

A Day in the Life of a Partnership School

by Karen Davis-Brown

If not for the cheerful, energetic voices of the children, you might not even know that the large old house is a school. However, 72 children from four to eighteen years old are joined daily in this place by approximately 20 adults for an adventure in learning the partnership way.

If we enter the large back yard, we first behold a half-acre garden yielding its first early lettuce and baby carrots. Several young children are in the garden with an adult helper, gently separating the fresh vegetables from the soil and from the still-immature plants. This week, it is the four-to-six year old group's turn to prepare lunch for the school. With the help of their three adult partners, the children are responsible for tending the garden, preparing menus, doing the "shopping" at local shops and growers, preparing the meals, serving the food to their school mates, and kitchen clean-up.

Soon they will be writing and illustrating their own cookbook to share with the rest of the school. Simple science, math, reading, nutrition, literature, and social studies lessons are incorporated into their work, as they learn the value of teamwork, service to others, and a job well done.

After a taste-testing session with the young children, we pass through the kitchen into a long hallway with rooms to either side. Next to the dining room on the left side of the hallway is a room where twelve 7-9 year olds and their three adult partners are busy working on a play they wrote based on the legends of the Native American groups that live in the area. The students are clustered in small groups, some painting stage sets while others sew costumes, and a third group builds drums for use in the play.

The students at this partnership school often learn in mixed age groups, but they are also grouped by age, with the 4-6 year olds, 7-9 year olds, 10-12 year olds, 13-15 year olds, and 16-18 year olds together. Each group has three adult leaders two teachers and one community volunteer. The teachers are comprised of one man and one woman, to model gender partnership to the children as they grow.

The community volunteer in the classroom changes every month. Often the person is an employee loaned by a local company, or a retired neighbor. In this classroom, the community volunteer is a local Native American elder who is helping them prepare their presentation with authentic material and respectful attention to the culture about which they are learning. As well as building and playing Native American instruments, how to say simple phrases in the elder's language, simple artistic methods for the set and costume design, and a different perspective regarding the region in which they live; this group of children understands that the production and presentation of this play helps them teach their schoolmates what they themselves have learned.

Across the hall, a 15-year-old girl is conducting one of the school's mixed-age music groups, rehearsing the Ode to Mother Earth she and some other young people composed for an upcoming

festival, where children from all continents will come together to share their experiences at Partnership Schools. Down the hall, the social and economic inventions lab is conferring via email with a sister Partnership School in Angola about building solar ovens.

In the flower garden, a 10-12 year old class is engaged in a lively discussion. They have just read a children's story in which the "good guys" win by battling the "bad guys". Sitting cross-legged or lying in the grass, small groups are discussing 1) the implications of the victory for the good guys' side and 2) how the conflict could have ended in a more positive, less violent manner. The teachers are observing the groups from the sidelines, available for support as the children require it. As we walk away from the doorway, one child hurries past us to the library. He remembered a similar story, and wants to refresh his memory on the peaceful resolution in that situation.

As we pass by a darkened room, we see a group of students studying slides of the art and technology of the Minoan civilization that flourished in the Mediterranean 3500 years ago. The group is composing a "textbook" for their peers regarding this culture, to convey what they're learning regarding how an ancient people in a highly creative, peaceful, gender-fair culture thought and lived.

In the next room, which is set up as a nursery, several very small children are playing or being held and rocked by a group of 13-15 year olds. This group decided that for the fall semester they would serve the neighborhood by offering a "mom's morning out", where they would provide free childcare to mothers of young children who needed a short break or to run errands. In the morning, the students take turns caring for the children or building toys and creating books for use in the nursery. In the afternoon, they spend their time researching questions regarding child development that arise from their morning's work, and plan the art, movement, and music activities for the following day.

The principal of the school, who has been our guide, explains that a group of 16-18 year olds have gone to "the farm" for the day. "The farm" is a small acreage owned by a local organic grower, one of the school's community volunteers. This group of young people is preparing to take two sheep they have raised to a community in Mexico. Having learned to shear, clean, spin, dye, and weave the wool their charges produce, they are using the products from the sheep to earn money for their trip. When they return, they will prepare an exhibit for a local museum, using their photographs, drawings, journal entries, and poetry which they gathered while in Mexico.

The principal explains that school governance, discipline, and academic evaluation are handled differently here than at schools not based on a partnership model. This school is governed by an all-school council which includes a representative from each age group, six school staff, and three community members. The basic code of conduct which the students are taught, and to which they are expected to conform, is developed by this body.

There is another body comprised of student representatives which holds "peer court" for schoolmates that have infringed upon the code in a way that impacts the whole school. Evaluation of student group and individual work is conducted at the end of every semester by a group of peers supported by adult partners. Both the students being evaluated and the school

evaluation team prepare narratives explaining each project's intended outcomes and process, and what was learned as it evolved, which then become part of the students' portfolio.

As we walk out the front door, we see the 7-9 year old group in the park next to the school. They are running, jumping and throwing learning and playing Native American games taught to them by the elder who is helping in their classroom. It is obvious that the "walls" of these "classrooms" are broad, wide, and extremely permeable they let the world in, and support the young people in taking their place as partners in weaving their own future.