

The Importance of Place in Waldorf Education Today

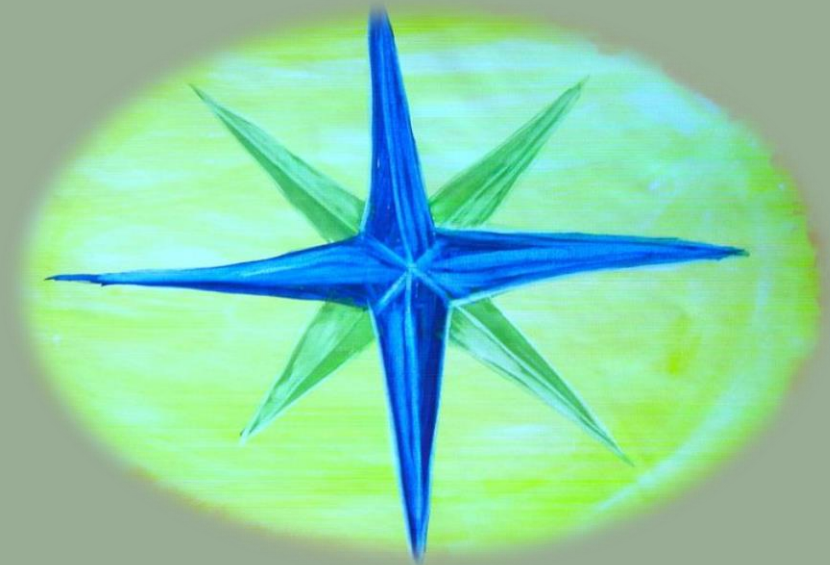
Education for these students at
this time in this place

What can we do better? The challenge of transformation in Waldorf education

- Why do we need transformation? A US perspective
 - Signs of stress and distress: students
 - Rise in students with individual learning needs
 - Increase in dysregulated behaviors and connection disorders
 - Increase in mental health concerns
 - Signs of stress and distress: teachers
 - Teachers increasingly report feeling overwhelmed
 - Increase in numbers leaving the profession
 - Signs of stress and distress: schools
 - Rise in alternatives to traditional schools
 - Challenges to conventional classroom formats due to increased individual student needs
 - A growing issue of students who "don't fit"

In search of answers: The significance of a sense of place

- Definitions:
 - Location, place, human geography
 - Genius loci: spirit of place
- Historical perspectives:
 - Generational changes, exponential increase in traveled world
 - Global connections, loss of local connections: “collapse” of geographical space
 - Movement and instability: privilege (tourism) and need (migration and refugees)
- The challenge of a global education movement:
 - Moving from replication to adaptation to innovation



What is working, what is needed?

- Where do we see success? What could success look like?
- What tools are embedded in Waldorf education?
- A search for ideas that are “outside the box” led to a visit to Ruskin Mill
- *Place, Craft, and Neurodiversity: Re-imagining Potential through Education* (2024, Routledge)

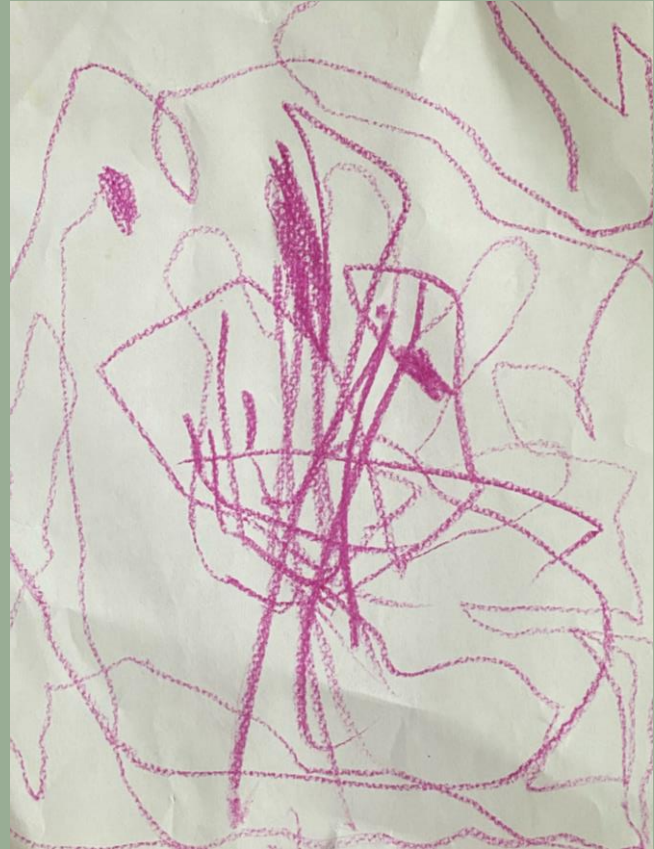
The biography of place: Where I am from

- Start with the educator (Steiner): understanding our own sense of place.
 - Ancestry and history
 - Place of birth
 - Travel history
 - Home and school
 - Local surroundings: knowledge of geology, flora, fauna, human history, culture
 - Where is “home”?
 - Zoom: navigating a shrinking world



Developing a sense of location and place

- A sense of location and place develops early
- Contributes to a sense of well being and security
- Widening horizons: our Waldorf approach to geography
 - Home surroundings, activities and stories
 - Developing context: local geography and history
 - Botany
 - Geology and mineralogy
 - Encompassing the globe, reaching to the stars



Place-based education is environmental education



- The challenge of maintaining a connection to the physical world around us in an age of technology
- “Meaningful connections with the natural world begin with our backyard communities.” (David Sobel, place-based education)
- Local experience is a primary and foundational source of knowledge
- Education that is rooted in place builds or restores a sense of belonging and connection.
- Place-based education promotes agency, confidence, and a mindset of contributing

The impact of place on schools



- A “universal” approach encounters geographic and cultural variation
- Lessons from a change in location and place
- The US challenge: locating Waldorf schools in diverse landscapes, a study in contrast
- The Reggio Emilia approach
- One size cannot fit all: adapting for place



Equity and inequity in school location and place

- Where are our schools?
- Waldorf schools are in 36 US states: urban, suburban, rural. Wide variations in locations, facilities, and opportunities for outdoor education
- A place called school (Goodlad): a picture of different resources. Schools and school success reflect socio-economic and political factors
- A sense of place supports agency, equity, and a sense of community





Connection to Place: Indigenous Wisdom and Ways of Knowing

- The Principle of the 7th Generation:
 - “In their decision-making Chiefs consider how present-day decisions will impact their descendants. Nations are taught to respect the world in which they live as they are borrowing it from future generations.” (Haudenosaunee)
- Honorable Harvest: a cycle of reciprocity, taking only what you need. (Kimmerer)
- Living in harmony with place: Arizona

Developing Indigeneity

- How do we work respectfully with Indigenous and other ancient wisdoms? Land acknowledgements and beyond
- Moving beyond Grimm: the importance of traditional and folk traditions
- Modern, ancient, and Indigenous relationships to the land
- Words spoken by a Hopi Elder (2000)

Where are you living?
What are you doing?
What are your relationships?
Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?
Know your garden.

Decolonizing Waldorf Education



Exploring the Genius Loci

- Genius Loci: the “spirit of a place”
- A consideration of the natural, cultural, historical and human elements that develop the essence and spirit of a place
- Building deep understanding through observation, immersion and interaction, research (e.g. history), community engagement, local culture
- Architecture: provides a foundation for adapting to the context where it is located



The Ruskin Mill approach: Restoration, redemption, and transformation



- “To advance the education of young people with learning and behavioral problems or special educational needs through training in the areas of arts, crafts, agriculture and environmental sciences”
- Holistic and therapeutic care
- Practical skills/therapeutic education
- Restoration, redemption and transformation of:
 - Individual young people
 - The land
 - Local history
 - Arts, crafts, and culture

Working with the land: plants and animals

- Land restoration: application of biodynamics
- Animals: the therapeutic power of sentient beings
- Locally-sourced resources



Crafts: Rooted in local resources and history

- Cultural and economic history: engaging with master craftspeople
- Local sourcing of materials
- Local and culturally relevant activities and crafts:
 - Fibers
 - Glassblowing
 - Jewelry



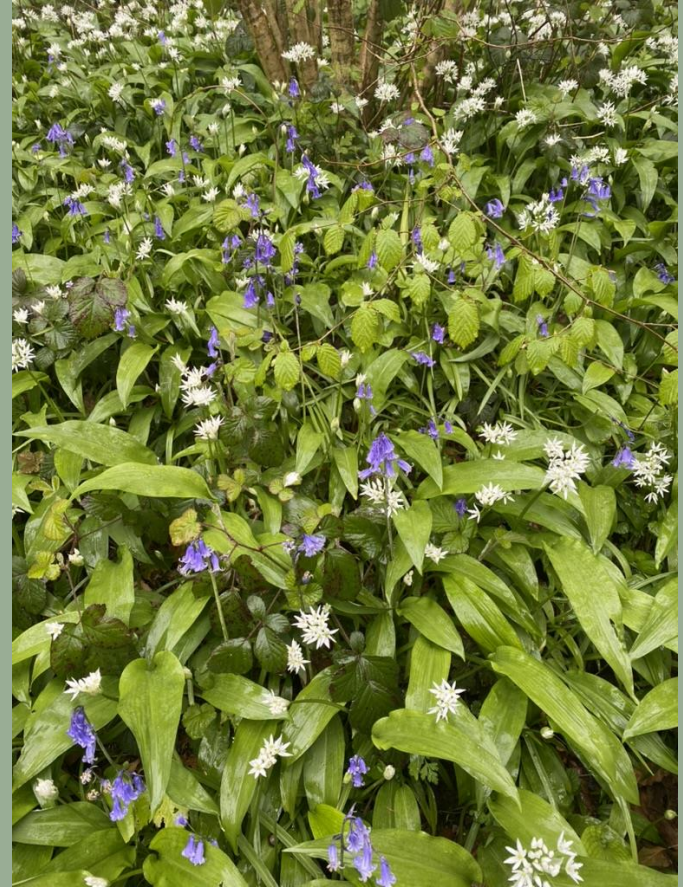
Learning and growing in community



- Co-development: staff and students together
- Respect for observation and research and providing resources and time for these
- Relationships and a culture of care

Honoring the cycles of nature

- The importance of festivals and celebrations
- Marking the cycle of the year
- Drama and movement



Emphasis on the spiritual



- Spiritual-scientific research, observation, reflection
- Eurythmy where possible
- The healing power of water
- Academic engagement

Weaving spirit and matter

- Public funding and the requirement for accountability
- Transparent and accessible communication to official bodies
- Assessment
- Emphasis on health and safety

Making connections: How does/could this apply to Waldorf schools?



- Addressing questions of scale, resources, and transferability
- Building a deeper understanding of the genius loci: land walks, land audits, and research
- Local sourcing of resources
- Farming and gardening: local vegetation
- Community engagement

Waldorf connections

- What about eurythmy?
- Spiritual research: working with the spirit of a place
- Challenging our assumptions about school: adapting to fit today's needs

