

Reaching Out Through NAEYC

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In mid-October I attended our state-affiliated chapter of NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), called WECA (Wisconsin Early Childhood Association). The first thing I took note of is that soon I will be a member of two WECA's when we change our name to Waldorf Early Childhood Association!

After getting lost the first day trying to find the Hyatt Regency in Milwaukee (I've only lived here ten years - give me a break!), I found my way to the tail end of a discussion on the importance of research in the field of early childhood education.

They were featuring the High Scope method in which the children in the child care centers are encouraged to Plan-Do-Review. This means that the children plan what they want to do by choosing from a Planning Chart, then they do it, and then they come back together to review what they have done and "discuss" it. This is a program for 3-6 year olds. One of their highlights is small group time where children "learn actively: experimenting, predicting, observing and evaluating. Adults support children's learning and encourage hands, mouths, and minds to be busy." Minds, mouths & hands (High Scope). Head, heart & hands (Waldorf). Hmm, something about that middle realm seems to be significantly different! I visited two of their featured centers, one for the 3-6 year olds and one for t through 5th grade, where the children are in mixed age groups. These centers are currently drawing national attention. The grade school is in the same building as the public Waldorf school in Milwaukee, so I had a firsthand experience of seeing the qualitative difference just from the decor on the walls. As with most child care centers I have visited lately, the sensory overload is astounding.

Another noticeable contrast to the more subtle environment I have come to love was in the huge room where all of the vendors were displaying their wares for child care centers. Sensory overload continues - I took pictures. Primary colors - super bright primary colors have now been joined by purple and green, the colors of choice for one of the major vendor's catalogues, but also the common colors of favorite dinosaurs! Shelves and shelves of books - big books, little books and in-between a few lovely ones and some not-so-lovely ones featuring every family dysfunction a child might possibly encounter in this world today. Lots of books for teachers on how to fill the day with projects, but also some neat ones with fun finger games in them. A combination of plastic and wooden toys, with the former outweighing the latter. A bevy of "realistic" dolls, several with a variety of handicaps. Muppet-style puppets for storytelling. And tapes - lots and lots of tapes - for the tape players I have heard in every single non-Waldorf child care center I have visited so far - everything from classical to rock 'n roll for tots. In the midst of all of these wares, there was one book on Waldorf education and a copy of *Parenting a Path through Childhood* by Dotty Coplen. Without knowing what it would cost to set up a display there, I left wondering where are the vendors that we often turn to for our supplies? Why aren't they here, even as a whisper? Of course, this harkens back to the woman with the WOW wagon (See next article.) It's not good enough to put the materials before a group if you have not first educated them as to how to use them.

Another feature in the vendors area was a place where you could have a tracing done of your silhouette. This was taped onto construction paper, and then on it you could write either a challenge you had experienced in the last year or a success story. It seemed that several people chose success stories, but it was their content that was most eye-opening for me. Here is a representative sample: "As the Director of a 105 slot center, I have a full time financial specialist and office support staff' One after another, the success stories featured the overcoming of administrative hurdles and financial hardships. I did not see a

single one that said anything about the children themselves. Posted on the same wall as these silhouettes was a black and gray poster that said in bold letters: Naptime's Over - Wisconsin Childcare Union. Another silhouette featuring wages said: "I asked for it. I demanded it. I got it." These are images I will not soon forget, as I grapple with the issues around "worthy wages".

Over the next two days, I spent a good portion of my time going on tours of various featured centers. One common image was that of piled-up baby dolls. Without exception, every center I visited had the dolls piled into one or two doll beds, arms and legs twisted every which way, sometimes in combination with the stuffed animals. Sensory overload also continued to be the norm.

However, there is a light at the end of this tunnel. At a new center sponsored by Milwaukee Area Technical College, we walked into rooms that were colored peach blossom! The other predominant color they used was a very soft mint green. The kitchen was a very open, welcoming place in the center of the building and lovely smells were emanating out into every one of the classrooms. The lighting was indirect. I did not see one light bulb in the whole place because of the unique coverings they used, and it was soft light. The tour guide was quick to tell us that the whole place had been designed by women architects. This all sounds encouraging, but the most encouraging of all was the response I heard from the child care providers with whom I was on this tour. They were all exclaiming as if seeing for the first time what a difference a softened environment can make. I heard comments like, "I guess you don't need primary colors everywhere," and "It's so relaxing in here. I really like it. I want to work here." It was a true oasis in the middle of the sensory-overload desert!

Now let me tell you about the other oasis. The last workshop I attended was called Childcare by Design and featured architect Dr. Gary Moore who, in addition to being a university professor and author, is also a child care facility design consultant. In his workshop, speaking out of an architectural imagination, he proceeded to describe several of the components of the Community Life and Child Care Centers I hope to help bring to birth some day, and we had never even met! He described the child care center as a village and suggested that each little "house" in the Center be comprised of mixed ages of children instead of separating them off by age. He spoke of gardens and greenhouses and kitchens wherein the children would help to prepare the food. He spoke of the extreme importance of outside spaces - little nook and cranny areas where children could play and hide.

There is more, but by the time I heard all of this, I thought I had died and gone to heaven! His workshop was, for me, like breathing after you have had to hold your breath for a long time. The feeling I got from some of the participants was that he was perhaps a bit of an idealist and not, perhaps, practical enough. However, he has been asked to write six articles for *Child Care Information Exchange* which is one of the leading trade journals for child care professionals, and he has published ten books. He is definitely on my list of people to stay in contact with, and when I spoke with him afterward, he spoke quite fondly of Waldorf schools and said that one of his favorite centers is a Waldorf facility in Wales, Great Britain.

One never knows where one will meet an ally! I encourage you to check out your local professional child care affiliates. If you are willing to get to know them, perhaps they will become more open to knowing about your work. Happy alliance-building!