
Time in Nature: A Fundamental Right for All

~ Lisa Miccio

The rhythmic serenade of creaking branches, accompanied by the melody of a nearby stream, lulls kindergarten children to sleep in tarp-covered hammocks. The hammocks hang between tall trees, and softly sway in the breeze as teachers from Acorn Waldorf School (AWS) wave silent goodbyes to their afternoon colleagues. Miles away there are more trees and more children awaiting them. In those spaces the hum of uninterrupted play harmonizes with the music of nature, as children soar between trees on zip lines, call confidently from the tops of boulders, build branch beaver dams, and quietly listen to the wind. But these are not Waldorf early childhood programs. These children are in public Pre-K, Kindergarten, and Head Start classes. The early childhood teachers who've joined them are breaking with long-held assumptions to engage in a new kind of Waldorf school outreach as they shift into their afternoon roles as mentors for the Neighboring Tree Project (NTP).

When children are at home in nature, they are also at home in the world.

—Joan Almon

Since the late nineteenth century, researchers have documented the interconnected relationships between human beings and nature, along with the benefits of spending time in nature for both children and adults. Studies point to the impact nature has on human capacities for resilience and regulation, as well as the positive benefits for children with social, emotional, and behavioral conditions. Moreover, limited opportunities to engage in outdoor learning have been shown to negatively impact children's group social play and interactions (Bento, G & Dias, G, 2017). Yet not all children have equal access to play and learn in outdoor spaces, and a recent survey conducted by the Natural Start Alliance shows that "of 121 outdoor preschools identified, only three percent of students were Black, seven percent Hispanic, and less than one percent Native American" (Beaven, Floyd, & Turner, 2023, p 9).

For Acorn Waldorf School's founder/director and kindergarten teacher Motria Shuhan, whose dream of opening Acorn Waldorf School sprang from her own seminal childhood experiences of playing in the fields,

forests, and meadows of the Ukrainian camp in upstate New York that her NYC family escaped to each summer, this racial disparity was unacceptable. Believing that time in nature is a fundamental human right for all, Motria and her colleagues at AWS began exploring new ideas for furthering their school's commitment to racial equity and access. But instead of wondering how to get children from more economically and racially diverse communities into AWS, the teachers started focusing on how to bring a healing relationship with nature to the broader community.

Those who look for the laws of nature as a support for their new worlds collaborate with the creator.

—Antoni Gaudi

Inspiration came from groundbreaking research by forest ecologists and scientists, who discovered that trees have a cooperative underground network connection that allows them to communicate and share resources with each other. The idea of cooperative connection led these teachers beyond the fields and forests of Acorn Waldorf School into the cities of Kingston and New Paltz, NY. It was nature's intelligence, modeled by forests working as social, cooperative beings, that inspired them to reach beyond the borders of AWS and develop the Neighboring Tree Project (NTP).

NTP is a grant-funded initiative of Acorn Waldorf School that develops partnerships with local early childhood educators, schools, and centers who are interested in adding a nature-based learning element to their programs. Through these mutually beneficial partnerships, early childhood teachers from AWS come to know teachers in their neighboring schools, have opportunities to learn from educators working outside of Waldorf education, and create a social community of colleagues who are united in the belief that bringing young children into forests and meadows is a fundamental human right. By branching beyond the borders of Acorn Waldorf School, NTP creates socially symbiotic relationships with educators in the public sector.



Children in the forest. Photo courtesy of Lisa Miccio.

Within a threefold order of the social organism, human beings will find it possible to work together in such a way that out of this cooperation, they shall create what cannot be brought about by any programmatic theory.

—Rudolf Steiner

In addition to NTP's cooperative connections with neighboring schools and centers, NTP has collaborated with Trust for Learning (TFL) and its Round Table members representing Waldorf education. Together they have explored questions on how Waldorf education can broaden its curriculum, be more inclusive, include more multicultural content, and most importantly, align with other educational movements that are also striving on behalf of all children.

The work of NTP represents a broader social gesture. Rather than asking how to get more children into our Waldorf schools, there is outreach into other communities to bring something to them. Waldorf education was not meant to be an exclusive education limited to only those children enrolled in independent schools. It was meant to foster social renewal by cultivating human capacities in service to the individual and society. Perhaps instead of asking how we can get people to come in, we might instead

begin asking how we can go out to meet others and form respectful relationships, offering what might be truly helpful.

NTP is demonstrating how Waldorf teachers can collaborate with non-Waldorf teachers, schools, and centers. At its core, NTP's goal is to help teachers and administrators bring their students into the forests, parks, and fields near their schools. They do this by offering their neighboring colleagues:

- Identification of natural spaces for play, design of outdoor classrooms, and site-specific equipment
- Faculty professional development training and workshops
- Guided observation visits to Acorn Waldorf School's forest classes
- Onsite mentoring for faculty
- On-site lesson demonstrations in the forest classrooms including nature-based crafts, circle time, story time, and puppetry
- Outdoor clothing and gear for all students and teachers, including rain suits, rain boots, winter snow suits, snow boots, and waterproof mittens

As they enter the program's fourth year, the NTP team has learned that achieving their unique goals requires new perspectives, habit changes, and actionable steps



Gathering of the Neighboring Tree Project. Photo courtesy of Lisa Miccio.

to get to where they want to be. NTP mentors are new to working with public school Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers, and with administrators/principles within elementary schools who may or may not have backgrounds in early childhood development. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that NTP partnering teachers and NTP mentors are often coming into relationships from very different places. They begin by exploring these discrepancies and acknowledging that there are vast differences in their approaches, including the values placed on play versus academics, the roles of the teachers, and the notion of concepts such as safety, fun, nature, and childhood. NTP mentors meet weekly with one another for professional development so that they can share their challenges, dig into their biases, transform their antipathies, and learn from one another. They courageously “embrace self-development as an essential part of their professional and personal life” while finding new ways to show up for their partners, and build the necessary bridges for healthy, mutually supportive collaboration (Gambardella, 2007, p 3). In addition, they carve out

intentional time for regularly scheduled conversations with their mentees to ensure that their mentees feel supported, heard, valued, and understood.

We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of critical mass. It's always about critical connections.

—Grace Lee Boggs

NTP mentors begin relationships with new partners by inviting them into an opportunity to experience or “perceive” a forest nursery or kindergarten in real time. New partners visit Acorn Waldorf School and sift through what they can or cannot implement and adapt to their public programs to incorporate a forest learning component. It is essential that the public school partners experience a sense of ownership and professional agency regarding their individual journey of becoming forest early childhood educators. An example of this process is described by an NTP partner from Meagher Pre-school:

Adding a nature-based component to our Pre-K Program at Meagher has brought so many positive experiences to not only my student's lives, but also mine. I feel like it is the piece of early childhood education that I didn't know I was missing. Now, it is hard to picture our program without it.

Seeing my students truly engrossed in the outdoors, getting "lost" in their play, learning through all of their senses, exploring through all seasons/weather, and taking risks is a special thing to witness. My personal relationship with nature has always been strong, but nature-based programming has shown me how to enjoy that love for nature alongside my students.

When we first started going out into the Forest, I had many worries [but] my mentors guided me and made me feel confident with my students in a non-traditional teaching setting.

I have learned many things from our partnerships and mentors. However, my biggest takeaway has been learning about the value in uninterrupted play and exploration. I have witnessed my students become more resilient, confident, creative, and physically stronger individuals. There is a peacefulness and hum of play that exists out in our forest that is difficult to recreate in the classroom. It is an amazing place to be, and I am so grateful that our school is able to provide this essential piece of childhood to our students

(Schneider, personal communication, 2023).

At the heart of the NTP mentorship program is a deep commitment to nurture trusting, authentic, long-term relationships with their neighboring public school and center mentees. To allow time for this, NTP mentors consciously balance the standard practice of giving and receiving of professional advice, critical feedback, and instruction, with the curiosity, genuine interest, and warmth of a friendly embrace. NTP mentors strive to practice "acceptance without judgment" and sensitivity to new forest teachers' budding questions (Koteen-Soulé, p. 6, 2014). Through this mindful balance, deep, socially symbiotic relationships, like those in a forest of neighboring trees, begin to develop.

In what ways [can] Steiner education...benefit from these discourses and build on them in order to create anti-oppressive, decolonizing approaches?

—Neil Boland and Joaquin Munuz

As recently reported by the Trust for Learning, "we stand at a critical moment to advocate for equitable access to nature-based early childhood education initiatives in service of all children and communities" (Beaven, Floyd, & Turner, 2023, p. 4). The Neighboring Tree Project is responding to these calls for action by pushing beyond the boundaries of their Acorn Waldorf School campus, breaking down insulating and isolating barriers of thought that have separated them from their neighboring public school and childcare center colleagues, and moving beyond their comfort zones as educators to policy making influencers who are actively "adapting to changed circumstances and changed times" (ibid., p. 4).

Representing just one example of how Waldorf educators can engage in new approaches to social justice and outreach endeavors, NTP operates similarly to a Waldorf school committee. According to Motria Shuhan: "The mission of NTP is possible because the work being done and the relationships NTP mentors have formed are valued as integral elements to Acorn Waldorf School's identity." AWS leadership supports the flexibility that NTP mentors need to schedule afternoon visits to their mentees, and by opening its campus to neighboring NTP partners, Acorn Waldorf School has become a welcoming place where they can explore nature-based education resources, test and develop nature-based models, nurture new ideas, and observe first-hand demonstrations of forest classroom practices.

This is the BEST day ever!

—JFK Kindergarten student

A NTP public school teacher smiles up at a beaming student who has just climbed a steep hill. "I did it myself!" he shouts. She notes another group of students shouting "Building, building. That is what beavers do best." The group of busy beavers has amassed an impressive dome-shaped lodge, made from a collection of twigs, bark, and broken branches. A small child quietly crouches at the base of a nearby, tall tree, and whispers, "I'm going to be the coyote who spots the beavers! Shhh....don't tell them I'm here. I want to surprise them!" Reenacting and reciting lines

from Henry Cole's book *Building* demonstrates her students' emerging literacy skills, comprehension, and capacities for sequencing, and she makes a mental note of her observation. Then she leans over to her NTP mentor to share: "The literacy talk is great, but I have seen children who didn't socialize now opening up in the forest and playing, and even sharing, with others. That, and their growing confidence in moving their bodies, is what I find most rewarding."

Soon after, the teacher plays a merry tune on a recorder, signaling that it's time to return to school. The little fox has emerged from behind the tree to take hold of the visiting mentor's hand and to tell her: "This was the best day ever." Joanna Dorman, who is both an NTP mentor and an AWS nursery teacher, smiles tenderly as she continues down the mountain to where her car is parked. She feels a deep sense of gratitude and joy, as one often experiences when observing the mysterious and marvelous, and thinks, "Someone says that every time we visit the forest!" ♦

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