

Toward the Deepening of Public Waldorf Education Urban- and Equity-Focused Waldorf-Inspired Teaching in Oakland, California

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In Oakland, California, International Boulevard between 21st and 22nd Avenues is a stretch of road known for its cultural and artistic vibrancy as well as for its prostitution and crime. At the newly-opened Community School for Creative Education, visitors are greeted by children's art in the windows and a warm welcome in Spanish and English (within a minute visitors can also be greeted in Vietnamese or Cantonese). The sounds of recorders and song filter through the halls while in classrooms, children are knitting, painting with watercolors or standing in a circle, throwing beanbags in the air, clapping and stomping their feet to math verses. Since August 2011, this Oakland block's largest building, the old Red Cross location, has been home to the Community School for Creative Education, commonly called the Community School. Though there have been a small number of other Waldorf inspired urban initiatives—Milwaukee's Urban Waldorf School in 1991 was the first—Community School marks the country's first urban, multicultural, multilingual, public charter school inspired by Waldorf education. Community School serves a population higher than the California average in poverty, children with a home language other than English, and children of color: students are 35 percent Latino, 35 percent African American, 15 percent Asian, and 15 percent white. Fifty percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch—a common proxy for poverty.

Community School staff members are committed to the use of best educational practices, combining time-tested Waldorf education methods with California state standards. The school's mission is to partner with families and the community to provide a rigorous college-preparatory program integrated into a culturally rich, arts-infused, highly personalized curriculum inspired by Waldorf education to the diverse students of Oakland, to prepare well-rounded, life-long learners to lead, contribute to, and successfully participate in our rapidly changing multicultural society.

Bringing Waldorf education into the public urban sector is difficult, and some people might question whether it is even appropriate. When I asked Henry Barnes, lead founder of the first Waldorf school in the United States (in New York City, in 1928), this question in 1990, he answered, "We need to go where the children are."

Who are our children? California is the largest and most diverse state in the country. More than half of the state's students come from low income families. A quarter of our children are English learners (students whose home language is not English and who qualify for extra help in public schools based on their assessment of English proficiency); 40 percent live in homes where the primary language is not English. About one in ten students require special education. Part of the education challenge in California and throughout the country is that the numbers of children living in poverty continue to inch up. In 2007, California passed the point when over half of children were poor, and the percentage continues to increase at a steady pace, reaching 57 percent in 2011. In May 2012, with the birth of one Latina baby to, as we can imagine, radiant and grateful parents, our world changed. With her birth, people of color became the new majority in the United States (United States Census Bureau, Newsroom, May 17, 2012)

How can Waldorf education better serve our public school, urban children? And what does Waldorf education in this setting require of teachers, administrators, and staff? These questions require creative thinking about core practices of Waldorf schools. Fortunately, creative thinking is itself a core part of Waldorf education. In some regards, Waldorf educators are better equipped than many school reform movements to meet this challenge. Waldorf started as an urban initiative in the industrial town of Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919. In this time of economic strife (unemployment was high, as was political uncertainty), philosopher, scientist, artist, and social reformer Rudolf Steiner came before the workers at the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory. When asked what they needed, one worker stepped forward with certainty in his voice: do not focus on us, do something for our children, build them a school for their future. Steiner turned to the factory owner, who agreed to bankroll the effort. Within six months, 12 founding

teachers were hired and a vacant restaurant was purchased and hastily remodeled into a school. The opening festivities were a very public event, held in the city gardens with an audience of a thousand citizens, including top business leaders, Steiner's students, and the factory workers and their children whose school this was going to be. Is Waldorf education just another short-lived reform? Definitely not: today the Friends of Waldorf Education count 1025 Waldorf schools in over 60 countries.

Initially Waldorf in the United States was a private school enterprise. By the end of 1990, America counted just over 100 private Waldorf schools scattered across the country from Princeton, New Jersey, to Los Altos, California. In 1991, the first public Waldorf-inspired school in the United States, Urban Waldorf, was founded in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Like the original Waldorf School in Germany, the Milwaukee school was founded to serve less advantaged children. In the new Urban Waldorf School in 1991, approximately 51 percent of students qualified for free lunch and 90 percent were African American. Initially, student performance increased dramatically, as measured by state achievement tests. In those heady early years of public Waldorf education, focus was on how to adapt Waldorf methods to best serve urban children (McDermott et al, 1996). Despite the initial success, after the founding principal Dorothy Saint Charles retired and the original staff turned over, this urban effort expired. In 2012 Urban Waldorf closed and the building was repurposed as an alternative high school.

The first challenge is to define what it means to be a Waldorf-inspired school in a public setting, which means observing the divide between church and state, being supported by public funds, and being bound to public policy on end-of-year testing. Despite the closure of the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf school, the movement to incorporate Waldorf education principles into public schools is growing, though largely in middle class and upper middle class suburban settings. In January 2013, the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education counted just under 50 charters and charter school initiatives inspired by Waldorf education. The second challenge is how to define what it means to be a Waldorf-inspired urban school in a highly diverse, low-income public setting.

The Community School in Oakland is one of these public Waldorf schools. Unlike the many private Waldorf schools, and the growing number of public charters, Community School's setting is urban and the population it serves is low income and highly diverse. We are aware of the challenges facing urban schools, and we believe that Waldorf education, appropriately adapted, is particularly well positioned to address some of these. Three major challenges are the importance of educators' cultural background matching the students'; vocabulary levels of incoming students that vary with students' background; and the problem of violence and fear interfering with education.

First, a growing body of research reveals the importance of educators mirroring the diversity of the children they serve (Colombo, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Tatum, 2003; Frieri, 1970). The Waldorf community—private and public—does not yet mirror the rich diversity of California or the United States, but the challenge is not unique to Waldorf educators: overall, teachers are predominantly white while students are increasingly diverse. However, teachers who do not share children's cultural backgrounds are able to provide culturally sensitive instruction (Moll, 2001; Ogbu, 2001). This involves building cultural competency: the skill to engage effectively with people from a wide range of cultures in different settings .Waldorf educators are arguably uniquely well positioned to engage in culturally sensitive teaching because of the basic Waldorf tenets of accepting diverse learning styles and recognizing individual uniqueness.

The Community School has worked hard to recruit and support teachers who mirror the diversity of the children. The school has drawn together a team of urban-experienced and Waldorf-experienced teachers and begun cross-training, so each group can learn from the other's expertise. The school has begun a focused conversation among its staff across the diversity of races and ethnicities regarding equity and race and the impact of these conditions on education.

A second challenge of low-income urban settings is that children enter school with different levels of vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 1995). The cumulative vocabulary at age 4 is on average 1,100 words for children from professional families, 700 words for

children from working class families, and 500 for children from low-income families. The difference grows as children age: linguistically “poor” first-graders know 5,000 words while linguistically “rich” first-graders know 20,000 words (Moats, 2001). At the Community School, we are particularly focusing on the scaffolding required enriching the linguistic capabilities of children coming in with a relatively low vocabularies, so that all children can follow a story in all its linguistic complexity.

The Community School is working to integrate Waldorf-inspired education strategies with California State standards-aligned direct instruction practices so that children can build the language skills to access the rich tapestry of cultural and personal stories they bring with them. This integration is a work in progress, but parents often express their appreciation for their children’s exposure to movement, music, knitting, gardening, and stories in a school that distinguishes itself from other schools that focus on textbook assignments and test prep. Simultaneously, the school is very aware of the need to harness these potentially powerful Waldorf tools so children acquire the foundational skills that stories and music alone cannot provide. Thus, the Community School works to bring together, for example, the artfulness of songs and music with the explicitness of lessons on long vowels and five-syllable words, in the context of an arts-infused systematic road to reading.

Thirdly, many schools face the safety gap, or the “too scared to learn gap,” as one educator called it. A sense of safe environment is a prerequisite for productive learning. By February 2013, incidents of violent crime in the neighborhood of the Community School are 35% higher than in Oakland as a whole, and the incidents of violent crime in Oakland are 300% higher than the state average. The crime level itself creates stress for children and families. Making school a safe place for children in the context of urban trauma is a prerequisite to successful learning. Community School is investigating the use of explicit, simple structures that will create a sense of safety and a readiness to learn, despite chaos outside of its walls.

Community School staff and parents have joined community leaders to do “Night Walks” as part of a cross-national effort in urban high crime communities to fight crime. The school is partnering the neighborhood’s alliance of African-American churches and schools that works with the Oakland police and city council. The shared goal of the partnership is for pastors and their congregants to lead safety walks in front of the school and to provide mentoring for Community School children.

Community School staff and parents have also participated in community clean-ups around the school together with community partners. Finally, at weekly assemblies, elders from the community—from the Native American water drummers to officiators of Chinese tea ceremonies to African-American storytellers and local artists—come and demonstrate their skills to Community School children. These partnerships and activities are key in building a sense of community beyond the walls of the school, and creating an environment in which we know each other outside of the school itself, and these relationships include the Community School children.

More broadly, in addressing the “too scared to learn” problem, Community School has reached out to our global Waldorf partners, the Friends of Waldorf Education, for help. The Friends have created emergency educational and crisis intervention teams, who work with psychologically traumatized children and young people in crisis regions such as the West Bank and Congo. These first emergency interventions took place in 2006 and 2007 in Lebanon in cooperation with UNESCO. Now they are active across the globe in war-torn areas. This spring, the Waldorf Education Emergency Pedagogy Team is scheduled to come from the West Bank and Congo to offer an intensive seminar to the Community School staff and families. All agree that the needs in the war zones in the Gaza Strip and the war zones of our streets share marked similarities.

The Community School is in its infancy—17 months old as a school, with only five months at its current location. In this early phase, we have taken the first steps. . Our work is just beginning, and our future is filled with challenges and opportunities. But Waldorf is no stranger to new challenges and precedent-setting educational efforts. This work harkens back to Steiner’s original intent that the first school serve the less well-resourced, the workers’ children. The Community School’s urban work draws from

our movement's rich legacy and community. It builds on Rudolf Steiner's living charge to authentically meet the children who stand before us now.

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