

Meeting All Our Students as They Need to Be Met

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Waldorf Education

BY VICKI LARSON

In Waldorf Education, the teacher seeks to meet the needs of each child in a sensitive and caring way. The curriculum for each grade is appropriate to the stage of development of the children in the class. In addition, the teacher strives to know each child as a unique individual, apprising him/herself of the particular circumstances of each child's life—the circumstances of the child's birth, the child's life outside of school, the family situation, relationships with siblings, the child's special interests, and learning style. To support this, the teacher maintains an ongoing relationship with the child's parents, visits the home, and, ideally, meditates daily on the child and on what is needed for the child's development.

When teacher and student share an ethnic, social, religious, or cultural background, this task can be relatively uncomplicated. However, when a student is of a different color, social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnic or linguistic background than the teacher, the task can be more difficult. In North American schools working with the principles of Waldorf and Public Waldorf Education (both independent and public), the student population is increasingly heterogeneous. A not-uncommon situation is a white, middle-class Waldorf teacher standing before a group of children that includes, in addition to a white majority, children from African American, Latinx, Asian, Muslim, and/or other backgrounds, some perhaps from marginalized families. ["Latinx," pronounced la-teen-ex, is a non-gendered plural currently often used rather than Latino or Latina.] There may also be students who identify as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, intersex, asexual) or gender-fluid.

Thus, Waldorf teachers today are teaching students who are different from themselves, who have backgrounds and experiences that are much different from their own. Waldorf teachers need to ask themselves, "Do I know, as a white person, what it's like to walk in the world as an African American or Latinx person? Do I understand what it means for a family to be living in poverty or surviving paycheck

to paycheck? Do I know what books my students are reading outside of school and what music they are listening to? Can I understand, as an English speaker, what it means to have parents or grandparents who speak another language at home? Do I know if any students are questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation and even what language they are using to describe these facets of themselves? Should I be grouping children by gender, when I may have a student who is gender-fluid?"

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

In meeting this critical challenge, Waldorf educators may have a significant resource in "culturally responsive pedagogy" or CRP. In 1992, Gloria Ladson-Billings, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, coined this term to describe "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." Also called "culturally congruent," "culturally compatible," or "culturally appropriate" pedagogy, this approach requires that the teacher, while meeting curricular requirements, create a bridge between the lives of the students at home and in school. Culturally relevant teaching utilizes the backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences of the students to inform the teacher's lessons and methodology. CRP is, in effect, a perfect fit with Waldorf pedagogy.



Gloria Ladson-Billings, originator of the concept of "culturally responsible pedagogy"

The Teacher with Lotion on the Desk

Dr. Randolph Carter, an educational consultant, has been working with Green Meadow Waldorf

School for several years. On one visit, after talking to the faculty about the importance of being a teacher who “gets it” when it comes to students of color, he asked, “So who is the teacher with lotion on the desk?”

Several of us in the room immediately understood the question, because of our personal experience in mixed-race families. There was silence for a moment or two, and Randolph asked if someone could help out the faculty who didn’t understand the question. A teacher’s assistant—who is white and from a mixed-race family—said, “When African American people’s skin gets dry, it gets ‘ashy.’ A teacher who understands that will have lotion on the desk.”

A white teacher who has had little or no contact with African American culture will be unaware of



A high school senior at the Green Meadow Waldorf School—a school working conscientiously with CRP—accompanies a first grader in the annual beginning-of-year Rose Ceremony.

the significance of ashy skin or the need for lotion on his/her desk. But, from the perspective of culturally responsive pedagogy, it is the teacher’s responsibility to have that awareness and (literally and metaphorically) have lotion on their desk.

This responsibility rests also with a heterosexual or cisgendered teacher who has LGBTQIA or gender-fluid students. It is true also for monolingual teachers teaching multilingual students, middle-class teachers teaching poor and working-class students, and teachers who learn in a neurotypical (i.e., not autistic) way teaching students who learn differently. Waldorf teachers strive to understand each child who stands in front of them. However, with many children, particularly for those from different backgrounds, crucial aspects remain unknown to the teacher.

How Waldorf Teachers Can Better Serve All Students

For the Waldorf teacher seeking to meet the needs of all children, there are several things of which to be aware. “Code-switching,” a term in linguistics, refers to the changes in spoken language, body language, and other modes of communication that shift when a person moves from one social/cultural context to another. We all code-switch when we go from a conversation with a friend to a conversation with a parent or our boss or a stranger. We adapt our speech and behavior to conform to the new social situation and to help the people around us understand us better. In school, the scholarship student, the working-class or poor student, the exchange student, the student of color, the LG-BTQIA or gender-fluid student—each is speaking, communicating, and behaving at home and in his/her/their neighborhood in a different way than at school. Hence, they need to code-switch more often and more profoundly than majority-group students. This double or triple life can be very stressful, and the teacher should be aware of it.

In the book *Nurture Shock* by journalists Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, in a chapter called “Why White Parents Don’t Talk about Race,” the authors assert that white people and African American people go through different processes in forming racial identity. The authors’ premise is that, in growing up, white people are taught to be color-blind when it comes to race. They are told to ignore race and treat everyone the same. Race and racism become taboo topics and white people (including white Waldorf teachers) become unsure about how to relate to people of color and unable to talk about race and color. They may become defensive and feel guilty when racism is raised as a topic. On the other hand, families of color talk openly about race and racism. White reticence on these topics indicates that people of color, as human beings, and their experiences are invisible to whites. For the white Waldorf teacher, it is important to examine his/her own attitudes toward race and racism and to develop a willingness and ability to deal with these issues openly.

There are various strategies that will help the white Waldorf teacher understand all students and meet their needs in a culturally responsive way. The teacher must make a conscious effort to learn more about the students’ home culture. For example, the teacher working with African American children might read African American magazines and

books by African American authors, and watch films or television shows that depict African American life. Studying the effects on African American families of historical enslavement and persistent racism might also provide useful insights. The teacher might also put extra time and effort into developing a positive relationship with the students' parents and family and pay attention to the way that white privilege plays out in white people's relationships with people of color.



Possible resources for teachers in culturally diverse schools

In the classroom, elements of the different cultures represented can be integrated into the curriculum. These may include study of the history and geography of the home culture, artistic and craft activities, celebration of culturally specific holidays and festivals, the reading and study of books by African American (or Asian or Latinx) authors, opportunities for children to present to the class and to the school aspects of

their culture, and, in the upper grades, candid discussions of race and racism. This broadening of the curriculum is important also for white students. It will help them understand other cultures and their classmates of those other cultures. It can also make them aware of the distinctive qualities of their own culture, its privileged status, and the ways that whiteness is made the norm in our society.

This work of teachers in the classroom can and should be supported by the school. Green Meadow Waldorf School in Chestnut Ridge, New York, is one school that has taken seriously the challenge of culturally responsive pedagogy. Green Meadow is a nursery through twelfth-grade school located twenty miles outside New York City. Founded in 1950 and currently serving about 320 students, Green Meadow is one of the oldest and largest

Waldorf schools in North America. For years, the faculty and staff wondered why there wasn't more racial and cultural diversity at the school. Everyone did their best to be open and welcoming, but with little result. About a decade ago, we realized we had to work consciously and proactively to confront racism and other biases in ourselves, our curriculum, and our community. Over the past five to eight years, the diversity and inclusion work has taken root as we have acknowledged the need to change the way we think about diversity and the way we recruit and serve all students and their families. The school is currently about 64% white, 17% multi-racial, 9% Asian, 6% Middle Eastern, 2% Hispanic or Latinx, and 2% African American.

The strategies the school adopted to support the inclusion work include:

- Writing a diversity and inclusion statement that affirms and honors the diversity that we acknowledge in the world and want to see in our community, and using this statement as a guiding star in our day-to-day work;
- Committing to supporting and empowering a Diversity and Inclusion Committee that is representative of the diversity in our school;
- Working with experts in the field of bias and inclusivity, including Dr. Randolph Carter, mentioned earlier in the article, Joel Baum from Gender Spectrum, and staff from the Gender and Family Project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family. This work began in 2012–13;
- Mandating, in 2016, that all faculty and staff take the Undoing Racism training offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (based in New Orleans) by spring 2019, paid for by the school;
- Offering support on questions of diversity, inclusion, social justice, and bias to AWSNA, Sunbridge Institute, other Waldorf and Waldorf-inspired schools, and teacher training institutes.

The work of having Waldorf Education effectively serve all children—regardless of race, ethnicity, faith tradition, socioeconomic status, and gender and sexual identity—is going on all over North America and in other parts of the world.

Community School for Creative Education

The Community School for Creative Education (CSCE) is a free, TK (transitional kindergarten) through eighth grade, public charter school in

Oakland, California, working out of the principles of Public Waldorf Education. The school's curriculum overview states, "Our curriculum respects diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions. Our instructional program is grounded in the principles of [Public] Waldorf Education, an art-infused education."

According to founder and executive director Ida Oberman, culturally responsive pedagogy is not merely aligned with Waldorf pedagogical indications, it is the foundation of Waldorf pedagogy.

CRP manifests in various ways in the school's life. Teachers and staff work closely with parents and grandparents, most of whom were involved in the founding of the school seven years ago. The design of the school environment, as well as the stories, rituals, songs, circles, and festivals, are drawn from

the diverse traditions represented in the school. Since more than fifty percent of the students have a home language other than English—languages in the community include Vietnamese, Cantonese, Spanish, English, and Arabic—school meetings include simultaneous translation available on headsets. Also, interpreters are ready so that those people who prefer to speak in their native tongue can do so. In addition, the school cooperates with various community organizations in improving all aspects of the lives of the children. Staff and faculty are urged to consciously examine their values and attitudes toward cultures other than their own, and, if they are white, confront the reality of white privilege.

It is encouraging that the move of applying culturally responsive pedagogy is taking place both in independent Waldorf schools and in schools inspired by the principles of Public Waldorf Education. Pioneering work is underway elsewhere in the world, including in Germany, where



Ida Oberman, founder and executive director of CSCE, and school principal Monique Brinson



Photo by Ida Oberman

Students at the culturally diverse CSCE

the Intercultural Waldorf School Mannheim and nearby Alanus University (a center for Waldorf teacher education) have developed a research and practice program in Waldorf Intercultural Pedagogy. Under the guidance of Professors Jost Schieren and Albert Schmelzer, Waldorf teachers and researchers can focus on this theme in their training and research study. Dr. Schmelzer writes that Waldorf multicultural pedagogy focuses on "our capacity to meet each other across different cultures."

This process of becoming culturally responsive to all our students is essential to the continued growth of Waldorf Education in North America and around the world. It is our moral responsibility as human beings and as educators to meet the needs of all our students. ☉



VICKI LARSON, a native of New Haven, Connecticut, discovered Waldorf Education in college, when she worked at Heart Pine Waldorf School in Gainesville, Florida.

Vicki has a BA in English from the University of Florida and a certificate in Spanish-English translation and interpretation from Hunter College, New York. Vicki joined the staff at Green Meadow Waldorf School in December 2007. Vicki is director of communications and marketing at Green Meadow, serves on the school's Collegium, is co-chair of the diversity and inclusion committee, and also teaches practical math to twelfth graders. Her daughter is a student at Green Meadow.