

It Takes a Village to Raise a Child *Extended Care in the Waldorf Schools*

• Andrea Gambardella

This is a report from a three-day focus group that met to share and explore extended care programs in Waldorf schools at the 2009 AWSNA conference in Portland, Oregon. The purpose of the focus group was to shape a way of addressing the whole of the school leadership—faculty, College of Teachers, Board—in order to garner full support for the needs of these programs. The group attempted to address an understanding of what is best for children in need of care, while meeting the realities of staff, facilities and costs of providing care programs. Nine people representing six schools and one training institute made up the group. They represented both long-standing schools and younger schools, and included early childhood morning program lead educators, extended day educators and admissions officers. Participants offered a variety of reasons for coming to this focus group: school considering opening an extended day program; programs in a school seemed piecemeal; questions concerning how to design the programs with best pedagogical practices.

Overview

One characteristic of the previous age in time, a time governed by Gabriel, was the connection of blood relations. We are now over one hundred years into a Michaelic age where blood ties are not the only or predominant unifying agent. As we look into our world we see how people are building a global society, for example in how younger people are creating communities together through the internet and how members of nuclear families are widely scattered across the globe. The fast growth of institutional infant and child care is also evidence of this, with the increasing role of non-family members in the life of children. Waldorf teachers with over twenty years' experience speak often of how the role of the teacher and school in the life of the child and family has shifted significantly, calling on more participation by teachers in the broader education of the child.

Some points to consider are:

1. The child needs constant and secure relationship and bonding to thrive. The Hungarian pediatrician, Emmi Pikler (who coined the widely used phrase “primary care provider”) did remarkable work with infant and toddler orphans, demonstrating the life-long health benefits resulting from a child’s bonding to caring adults. She also brought to the fore the benefits and detriments of the attachment-loss cycle many children experience early in life.
2. There is research demonstrating how emotional issues of insecurity cloud and veil the child’s ability to be fully present for learning in informal and formal educational settings. These children are often wrongly identified as having learning disabilities, or develop them as a result of emotional baggage. A child who is hyper-vigilant will not be able to focus for long periods on lessons in a class, or attend to social circumstances to learn valuable lessons for relationship building.
3. There is a steady stream of research published on children’s health issues arising from exhaustion and over-stimulation: sleep problems, digestive problems, asthma (breathing problems), skin and other allergies. These are likely results of our lifestyle and the lifestyle imposed on the child.
4. Play is a part of every human life, and is especially important in the youngest years of childhood (birth to fourteen years). The International Association for Play defines play as freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and self-directed. Even the child who leaves school at noon or 3 pm is not necessarily going home to an environment that allows time for real play.
5. Schools have increased responsibilities for acculturating children, surrounding them with community, and providing mentors. (James Pewtherer spoke at the conference about moments of human meeting and how each of us in a school might be providing essential and critical meetings of recognition for a child and for each other).

Are Waldorf schools recognizing extended day/ afterschool programs as an integral part of the child's Waldorf experience? How are we viewing what we want from children for the main portion of the school day—versus how we care for their overall health between noon and 3 to 6 pm? Are we fully recognizing the young child's need for continuity of care, rhythm, minimizing transitions, and meaningful long-term relationships?

Areas to Address

Together, the group identified six areas for school committees to address and articulate the school's values. Participants listed some of these values.

Provider

- Warm, nurturing, communicative, guiding care provider
- Ideally having Waldorf training, and/or an affinity for this type of work with some background in care
- Consistent, long-term stability in staff
- A school-culture attitude that promotes the child's enthusiasm for being in care

Program

- Play, a hearty snack, warm relationship with adults
- The re-creation of "being at home in the neighborhood"
- So-called enrichment is not seen as necessary after a full day in a Waldorf school—rather, allowing for the digestion of a rich day of experiences
- Unstructured free play, with supervision with a variety of possibilities, designed by Waldorf teachers
- For older children—Homework time, the possibility for instrument lessons

Environment

- Designated space that provides comfort, familiarity and a sense of ownership
- Large enough for activity options
- Homework space, adjoining outdoor space (visually accessible)
- Supervisory environment—held but not hovering

Rhythm

- Formalities/rituals should frame the afternoon: entering into the afternoon, within the snack or meal, for the farewell

Food

- Snack provided by the program
- Consistent, simple, ensouled presentation
- Nourishing healthy food

Support of the School

- Clear communication among the teachers and providers
- Extended care staff connected to full faculty
- Substitution coverage so that attendance by the provider at faculty meeting is possible regularly or in some way
- Clear description of programs and articulation of policies

How to effect community support in your school

The group explored ways to facilitate discussion of extended day programs within the school. Below are our notes.

- Begin with the College of Teachers—write it up as a proposal, with research examples from other Waldorf schools; survey parent body for need
- Discussion with full Faculty Meeting:
- Taking it up as a study
- Define essentials
- Make visible the realities in your school—provide statistics within your school
- Survey parents for need
- Admissions—who is asking for an after school program? Keep a tally.
- What might be the growth-curve for this program in our school over the next few years?
- Can we serve the young child for such an extended day?
- Health studies
- What aligns the program with the mission of the school?
- Research the children and families within our own programs for benefits and challenges of current design.
- Who are the young children coming who have already been in care? What does it tell us?

Examples from Waldorf Schools

The schools listed below are accommodating the needs within their own community; their programs are designed for the specifics of their situation. They each have elements that can offer good research for any school looking to gain a picture of how these programs can be formed, staffed, and resourced.

Prairie Hill Waldorf School, contact Anne-Marie Freyer

Portland Waldorf School, contact Charles Forster and Robin O'Brien

Olympia Waldorf School, contact Aurora Gregory

Waldorf School of Garden City, contact Lucille Goldenberg

Highland Hall Waldorf School, contact Laura Ferris

Atlanta Waldorf School, contact Anne Sommerville-Hall

Note: In Fall 2009, WECAN posted on its website its Healthy Organizational Practices topics. Extended Care programs are a featured topic. www.waldorfearlychildhood.org.

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