

Waldorf Approach Offers Hope in Schools for Juvenile Offenders

by Arline Monks

The audience was unusually silent as two fifteen year-old boys began a Mozart duet on their recorder. For months they had worked diligently on learning to play the instruments and to read music. Now it was June, the last day of school, Parents Day, and forty-five people including classmates, teachers and members of the county school board were listening attentively. When they finished playing, their classmates cheered, and the boys even clapped for themselves.

"It was a miracle," said Ruth Mikkelsen, principal of the T.E. Mathews Community School and the Garden Court School in Marysville, California. Both boys had been expelled from public schools for violent acts, constant failure in class and refusal to follow directions. "But their music lessons were rigorous, unflinching and involved following many directions," she said. "They had never in their lives worked so hard at anything."

T.E. Mathews Community School is a school for twelve-to-eighteen year-olds who have been court ordered to attend. Some have committed serious crimes. Some are hardened criminals despite their young age. The Garden Court School is in Juvenile Hall, a lockup facility. Both schools are in Yuba County, which has one of the highest percentages of people sentenced to prison per capita in California, and the third highest crime rate in the nation.

Parents Day at Mathews culminated nine months of an exciting experiment -- the application of Waldorf methods and curricula in the two schools -- and reflected the success of a growing partnership with Rudolf Steiner College.

The experiment began in September, 1993, when head teacher Evy Arcuri returned to her classroom at T.E. Mathews after taking a two week summer institute for public school teachers called The Waldorf Approach Applied in the Public School Classroom at Rudolf Steiner College.

Evy was enthusiastic and determined. In the two weeks of classes at the College she had learned many new things - to draw, to tell stories, and especially, how to integrate the arts into academic lessons. She had learned about main lessons, making main lesson books, and how to develop concentration and math skills through movement. Armed with a whole repertoire of songs, poems and new ideas, she intended to bring as much as she could to her 38 students. Venturing into new teaching territory with skills recently acquired meant taking risks. But if she couldn't take risks, how could she ask her students to do so?

She remembers telling her first story -- a short fable. It was greeted by cynical sneers. "My heart sank, but I continued on, determined to finish. About half way through their faces began to relax and I knew I had them."

Evy's enthusiasm was contagious and "Waldorfing" began at T.E. Mathews. When Sacramento's largest school district contracted with Rudolf Steiner College to offer a Waldorf staff development course for its teachers the following fall, and made it available to teachers from other districts, Ruth Mikkelsen enrolled herself and three teachers. From November, 1993, to May, 1994, they attended classes on two Tuesday afternoons and one Saturday each month. "The Waldorf course first had a remarkable and dramatic effect on my teachers," the principal said, "and then on the students."

Among the many things being adapted from the Waldorf methodology and curriculum for the special needs of the students at these schools, storytelling is among the most powerful. Presenting lessons orally -- through story -- reaches and engages those with learning disabilities and minimal reading skills. Although students are of mixed grade levels (seven-to-twelve), many are reading below third grade level and have a history of school failure. But when lessons are given through the story approach, students can remember with great accuracy and begin to forge a positive connection with learning and with school.

At Juvenile Hall, former head teacher Carol Holtz tells of the effect of oral delivery of the lesson on her students. "First thing each day," she said, "they would ask if I were going to tell a story. Sometimes I had to remind myself of their ages. When I did tell a story, there was total attention. One boy who was scheduled for a morning court appearance asked his probation officer if he could go first so he would be back in time for the story."

Carol reports that immersion in the spoken word through stories and poetry has influenced students' capacity to write. "Before I had my Waldorf classes and started storytelling, I couldn't get them to write more than a paragraph. Now they are writing pages and even creating their own stories." The probation officer adds that some of the boys have asked to have their sentences extended so they won't have to leave the school.

Principal Mikkelsen also points to the impact of the music program. "Students who couldn't focus on their work for more than two minutes at a time worked for 30 minutes practicing on the recorder. They continually asked to practice music during detention and lunch hour. Music lessons also taught cooperation and helped dissolve the polarization of gang culture so rampant among these young people. After all, how can you hate someone with whom you've just played a Mozart duet?"

When Ruth Mikkelsen took over as principal of the two schools in 1989, she was well-prepared. She had twelve years as a teacher in the Bi-County Juvenile Hall behind her, along with three years of teaching experience in the Yuba County Jail. She admits that since earning administrative and teaching credentials and completing her MA in Special Education at California State University Sacramento, she has sought out the most difficult children, "the kids everyone has given up on."

Seven years ago when she started at T.E. Mathews, it was a school urgently in need of change. "There was no clear curriculum focus. The absentee rate was astronomical. Kids were angry and violent, and local police were complaining about the frequent visits to restore order."

Ruth began aggressively pursuing solutions and assembling a stellar staff. She chose teachers who were creative, organized and courageous, and accompanied them to numerous workshops and inservices in search of new approaches. She also challenged them to develop new skills and capacities. Together, principal and teachers began to create a curriculum based on how children learn.

Waldorf education encountered at the Rudolf Steiner College summer institute in 1993, was one of the approaches to be explored. "Although we had made great strides developing a thematic curriculum that addressed multiple learning styles, something important was missing," she said, "Waldorf had the missing pieces. It brought a unifying vision. It touched the heart as well as the mind."

Other Waldorf pluses? The staff notes the uplifting current of morality that pervades the curriculum; the extensive use of physical involvement in learning; the use of ennobling tales, poems, and biographies to stimulate imagination; and the way that Waldorf has long incorporated what have now become the latest teaching strategies involving learning: child development, brain research, and the use of art and music in the classroom.

The success with Waldorf approaches in the first year prompted Ruth Mikkelsen to send her teaching staff to Rudolf Steiner College's Summer Institutes for the last three years. It has also kindled enthusiasm for the next step -- a partnership project between Rudolf Steiner College and the Yuba County Court and Community Schools to develop a Waldorf-based model program for highly at-risk delinquent youth that can be replicated in California schools and across the nation.

A startup grant has been received and additional funding is being sought for the project which includes teacher training and on-site classroom supervision as well as program and curriculum development. Principal Ruth Mikkelsen is co-directing the project with Betty Staley from Rudolf Steiner college. Nel Noddings,

author and Professor of Education at Stanford University, will supervise a consultant research team for an evaluative study of the program.

Last spring Ruth Mikkelsen was given special recognition at the annual School of Education awards dinner at California State University Sacramento for introducing Waldorf educational techniques at the two Yuba county schools "to teach students who have gotten into trouble and who often come from troubled homes."

Soon after they began testing Waldorf methods in their classrooms, teachers Evy Arcuri and Carol Holtz attended a committee meeting of the California legislature focusing on violence prevention and the impact of arts programs in prisons and juvenile detention facilities. They were prepared to testify about the success of what they were doing and came bearing student work, main lesson books, drawings and paintings, as well as many stories.

" . . . There are days when groups of three or four students are singing the songs we have taught as they file out to other classes, happily singing rather than swearing, shoving or verbally abusing each other."

" . . . One young man who had much difficulty with both reading and writing always finishes his main lesson book for Humanities class and can repeat verbatim any story told during the class. He takes pride in his main lesson book and his drawings are always his best work."

" . . . Boys in rival gangs are practicing recorder duets together. When one falters, the other patiently points out the mistake and then they continue."

In written testimony to Senator Henry Mello, who chaired the legislative committee, Evy Arcuri wrote of her students: "Often their lives make it difficult for them to retain the beauty we introduce to them during the school day. It is my hope that late at night, if they are afraid or angry or running the streets ready to commit a criminal act, the words they have learned or the beautiful images they create in my class might creep into their heads and steady them, stay their hands, soothe them, carry them to a better place, or give them hope."

About the Author

Arline Monks has been a Program Coordinator at Rudolf Steiner College for twelve years. She served for five years as Administrator and Coordinator of The Waldorf Approach Applied in the Public School programs in conjunction with the Sacramento County Office of Education, Sacramento City Unified School District and other school districts. In 1992 and 1993 she was coordinator of the Transforming Education seminars at the Crocker Art Museum in collaboration with Sacramento County Office of Education. In addition to her extensive

background in education, Arline Monks spent two years as a reporter for the Los Angeles Times.