Diversity & Equity: Early Childhood

The Early Childhood department at The Waldorf School of Atlanta takes a holistic approach to integrating diversity into the daily, weekly, yearly, and seasonal rhythm. Waldorf early childhood classrooms at our school, and around the world, have a distinct “look”. Within this familiar homogeneous formality, each teacher also brings their own personality and being into the classroom. The teachers strive to work with diversity in authentic ways, recognizing the importance of honoring diversity in what is seen and unseen. It is common in our early childhood classrooms to have dolls of varying skin tones, and books depicting children from many cultures and races.

The main work of diversity in each early childhood class comes through stories, songs, verses, and in building relationships with our students and their families. Our school has the unique opportunity to be located in a city with much diversity! Teachers welcome the chance for parents to share some of their culture with the class in the way of celebrations with songs, food, and stories. These celebrations bring the cultures to life, connecting the children experiencing the celebration on a heart level. Families who have this opportunity to share something from their culture with their child’s class, typically also feel a deeper sense of connection with the school and their child’s teacher.

The Waldorf School of Atlanta has a rich diversity in family structures. Teachers in the early childhood work to be inclusive of these family structures in circle games and stories. Traditional circle games, such as The Farmer in the Dell, has images and words depicting traditional archetypes; even the cat and dog are often unconsciously assigned gender roles by many people. In our kindergartens, we strive to broaden these traditional roles to be inclusive of everyone. A simple change of having the farmer take a mate, instead of a wife, is just one example.

Teachers also try to instill in the children that it is okay to talk about differences! Many people feel that calling attention to differences will make the child more likely to develop racist thoughts, but diversity and equity experts disagree. Children are observant and naturally notice differences. How we respond to their natural curiosity has significant impacts on how they internalize how we talk about (or don’t talk about) diversity and race. Honing observation skills is the beginning of scientific study, and our early childhood teachers are working to respond to a child’s statements of noticing differences in a matter of fact, “Oh yes, look at that! We all have different skin colors!” This of course, is not easy as we have all grown up in a culture where talking about race and differences is not encouraged. Raising awareness and working to overcome personal biases is an integral part of the work being taken up by the early childhood faculty, as our school strives for The Waldorf School of Atlanta to truly be a school where diversity and equity are living.

- Sondi Eugene