need to live into and form a positive relationship to that culture and story. Then it will not seem foreign to us or to the children who "dream" into the story through our telling. They are able to live into the tale even if there is no one from that culture in the kindergarten. Stories from diverse cultures give us a taste of those cultures, those regions of the earth from which the stories come. This helps us "feel" into the lives of others, a step towards empathy! "We can begin to taste the other, and soon it becomes less other". (Stephen Spitalny)

The white man finds it hard to recognize the “humanity” in other cultures, and from his own written intellectual tradition rather tends to inflict his own rational, intellectual, logical thought upon the oral cultures. We need to recognize that words have meaning deeper than what one “hears” (this is especially important in kindergarten age children). We need to respect the vitality which lives in the living Word - listening to the unspoken word, and make space for what is coming from the outside and work with it - not wrap ourselves in our European heritage and remain bunkered.

But what we must also be conscious of is not becoming tokenistic. I cannot express this enough, we must learn to live into what we are doing.

It will be necessary to form a more personal connection to this issue by exploring our own culture:

- What is MY heritage? (grandparents, etc.)
- What are MY beliefs? (religious, cultural, social)
- What are MY prejudices? (race, gender, etc.)
- Am I uncomfortable with certain situations? (homosexuals, disabilities, etc.)

We need to ask ourselves if we can be truly non-judgmental.

Until we know our standpoint, we cannot know how to look outward objectively. Until we recognize our own failings and limitations, we can't recognize the life in other cultures. We need to step into the other cultures' shoes and try to grow in awareness and empathy.

“I treat them all the same” is not a truth. Children are not all the same, each is an individual. “We aim to treat all children with equal concern, not all the same.”

Watch your language. You cannot say there is not a difference between a black or a white child; of course there is. However, to the child you need to make the difference so general that it becomes irrelevant, and then answer the question without weight. We need to live with these questions which might arise and think about how we would answer them before they do arise. For example, “Akimba has dark skin because his father comes from Nigeria which is very hot, and Noria's mother comes from Norway which is a cold country, and the sun doesn't shine there very much, so she has pale skin, but their hearts both shine like the sun.”

## **What Can We Do About It**

### **Self-Education**

We need to find out what humanity today says about tribal/racial differences.

- That environmental differences created the different racial features (not separate breeds). Research shows how climatic changes have affected the features in Australasia.
- That we come from the same “gene pool”. The DNA structure is the same throughout all the races. (The consequences being that there is no such thing as Race... Pseudo-scientific research shows that genetically we all come from four different people.)
- Karmically we choose to be born into different races to have a specific environmental, cultural and racial experience. Perhaps this is part of learning how to live together, to grow in awareness and empathy?

## **Courses**

These are worthwhile, not only because we begin to recognize what is expected of us, but also so that we can begin to contribute to their debate. Look for trainings organized by Human Resources, the Department of Education or a pre-school association.

## **Language**

We need to become “Politically Correct” in our terminology (and again I stress not tokenistic.)

For example: Black - A word chosen by many African-Caribbean and some Asian people to describe themselves, their situation and a shared experience in society where people are subjected to prejudice, harassment and discrimination because of the color of their skin. Some people use it as a political term, not necessarily a skin color.

Ethnic Group: This is the group we belong to and identify with because of nationality, color, culture, values, religion, etc. Everybody belongs to an ethnic group. English, Jewish, Welsh, etc. Ethnic does not equal black!

## **Interviews**

We need to become familiar with our parents and children, to make sure that we have accurate biographies of the parents and children; acknowledge their cultural, religious, racial differences; and make sure that they understand our philosophy. And they need to realize that we will not compromise our essentially Christian Waldorf education, but that they are free to partake in our festivals of their own free will. Constantly ask yourself, “How will I deal with this situation if it should arise?”. For example, explain the Sistine Madonna to prospective parents or at a parents evening, as it is often taken as representing an all white racial group or else a Catholic Icon.

## **What You Will Need:**

The foundation for successful inspection is the presence of certain documentation and policy statements, for example:

- Parents’ Handbook
- Equal Opportunities statement: “Our school recognizes and has regard for the child’s religious persuasion, racial origins, cultural and linguistic background, so that each child is valued as an individual without racial or gender stereotyping.”
- A Multi-cultural Policy
- Waldorf Schools Equal Opportunities Statement.
- Grievance procedure - written in handbook (e.g.: speak to teacher (never alone), then the board.)
- Policy: Make sure that all the staff are familiar with the policies and adhere to them.

In addition:

1. Include all parents of other cultures in implementing festivals - ask them in depth about their cultural and religious heritage.
2. Support the children's ability to reproduce a variety of costumes through the provision of dressing-up materials.
3. Puppet shows and stories can embrace diversity.

Equal opportunity awareness is as important as multi-cultural awareness. This includes other issues such as: disadvantage, discrimination, prejudice, power. An equal opportunities policy and practice addresses: race equality, disability, sexism, human rights, equal opportunities for all, ageism.

### **Suggested Reading**

- Article in PAIDEA - No 15, November 1997.
- "Diversity and Story in the Kindergarten", Stephen Spitalny, Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter, Fall 1997.
- Multi-Culturalism In Waldorf Education, Vol. 3, Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter, Spring 1993.