

Inviting Parents into Our Work and Play

— Stephanie Skinner and Hellene S. Brodsky Blake

“A healthy social life is found only when in the mirror of each soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the whole community the virtue of each one is living.”

- Rudolf Steiner

Through the Garden Gate We Go, Working Together We Learn and Grow

Early childhood programs, be they in our homes or nestled within our schools, offer for many parents a first experience of the principles and practices of Waldorf education. These values are found living in the school community, a community to which most early childhood families are or have been brand new. In this way, early childhood teachers and programs play a unique role in their communities, as we are the gateway that opens to welcome new families, introduce them to Waldorf education, and invites them to become an intimate part of the school community. Our relationships with new parents and families establish an essential foundation for the years to follow.

We have found that, with this foundational relationship in mind, creating opportunities for parents to actively experience and discover for themselves the vital underpinnings of Waldorf Education is

invaluable. Inviting parents to participate and experience hands-on learning, while concomitantly sharing pedagogy, instills in the parent body a deeper security, investment, understanding, and commitment to Waldorf education. In order to enliven and deepen the commitment to working with parents that already exists in our early childhood programs, we facilitated a workshop at the National Early Childhood Symposium held in November of 2015 at Rudolf Steiner College, the results of which are found in this article.

Working with Our Hands, Hearts and Heads

The workshop started with handwork and crafting. For this workshop, we chose a project that, if used at a parent evening, would allow parents to make something they can use to bring beauty and reverence in their own home while at the same time experiencing

the kind of handwork their own children might be doing. Engage the will (hands) first by cutting rounds and sanding. Then the feeling (heart) realm is enlivened by working with copper (a warming, healing metal). Finally the thinking (head) is engaged as you select and create a pattern in the copper. This same idea of “hands to heart to head” is found as a guiding pedagogical principle throughout Waldorf education. We see this exemplified here in this particular craft project, and also in general when we bring parents into our classrooms or play yards to work; they learn by doing, which creates then a feeling and, then later we reflect on our experiences and what they might mean for our own lives. (Instructions for this craft can be found following the article.)

Collaboration and Co-creation: A Living Workshop

Together we gathered with twenty-five Waldorf teachers from across the nation, from early childhood programs in public and private Waldorf schools as well as home programs. They joined for a workshop that was described in conference materials as a “workshop that will explore the role of early childhood program as the gateway to Waldorf education and culture. We will share community building activities for parents, and make a copper and wood candle holder, perfect for a parent meeting.”

In the spirit of our times, in which we find that we learn best through experience and self-discovery, the workshop was in itself collaboratively co-created using an approach known as the World Cafe. This process allows wisdom to emerge from the group rather than directly and solely from the instructor. Often times through this process, both the facilitator and the participants garner new concepts, ideas and imaginations. Through World Cafe there is a propensity to assimilate these discoveries as their

“It’s never enough just to tell people about some new insight. Rather, you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility. Instead of pouring knowledge into people’s heads, you need to help them grind a new set of eyeglasses so they can see the world in a new way.”

*- John Seely Brown,
A New Culture of Learning*

own. This results in a deepening commitment of the tenants of the topic at hand, the school community or other working group. It’s a wonderful way to work with parents at a parent night! We encourage you to learn more, and to try this model on your own.

For further details on World Cafe, including a description of how to lead one, visit www.theworldcafe.com.

Through the World Cafe, workshop participants actively shared the seasonal community building activities their school and individual classes or programs offer. We emphasized the role of the parents and teachers as being one of great responsibility, as we know that the child is, through imitation, modeling herself out of the outer deeds

and inner attitudes of the adults. Seeing parents and teachers work together is a wonderful and potent model for young children to take into their work and play, and into their whole being.

What kinds of things are we doing with parents in our classrooms around the year? Here are some of the ideas that were shared during the workshop when participants were asked what events and opportunities have been most successful. We hope you find inspiration! And, if you have any hesitations about bringing parents into the classroom or on to the play yard (we know it can be extra work!), we encourage you to give it a try. A day spent in the classroom can be eye-opening for parents, as they learn so much from observing us with the children, and are enlivened just as the children are through purposeful work and play.

- **SUMMER:** Home visits; craft groups; making “Little Ones”, birthday gifts, and classroom

supplies; work parties; picnics; nature walks; baking groups; preparing the classroom

- **FALL:** Lantern making in the classroom; making applesauce or jam together, and canning it for the winter; Harvest Fair and other festivals of the fall (Festival of Courage, Enchanted Walk...); parents carving pumpkins and roasting seeds in class
- **WINTER:** Book groups, craft groups; parent teas on the weekend; wet felting craft; potlucks and special presentations; holiday evening with a sharing of traditions and foods
- **SPRING:** Spring cleaning inside and out (many hands make light work!); end of year ceremonies and celebrations; working in the garden together
- **ALL YEAR ROUND:** Weekly hiking or walk days, with parent volunteers; monthly trips to the community garden; seasonal hikes to the same place in nature; an outdoor morning circle for parents and children, at the start of the kindergarten day; inviting parents for story, with an open door policy; having a parent volunteer or two to be “handy people” who come in when you need tricky repairs done; sharing of seasonal songs via CD or audio recording of some kind; inviting parents to share a project, such as woodworking, weaving, or sewing; birthday celebrations; inviting in, one at a time, each and every parent or family to spend all or part of a day, as a routine practice

Participants also discussed how they believe the values and principles of Waldorf Education are established in their community, and created a parent survey meant to shed new light on our work by including the parent perspective.

Parent Participation, Reflection and Response

The survey was sent to parents across the country from a wide variety of schools and programs which included private and public Waldorf schools and home programs. It is our hope that the responses will help us to more effectively create meaningful opportunities for parents to build community while also learning and transforming their own lives.

Which of the following community events have you found most meaningful and effective for building community at your school or program? Choose all that apply:

Work Parties.....	32%
Parent or Class Meetings.....	69%
Guest Lectures or Speakers.....	31%
Festivals.....	76%
Community Picnics.....	32%
Volunteering in Classroom.....	36%
Crafting Groups /Making Little Ones.....	38%

Which of the following areas of your parenting approach or home life have been influenced by Waldorf Education?

Media use; media mindfulness.....	90%
Routine/rhythm in the home.....	83%
Children’s health.....	47%
Overall understanding of child development.....	82%
Nutrition.....	42%
Understanding of First Grade Readiness.....	41%
Spirituality or religion.....	20%
Festivals, celebrations.....	61%
Activities outside of school.....	27%

To which of the following experiences do you attribute these changes?

Parent nights, parent meetings.....	66%
Articles, links, and other resources.....	82%
Parent-teacher conferences.....	65%
Work parties.....	10%
Festivals.....	43%
Birthday Celebrations.....	27%
Time spent volunteering in the classroom.....	37%
Learning from other parents.....	50%
Class picnics.....	11%

Overall results overwhelmingly suggest that festivals, parent meetings, and class meetings are essential opportunities for supporting the bridge between home and school and the creation of a healthy school community. Further results indicate that through these opportunities for social interactions, changes in home rhythms, media usage, and understanding child development are enhanced and more aligned with school expectations, values and policies. The experiential opportunities for parents, whether

“The model of community we seek is one that can embrace, guide, and refine the core mission of education—the mission of knowing, teaching, and learning... To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.”

*- Parker J. Palmer,
The Courage to Teach*

seeking community, guidance, support and a deeper meaning and understanding in education. Parents often experience fear when they are left wondering about the whys, hows, meanings, and spiritual foundations of Waldorf education. Waldorf schools share a responsibility to provide this avenue of education beyond the child. Full inclusion of the parent and adult body is essential for the full health of not only the child, yet the school community.

Our survey results reflected over 100 participants from a variety of Waldorf settings. The findings further support the importance of community extending beyond the classroom. Festivals, interactions with teachers, salient articles, and meaningful work exemplify the foundation of a healthy collaborative relationship between teacher and parent. It is suggested that further data collection include a larger sample size across our parent bodies. Whether the child is within a private, public or homeschool setting, Waldorf education is needed more than ever as an antidote for our insta-paced, movement-less, media-saturated world.

We encourage you to expand your horizons with your parent body and share with us your experiences. Know that you are not alone as a teacher, as

with a teacher or other parents, are enhanced by articles and the sharing of current research and data.

Parting Thoughts

In summary, this living workshop on cultivating and creating community proved to be a rich resource for the deepening of our relationships to our parent bodies. Our collaborative work as teachers and parents is imperative on behalf of the health and well being of the children and the families of today. Parents are

parents desire to be in the classroom, too. We urge you to place renewed value on parent involvement, participation, and input as a means of building the healthy fabric of your community. There is an interdependence, be it healthy or unhealthy, that lives in, around and between us and our students and your families. Our work is to remove hindrances from not only the children, but also from the parents and within ourselves in order to be truly free.

What successes have you had in bringing parents into the work and play of your children’s garden? How has this affected individual parents? How has this affected your community? We would love to hear from you and share your successes. Please email us! ♦

“Trust and confidence between parents and teachers is the foundation for success in the classroom. It is so important one can rightly call it the ‘second classroom.’ ”

*- Torin Finser,
A Second Classroom*

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