

1998-1999 Questionnaire Responses

In the Fall, WECAN sent out a questionnaire to all schools. We received many wonderful responses which we combined in a mailing to schools in February. However, there were a few longer responses which we wish to include in this issue and in the fall. The following was sent by Betsi McGuigan, Monadnock Waldorf School, Keene, NH.

1. Please describe any changes you have seen in today's children in contrast to those of five years ago or more.

The children seem to be strong individuals wonderful children who have great difficulty adjusting to a group consciousness. I call them prickly or edgy. Alone they are a delight, but melding into being part of a group seems ever more difficult. Part of this phenomenon is what we would call a lot of nerve-sense children.

I see tremendous *courage* in today's children. I hear story after story of children who fell or got hurt as babies and did not cry. I think of my classes beginning in about 1994 as "warrior children." Parents have also told me amazing stories about little toddlers using berries in the woods to mark their faces with stripes like the Native American war paint and the tiniest children understanding cartoon kinds of weaponry - arrows in particular, and swords.

2. In what ways is your work with children different today than at an earlier time?

In many ways - but it's hard to know if that is just from my maturing as a teacher in a maturing school or because the children are different. On the one hand, I am more relaxed with the children. My classroom has gotten more and more simple. My routine and rhythm are well-established in me as well as the children. Given those confines, I let the children go pretty far in their exploration of the environment, physical laws, and relationship. They can build and climb high; mix with water, mud, sand; combine materials and equipment in many ways. I may help to extend an idea - get out a big pan of water when they are sneaking into the bathroom to float boats in the sink or make a pulley when they are throwing things to each other across the room, but I also am much more relaxed about letting them spin, mix, balance, build - I think my classroom is safe, but it takes time for interns, for instance, to get used to certain kinds of freedom I give the children. I am always *there* - really aware of the children - but I don't intervene except for safety and cruel or rude remarks. I am also much more conscious of mannerliness. I do not wait for imitation alone to take hold with manners. I intervene immediately when the children are rude.

I've also developed a deep love and appreciation for boys. We have 15 beautiful acres at our kindergarten. The elementary school is at another site. So we cut and haul saplings to make a sukkah for Michaelmas or an arch for May Day. We tap our sugar maples, haul the buckets, cut firewood to keep the fire going, we haul mulch, turn compost, harvest the garden. There is a lot of *physical* work to do and we find the children - especially boys who might be difficult under other conditions - love to work and are good workers. The time in nature also brings out a deep joy and wonderful play in the children. We have a stream in the woods that is a wonderful place all seasons. It is really healing water.

But our real coup is two men who work with us in the kindergarten. Jim Haddock, husband of my colleague, Libby Haddock, is semi-retired and comes often with big jobs and lets the children help. He is *dearly loved* by staff and children alike. He has a truck, which is also useful and popular. He is a "manly man" and a hero in his own time. Our woodworking teacher, Hans van Peil, is also scheduled to be in the kindergarten on Wednesday mornings. Hans does building maintenance, classroom repairs, and builds us

things like stools and bird feeders and boats. Hans is an archetypal “workman” - he is careful, orderly, quiet, and very kind with the children.

These two men have been so helpful - to the teachers on a practical level and to the children on a deep, deep level. Children who are suffering from divorce or other adult woes often hook up with Hans or Jim and are very soothed by these wonderful men. I think all schools would do well to write salaries for men like these two into the kindergarten budget. Children need this. Although Jim is a volunteer, it is hard to find a volunteer like him. As our movement matures, we need to acknowledge work with pay.

3. Is your work with parents different today?

Perhaps the work with the parents is the most exciting. It seems we've become a real family center. Our school doctor often talks about the need for “nest warmth.” In our kindergarten kitchen we seem to be able to demonstrate what “nest warmth” is. Modern parents need nest warmth as much as their children!

Our kitchen often holds several parents as well as my assistant and some children. She gives them tea and a task - kneading the bread, peeling veggies, washing dishes. It smells good. It's warm. It's pretty. People are happy. Parents like to linger and we let them. We also welcome parents into the classroom. My background is Head Start where parents were always integrated into the classroom. I feel strongly that the more closely parents and teachers work together, the stronger the benefits for the child. I hope that children feel the warmth that we feel for their parents.

We spend a lot of time and effort integrating parents into our work. We begin with in-depth admissions interviews and home visits. All summer we have Tuesday Beach Days and Wednesday Gardening Days to keep in touch. Beach days are coordinated by a parent; gardening days by staff. We involve parents in all of our festivals - Welcoming Day, Michaelmas, Lantern Walk, Spiral Walk, Christmas Play, and May Day, and the final Beach Day. We have craft afternoons, evening meetings, and 3 rounds of conferences. We try to involve them in receiving from the school as well as the endless giving required in Waldorf schools. We try to be very welcome, open, and embracing.

On the other hand, I've outgrown feeling responsible or when parents project “stuff” on me or the school. We are who we are. We close for 2 weeks at Christmas, only offer after care until 3:30, and so forth. People can choose us or another school, but we've learned to set and maintain certain boundaries without apology.

I've also learned to be direct and honest about what I observe in children. If a child is struggling, parents usually already know and are happy to have a partner to share that. Overall, we really enjoy and respect the parents and view them as our partners.

4. How is your work with colleagues different today?

We are blessed with a fantastic colleagueship at both the kindergarten and elementary school. Obviously, a harmonious colleagueship makes teaching much easier and more joyful. We've experienced real struggles to get here and will undoubtedly experience struggles again. But, for the moment, we are able to do a lot of forward looking work for the school because we are not hindered by personal difficulties among colleagues.

5. Have you noticed changes in the way you work with the parents and in the wider community? Describe.

I came to Waldorf from “the world” - with my background Head Start, day care, and public education. I've held on to ties in that world since coming to Waldorf in '86 and hope to be able to do more in terms of workshops and sitting with non-Waldorf colleagues in a general interest for children. I've noticed Waldorf become much more open and receptive to the outer world in the past 13 years and I support this and I am grateful to see this trend.