

Conversations with Parent/Child Pioneers

From the Workings of the WECAN Parent/Child Task Force

Nancy Foster

"Thank you for the parent/child class! I thought the school was for my son, but I think the bigger education happened to me." "After all my reading and listening to talks, I finally understand what Waldorf education is about." "My son's delight and the warmth in the classroom have been magical for me."

Every parent/child teacher is familiar with comments like these. Parent/child groups, by whatever name, have become the gateway through which many families first enter the world of Waldorf education. They have also provided a supportive community for parents who may otherwise feel isolated in today's fast-moving world.

The WECAN Parent/Child Working Group would like to recognize some teachers who were pioneers of this work in North America, creating new forms to meet the needs of families with younger children. We identified four such pioneers, based on information available to us, and they were gracious enough to share their experiences for *Gateways*. It is always good to remember our roots, and there is much to be learned from such retrospection. We interviewed Patti Wolfe of Toronto; Cecelia Karpoff of northern Virginia; Connie White of London, Ontario; and Erica Carnay Jayasuriya of Portland, Oregon.

Patti Wolfe received teacher training at Emerson College and returned to Toronto where she taught kindergarten at the Toronto Waldorf School for three years. After some years at home with her own children, her parent/child work began in 1989 when she was asked by the school to meet with families with young children. The demand grew, and she now teaches five Parent and Tot groups each week.

Cecelia Karpoff had been a nursery teacher at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery for several years when a visit from Erika Grantham, who described her work with parents and children at Michael Hall in England, inspired Cecelia to try a new approach. After three summers of a pilot parent/child program, begun in 1990, a parent/child program was incorporated into Acorn Hill's regular offerings. She now teaches parent/child classes at

Potomac Crescent School, a Waldorf initiative in northern Virginia.

Connie White began her teaching career in the Canadian public schools, later completing her Waldorf kindergarten training in Detroit in the mid-1980s. After a number of years in the London Waldorf School kindergarten in London, Ontario, her health required a change. Aware of the parent/child work recently begun in Toronto, she visited Patti's program. She then wrote a proposal to her school, and began a Parent and Tot class in the mid-1990s. She has now turned the work over to another teacher, but continues to be involved with the school.

Erica Carnay Jayasuriya received a combined grades and kindergarten training through Antioch. Having done her practicum at the Portland Waldorf School, she was asked in the spring of 1996 to take up the fledgling parent/child program there. During her three years of parent/child work, she began to develop an approach different from what she had inherited. Later she took a third grade class at Cedarwood School in Portland, making a commitment through fifth grade, which she is now completing. Erica plans to return to parent/child teaching next year.

As it happens, all four pioneers began their programs within the context of an established school. Connie noted that it can sometimes be more challenging to begin parent/child work in older schools, where space may be a difficult issue or the need may not be recognized. In new initiatives, by contrast, a parent/child program is often the first offering. Still other programs exist independently in a group leader's home or other setting.

The pioneers were asked, in the interviews, to discuss the motivation and inspiration for their work.

As a kindergarten teacher Patti had experienced that many parents arrived without any knowledge of Waldorf ideas, and she saw the parent/child work as a way to reach the parents while their children were younger. She was not aware of anyone else doing such work at the time, so she began with what she

knew, gradually developing ways to meet the needs she perceived.

Cecelia had been concerned about the children in her nursery class who did not seem ready to separate from their parents. She saw, on the other hand, that parents were looking for a school experience for younger children. Erika Grantham's work with parents and children together provided Cecelia's inspiration for addressing these observations.

Connie's immediate motivation for beginning a parent/child program was her health-related inability to continue as a kindergarten teacher. When she visited Patti's program in Toronto, however, she felt that everything she had done in her life had prepared her to take up this parent/child work.

Erica began to develop parent/child work because she was asked and, as a mother of a young child herself, she was interested in the task. Through the remedial training at Rudolf Steiner College, she had been awakened to the cornerstone role of the earliest months and years of life, and she recognized the potential role of a parent/child program in supporting healthy development.

What has been the main focus of your work with parents and children together?

For Patti, the image of greeting people at the door is primary: she is the one who has the privilege of welcoming parents coming to meet Waldorf education and each other. This is her goal—to help parents, often lonely and isolated, find community with each other in the context of the Waldorf approach to living with young children. Over the years, she has changed her approach to achieving this goal. In the past, she found, if parents *understood* a concept, such as rhythm in the home, they could put it into practice. Now she finds that understanding is often not enough to bring about change, so she tries to make the concept experiential and may even offer exercises for individual parents who need help, or to the group in response to something that arises.

Cecelia has focused her approach on the needs of the children and on including the parents in the work of the classroom (her “household”) in a way that creates a mood of calmness, purposeful activity, and warm support. She was surprised initially to discover what an impact it had on the parents to be in a setting where the Waldorf approach to early

childhood is modeled. In her experience, the parents see the results of this approach and are inspired to learn more about it and to carry it into their home life. For this reason, parent evenings for questions and discussion have been an important part of her work.

To Connie, it was of central importance to model for parents a sense of enjoyment and appreciation of their children. She wished to enkindle in the parents the desire and ability to see their children more deeply. In the beginning, she offered a focus of craft work for the parents, but reading about domestic work in the parent/child class helped her take a next step to creating a warm, social mood for the parents while enfolded the children in work activities and an understanding consciousness.

When Erica entered parent/child work she hoped to help parents understand the importance of early movement experiences. Through a visit to a Waldorf center for at-risk children, she was profoundly affected in her understanding of the role of touch coming through imagination, and this inspired her to develop a “grandmother's lap” model of circle time emphasizing parent/child interaction. A further focus in her work was educating the will of the parents, helping them to model activity, to observe their children with understanding, and to be aware of and trust their own parenting instincts.

What challenges have you faced in developing the parent/child work?

A common challenge to these pioneers was to meet the needs of both parents and children: the parents' need to connect with each other, to talk together, and the children's need for a quiet space within a situation where much activity is taking place.

Patti mentioned the etheric demands of dealing with so many different people, and the need to accept that she can't help every parent right away—that there is a time process that must be respected and allowed to ripen before “results” can be expected. She also spoke of the teacher's need to be conscious of what she is modeling, always to have the appropriate gesture and tempo for the young child, while constantly balancing the dynamics of the group.

As a nursery teacher, Cecelia had been accustomed to creating a mood for and with the

children. She had to learn how to include the parents and bring them also into an appropriate mood— without offending them! She experienced, however, that parents recognize calmness and they themselves wish for it.

Connie had wanted to include study and conversation with parents during class, but after trying various approaches, she abandoned this attempt. She found it best during class simply to point something out in the moment, for example, “There’s an example of imitation.” Deeper conversation was best saved for other times.

A challenge Erica faced was in helping her colleagues in the kindergarten to understand why her approach was different from theirs. Her intention was to focus more on the parents as a key to the work with the children, rather than offer a form similar to the kindergarten.

What has been most important to you in the parent/child work, and what advice would you offer those who have taken it up more recently?

All the pioneers have felt deeply rewarded by parent response to the parent/child classes. Parents express that being in this environment and learning from their experiences transformed them and their lives with their children. The pioneers have recognized the gift to the teacher of truly coming to accept and respect parents as they are, realizing, as Patti said, that all are seeking the best for their children, and seeking for a place that honors the spirit. These teachers have been happy to be able to share their developing work with others through talks, workshops, and welcoming visitors to their classes.

As for advice, each of the pioneers has so many insights to offer that it is difficult to choose what to share! Here are a few thoughts that were offered:

* Strive to be very organized before everyone arrives so you are free to respond to needs as they arise.

* Continue deepening your understanding of the developmental needs of the very young child in order to develop appropriate activities and material.

* Hold an orientation meeting and parent evenings rather than trying to meet these needs during class.

* Stay current with what is being offered to parents outside of the Waldorf movement, to help parents sort out conflicting advice and find their own way.

* Develop your observation skills in order to meet both parents and children appropriately.

* Strive for a warm, non-judgmental atmosphere, develop a big heart, and work from compassion toward education.

* Work for full recognition in the school of the importance of this work and of meeting its needs for a large-enough space, a trained teacher and assistant who are provided with good salaries and benefits. We can be most grateful to these pioneers for forging a path for this work with parents and young children. Clearly it requires vision, sensitivity, creativity, courage, and energy, as well as the essential grounding in Waldorf education and the insights of Rudolf Steiner. In speaking with these pioneers, I felt joyful at both the similarities and the differences in their approaches, and it seems right to close with advice from Patti, “Feel fine about working out of your own circumstances, strengths, and passions. There are many ways to come together.”

Those wishing to learn more about these teachers’ approaches to parent/child work may contact them as follows: Patti Wolfe, 905-727-7489; Cecelia Karpoff, 703-451-8768; Connie White, connie39@sympatico.ca; Erica Jayasuriya, ejjece@yahoo.com.

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