

Learning Through Creating an Urban Waldorf Elementary School Background

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The purpose of this article is to profile an exemplary model of an urban public school. The Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a successful school based on a school level and within the context of traditional assessments. At Urban Waldorf learning through an arts-based curriculum engages the students in education in a meaningful way – a process that develops their whole being, not just their cognitive growth.

‘All the things you read about public schools, that you need to do this, you need to do that – hell, they’ve been doing it for eighty years’ (Mikkelsen, cited in Oppenheimer, 1999).

Mikkelsen [teacher at the Thomas E. Matthew’s Community School] was referring to myriad reforms that policy-makers incessantly propose to reverse a range of problems besetting American youngsters: gradually weakening morality and family structure; students’ shrinking capacity for creativity and self-discipline, and their increasing turns to violence; diminishing appreciation for the nuances of language in reading writing, and conversation; and graduates’ spotty preparation for the professional world (Oppenheimer, 1999).

The second quote, in which the author includes a teacher’s testimonial about a public Waldorf school, describes what aims can be achieved through an arts-based approach to the curriculum. Throughout my research I have discovered several authors (Oppenheimer, 1999; McDermott cited in *The Waldorf Promise*, 1997), teachers, and parents who refer to the Waldorf approach as “the best kept secret” in education.

In this paper I take an inside look at a school in which the students are motivated by intrinsic rewards of aesthetic adventures in the classroom and the teachers want to remain teaching.

Special Aspects of the Urban Waldorf School.

Entering the Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin I encountered an unusual urban public elementary school and took notice. Approximately 250 students attend in grades four year-old kindergarten through fifth grade. Ninety-five percent of the students are African-American, eighty-seven percent of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. Here, a Waldorf-

inspired arts-based curriculum engages students of color in learning, and trains teachers through an artistic lens, to develop an aesthetic appreciation of the world with their students. Indeed this type of school stands in stark contrast to the approach of most city schools which increasingly cut the arts out of the curriculum in order to spend more time meeting the standards (Haberman, 1995; Weiner, 1999; Eisner, 1998).

More than 200 Waldorf schools are located in the U.S in addition to 500 more that exist around the world. However, except for one other public Waldorf school and a few charter Waldorf schools in California, Waldorf remains entrenched in the private school system (Interview, Brad Manatee, 2/22/01). Brad Manatee (a pseudonym), an Urban Waldorf teacher, reported that at a Waldorf conference in the fall of 2000 interest in public Waldorf initiatives seem to be growing. Also, at the Rudolf Steiner College where teacher training occurs, classes in public Waldorf education are now offered.

Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner founded the first Waldorf school in Germany in 1919 (McDermott, 1984). Steiner had a wide range of interests and gave lectures on agriculture, art, and society as well as on educational practices. Emil Molt, a contemporary of Steiner's who owned the Waldorf-Astoria Tobacco Company, encouraged Steiner to develop some of his philosophies for the educational realm to help the child laborers which the factory employed. Similar to Maria Montessori, Steiner advocated for social justice by promoting the idea of giving the same level of education to all social classes in a time when only the elite previously experienced education.

Steiner sought to cultivate the knowledge of his learners through their individual and cooperative spiritual growth. Steiner's ideas combine his theories on human nature and child development. Additionally, he encouraged the teacher to be aware of the holistic child by suggesting that he or she be able to diagnose health conditions of children so that an outside doctor will not have to be brought in to care for the sick students. Steiner urged the teacher to take preventative measures by practicing educational methods, which include therapy to see whether the child is responding well to his or her methods.

Waldorf Teacher Training

Rudolf Steiner believed that the only requirement for a teacher is to become an artist. Prospective teachers need a "transformative" experience in order to teach Waldorf philosophies – similar to what advocates for alternative certification, such as Haberman (1998), have been promoting. Steiner argued that the teacher must be captivated if students are to be (through chalkboard drawings or oral recitations), thus the idea of continual renewal is necessary ("renewal" is central as it is the name of the Waldorf journal).

The education of teachers employing Waldorf philosophies requires its teacher candidates to hold a Bachelor's degree or life experience in any field. Here teacher trainers view life experience as an asset as in many other alternative teacher education programs. The teacher candidates participate in a three-year full time or weekend intensive program of study. The foundational year requires teacher candidates to look inward as they examine their own beliefs as well as the philosophies of Steiner, without teaching methods specifically related to education. The next two years of teacher training are similar to the developmentalist tradition of teacher preparation (Zeichner and Liston, 1990).

One challenge for the Urban Waldorf School has been recruiting and retaining teachers that are both state certified and trained in Waldorf methods especially in a climate where

teachers are hard to employ. One reason for this is the poor working conditions of for teachers in city schools (Weiner, 1999). The literature on urban education points to huge discrepancies between city schools and their suburban counterparts (Anyon, 1997, Peterson, 1991, Kozol, 1991, Wilson, 1987). This is evidenced by 50 percent or higher dropout rates and approximately 60 percent of children coming from families with high levels of poverty in many cities (Recruiting New Teachers, 1999). Equally disturbing is the fact that not many candidates who become certified to teach want to practice in city schools (Grant & Secada; 1990; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). To accommodate the dual licensure requirement of the Urban Waldorf school the faculty has allowed teachers who do not have Waldorf training to enroll in Waldorf classes over the summer since the main Waldorf training institutions are located in California and New England. In the 2001-2002 school year however, the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee obtained a grant to start a Waldorf training program enabling them to train teachers locally.

Methods

In the 2000-2001 school year I participated in the classrooms of three primary grade teachers. I collected data in the following ways for this project. First, I was a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) taking field notes during weekly observations of the three teachers and their students. I spent two to four hours in each classroom and visited one or two classrooms each week. In addition, I assisted the teachers in small tasks as an aide in the classroom. Second, I conducted open-ended, exploratory interviews (Spradley, 1979) with each teacher, the principal, and the implementor (whose role is similar to that of a vice-principal). Third, I interviewed a few students from each classroom to gauge their perceptions on their own learning. I also spoke to parents, through individual interviews that they volunteered for on two spring parent conference nights. The teachers and students' names have all been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Findings / Discussion

External Measures of Success

In reflecting on one of my research questions, “In what ways is this school a successful urban elementary school?” I am identifying the following external factors relating to its effectiveness: 1) the Urban Waldorf students’ high scores on standardized assessments and 2) comparisons of Urban Waldorf to similar schools in Milwaukee.

First, compared to a neighboring school with similar demographics and attendance rates, Urban Waldorf students far exceed their peers on third and fifth grade test scores which measure the percentage of students at or above proficiency for their grade level in each subject for the 1999 – 2000 school year (see table 1).

According to the Milwaukee Department of Public Instruction, test scores from the 1999-2000 academic year on the statewide achievement test administered to fourth graders to measure student proficiency in reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies show positive results. The percentage of Urban Waldorf students that are advanced and proficient in each subject area are consistently higher than the Milwaukee district average (which has 84 percent students of color), with notable differences in reading and mathematics (see table 2).

Second, comparisons to another area city school are important in defining another of Urban Waldorf’s measures of success. The rates at which Urban Waldorf students enter or leave the school within one school year are remarkably lower than both a neighboring school with similar demographics and to the Milwaukee district average mobility rates (see

table 3). In addition, Urban Waldorf remains one of the two of twelve alternative schools still running in Milwaukee from their initial start-up in 1991 by the district superintendent.

Table 1: Urban Waldorf and Neighboring School Test Scores - % of Students Proficient in each Subject (1999-2000)

	Reading (grade 3)	Writing (grade 5)	Science (grade 5)
Urban Waldorf	90.0%	50.0%	33.3%
Neighboring School	67.3%	36.9%	4.8%

This information was taken from the Milwaukee Public Schools annual testing report.

Table 2: Urban Waldorf and Milwaukee Public School Average Test Scores - % of Students at or above Proficient in each Subject (1999-2000)

	Reading test scores	Math test scores
Urban Waldorf Average	64%	62%
Milwaukee District Average	52%	47%

This information is taken from the Statewide Information Network for Successful Schools web site, 2000.

Table 3: Urban Waldorf, Neighboring School, and Milwaukee Public School Mobility Rates

Urban Waldorf	11%	1998-2000
Neighboring School	34%	1998-2000
Milwaukee Public Schools	23.8%	1998-2000

This information is taken from the Statewide Information Network for Successful Schools web site, 2000.

These data indicate that compared to other schools with the same demographics parents are choosing to have their students remain at Urban Waldorf at a higher rate. The principal credits this low student mobility rate as one of the contributing factors of the school's strong sense of community.

Internal Measures of Success

Turning to a set of internal measures of success for Urban Waldorf I analyze four ways in which the Urban Waldorf teachers in the first, second, and third grade classrooms cultivate student learning: 1) the strong student-teacher and student-student relationship, 2) the pacing of activities, 3) culturally relevant teaching, and 4) using a different model of the curriculum based on arts-based activities.

Relationships

First, the strong bond between the student and teacher occurs by having the same teacher stay with the same students for multiple years. In the first grade classroom, Gladys greets each student individually in the morning, shaking their hands and looking at them in the eye on their level. In the kindergarten classroom, Malorie takes the time to comment on individual homework papers as she collects them. This kind of teacher attention to individual students is fostered in conjunction with academics as well as social opportunities.

Discipline is another way in which student – teacher relationships are solidified through attitudes of responsiveness and respect. For example, in the kindergarten classroom, counting is often used as a warning for students to clean up or settle down, in place of harsh reprimands and public humiliation of individuals which is common in other classrooms. Gladys responds to a student wiggling in his or her chair by taking the chair away from the student, requiring him or her to continue the work rather than taking away a snack or recess privilege. Paula has her students discuss as a group the way they treated each other poorly at recess in the classroom, instead of reprimanding individuals. She poses this as a classroom issue, putting responsibility on students to work cooperatively. Students take “time outs” in other people’s classrooms. This philosophy of the principal not being the disciplinarian promotes a shared management of students, so students feel watched by all teachers, not just their own.

An important by-product of the strong student-teacher relationship is the way in which students are also brought together for longer periods of time to develop more meaningful ways of knowing each other. An ethic of caring not only between the teacher and the student, but among the students is instilled. This happens not only in all three of these classrooms, but throughout the school. For example, in the second grade classroom and others, the teachers and several students wear “crazy hats” in honor of the girls’ basketball team’s qualification for the state championship. In addition, a few fifth grade students help the first and second grade classes by providing individual assistance during knitting lessons. The three classroom teachers and the specialty teachers strive to foster a sense of caring through their instruction. Mr. C, the music teacher, Malorie, and Paula all ask students to clap for their peers after one of the students plays an instrument, reads a story, or performs in front of the group.

Pacing

A second way in which these teachers cultivate student learning is through the pacing of lessons or activities. The teachers convey concepts in a continuous manner where one subject is consistently emphasized, rather than teaching fragmented bits of information. For instance, in the second grade classroom, the students learn about the four math operations through the use of

a story about squirrels. On Monday, Paula tells them a story about squirrels living in a house collecting nuts. On Tuesday, the teacher instructs the students to draw a picture of the squirrels in their homes, including shelves, which are neatly lined in rows and columns for the squirrels to store their nuts. Paula draws an example on the board. On Wednesday, the teacher asks them to briefly recall the story, then focuses on the computation of the numbers, (i.e., digits in each column). On Thursday, Paula gives the students practice problems, which they must illustrate. On Friday, the students act out the story. In this way, the students are constantly building ideas that become part of their shared experience rather than practicing drills out of a workbook. The students are engaged because the material is presented artistically.

The teachers have taken the indications of Rudolf Steiner and adapted them in their classrooms to prepare their students mentally and physically for each lesson, not only within each subject, but between subjects as well. In each classroom, the students begin with a slow warm-up activity, followed by an active circle time. After circle time, they move to retelling a story in a different way, then to an activity at their seats. Thus, students' physical needs are weighed as prominently as their cognitive abilities. For example, Gladys holds a rod out for the students to jump over after returning from the bathroom. This stands in contrast to traditional classrooms where teachers often reprimand African-American students for moving around in their seats so much, which conditions these students to sit still and may result in the students losing interest because they cannot express themselves (Delpit, 1995).

Cultural Relevance

A third instructional practice, which the teachers in these primary classrooms employ to cultivate student learning, is making the curriculum culturally relevant in both what is taught and how it is taught. In this way, a few aspects of Ladson-Billings (2001) three pronged indicators of culturally relevant pedagogy are adopted. First, these teachers promote academic achievement by a) presuming all students are capable of being educated, b) knowing the content, the learner, and how to teach the content to the learner, and c) encouraging multiple measures of achievement. Second, the teacher promotes cultural competence by a) understanding culture and its role in education (which is emphasized in the Waldorf teacher training by examining one's own biases), b) taking responsibility for learning about students' cultures and communities (e.g., Waldorf teachers face racial issues directly), and c) using student culture as a basis for learning (by capitalizing on prior knowledge).

Pieces of these components of culturally relevant teaching appear in several ways in the three classrooms. First, during circle time in all grades, students are animated, engaged, learning the language, developing projection, movement, coordination, and listening skills. Most importantly, the instructor is providing a way for the students to connect with their heritage. For example, in the kindergarten classroom the students sing "This Little Light of Mine," while clapping and swaying together like a gospel choir. This allows the students to find their own expression in music that is familiar to them. In the first and second grade, reciting African chants is an integral part of the morning, sending an important message about how they are valued every day, not just during African-American History month. Second, African artifacts are present in each classroom (e.g., African batiks in the second grade classroom, wooden statues on the first grade nature tables). Furthermore, all dolls and chalkboard drawings have brown faces so the students can "see themselves" in the stories. Third, at each of the weekly assemblies, which all grades attend, fifth graders playing African drums greet students.

The Arts

The fourth way in which the Urban Waldorf teachers cultivate student learning is through the curricular model employed in the classrooms. Through using the arts, a teacher can nourish in her students an intrinsic love of learning. For example, story time in the kindergarten and first grade classrooms is an aesthetic event. Through the combined use of oral storytelling, dimming the lights and lighting a candle to set the mood, and singing a verse which brings the students to “storytelling land,” story time becomes a magical and meaningful learning time for students. By having knitting, music, drawing, painting, beeswax modeling, circle time, and eurhythmy (a sequenced event of words put to movements) classes as part of their daily activities, students come to see these activities as an integral, not “fluffy” way of learning. In addition, performances are a regular part of the students’ curriculum. During the semester that I visited the three primary classrooms, I delighted in the opportunity to see the kindergarten class perform the story of “Firebird” and the first grade perform “Briar Rose.” Both were complete with costumes, blocking, and music. The first grade performance was especially impressive as the students memorized verses with difficult language which they enunciated and sang beautifully.

Other subtle ways of teachers cultivating learning through artistic means are equally impressionable on students. For example, the instructors’ use of singing through transitions is a normal event in these classrooms. In contrast, in all of the thirty pre-kindergarten through third grade classes in which I have supervised and observed as a professor, I have only heard pre-k instructors singing through a single transitional activity, and in those rooms the most common occurrence for this was cleaning up from playtime (e.g., “Clean-up time, Clean-up time, Put your toys away...”). These transitional songs are scattered throughout daily activities, so the students also take an active role in singing. For example, when going to the bathroom, leaving for an assembly, lunch, or recess, the kindergarten and first grade teachers lead the students out of the classroom through the use of song, reminding them to take their “Angels” (a concept repeatedly used whereby students put their hands together to make symbolic Angels) with them. This instructional practice is very refreshing, in contrast to the way that many teachers yell at students to line up at the door. In addition, the students and teachers in all three classrooms sing the attendance, rather than the teacher simply calling off names and having students respond with “here” or raising their hands, which is the case in many traditional classrooms. In the second grade classroom, students sing harmonies and learn to match pitch with the xylophone as well as part of the daily attendance routine. These activities also help students to focus in a positive and constructive way for the next activity.

A second subtle way in which art pervades the curriculum throughout these classrooms is through the instructors’ regular references to the personification of various materials. For example, during the kindergarten playtime, Malorie asks the students to “freeze” when she needs the students to be silent to communicate with the entire class and to “thaw” when she finishes speaking signaling the students to commence their activity. In music class, Mr. C instructs his students to say “good morning” to their instruments as well as take their harps out of their “beds” and place their “pillows” in their cases. Gladys often instructs her first graders to put their crayons in their “beds” and roll up their “covers.” This use of the language not only conveys empathy and respect for materials in an ecological way, but it promotes a sophisticated use of the students’ vocabulary.

Conclusion

In summary, the following practices in this Waldorf-inspired urban elementary school seem to be central to the success with students: the continuation of the class teacher for several grades with the same students, the strong bond between the teacher and student, the organization of the curriculum into main lesson topics – which lead to in-depth study of one subject, the integration of the arts with academic work, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, the teaching and valuing of different ways of knowing (i.e., physical, cognitive, and spiritual) which match the rhythms of the students, and the faculty working together toward a common purpose. The Urban Waldorf School does face similar challenges to other schools with parental involvement and teacher recruitment, but the staff has works hard to accommodate the needs of their parents and teachers. Some of these practices exist beyond the means of individual teachers to change, but many of them can be replicated in city schools.

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