Essentials of Waldorf Education Study

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This year the Waldorf Education Research Institute at Sunbridge College conducted the first phase of a three year investigation of the Essentials of Waldorf Education, funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation. A survey was distributed to individuals who are involved in Waldorf or Waldorf-inspired education in the United States and Canada in an effort to determine primary elements of Waldorf education that would be investigated more thoroughly in the next phase of the study. Of the 250 surveys that were initially sent to schools, training centers, colleges and conference participants, 150 were returned to the research team.

The survey was originally designed to be a preliminary pilot survey. Since the results of the survey were consistent with other recent studies conducted on Waldorf education (McDermott, 1995; Easton, 1995, Kemp, 1994) it was decided to continue the study with a more specific inquiry into several classrooms, which would allow teachers to articulate the essentials of Waldorf education through their work with the children in their classrooms.

The detailed survey results can be obtained from the Waldorf Education Research Institute; however, a brief overview of the study follows. The six identifiers that were utilized to identify the essential elements of Waldorf education were: (I) the reasons for choosing Waldorf education either as a parent or as a teacher: (2) perception of the aims of Waldorf education; (3) perception of the extent to which aims are achieved; (4) perception of the factors contributing to achieving these aims; (5) perceptions of the conditions in Waldorf schools; (6) perceptions of the outcomes of Waldorf education.

Reason for Choosing Waldorf Education

Parents and teachers both indicated that the primary reason for choosing Waldorf education was they were seeking an education that would educate the whole child, "head, heart, and hands:' The second reason was the integration of the arts and academics, while the third reason was that Waldorf education is based on a philosophy of child development and teacher self-development.

Perception of the Aims of Waldorf Education and the Extent to Which These Aims are Achieved

More than two-thirds of the respondents view Waldorf education as enabling students to develop a strong sense of self and good life skills. Two-thirds of the respondents also perceived that the schools are successfully achieving this aim. Two-thirds of the respondents perceived the preparation of students for meaningful work as an aim, and as one that is achieved. One half of the respondents views Waldorf schools as preparing students for college admission; however, only one-third saw this as an aim.

Perception of Factors Contributing to Achievement of Aims

Two-thirds of the respondents view the image of the child, the theory of child development and teacher self-development as the most important factors contributing to Waldorf schools meeting their aims. School governance practices are the lowest on the scale of factors contributing to achievement of aims.

Perception of the Conditions in Waldorf Schools

Faculty /student relationships ranked the highest, citing teachers' multiple years with students as a significant factor. Parent education, particularly parents' understanding of the school's philosophy, ranked the lowest.

Outcomes of Waldorf Education

Almost all respondents (95%) agree that Waldorf education develops a student's artistic abilities and appreciation of nature. Respondents (90%) perceive that it develops students' imagination, intuitive abilities, and a strong sense of self. Respondents (80%) agreed the students develop strong academic and intellectual skills. Many respondents (65%) agreed that it encourages students to develop spiritual consciousness, an appreciation of cultural diversity and a sense of service to the school community. Less than half perceived that this sense of responsibility extended to the wider community.

Phase Two of the Study

Four teachers have been chosen to represent various situations in which Waldorf education is being practiced. Monica Alexandra teaches in a public school of choice in New York City, Cherly Colbert teaches at the Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee; Tim Hoffman teaches at the Rudolf Steiner School in NYC, the oldest independent Waldorf school in the country; and Sheari Mitchell teaches at the Harriet Tubman Village School, a Charter School in San Diego, Ca. These teachers will have quarterly phone teleconferences for two years. The criteria for their conversations were derived from the survey in conjunction with a weekend conference conducted by these four teachers and a team of researchers, Dr. Eleanor Armour- Thomas, principal investigator for the Urban Waldorf School study and Professor of Educational Psychology at Queens College, Dr. Freda Easton, and Patti Smith, Director of the Teachers' Studio at Sunbridge College

Three significant factors in Waldorf education will guide the continuation of the study; (I) the rhythm of the day, and the classroom environment; (2) the long term development of the child; (3) the self reflective practices of the teacher. These factors will be central in reporting teacher observations. "Circles of Support" have been identified to provide each teacher researcher with a specific reporting system.

The Circles of Support include: (I) a description of an individual child (physical, social, aesthetic, emotional, and academic); (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, with special emphasis on contributing and impeding factors that affect the development of each individual child in the study; (3) governance structures; (4) state and district compliance; and (5) professional development of the teachers. In studying the individual children, the teachers will report on observations, interventions, and responses in their work with each child. In this process, curriculum, assessment measures and outcomes strategies specific to Waldorf education will be identified.

The significance of Waldorf education, the developmental view of childhood, teachers' long term commitment to individual students, and teacher self-development will be documented throughout the duration of the study. The ability of Wald9rf education to meet the needs of children and the demands of schools with differing accountability expectations will be another interesting aspect of the study that will be recorded. Another potentially useful outcome of the study will be to determine if teacher support groups such as the one developed for this study could be created within the Waldorf school movement.