

Presentation – transcribed  
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Slide one

Good Evening.

Thank you for coming out tonight. I completed my research in the Spring of 2019 and since then seismic changes have taken place in the realm of diversity around the world, in our city and within the Waldorf movement. To be honest I would happily have preferred to send you all a pdf of the article that was published in the Waldorf Research Bulletin but I feel compelled to offer what was only touched upon in the article and that is the voices of the research participants or at least more than what was presented in the article. The participant interviews are to me the most important aspects of the research and it was quite a blow when I first submitted a draft to my professor and she told me they were not interested in the actual interviews but the process...

Slide 2

I kept thinking about the words of one participant who said- 'I have no idea if our school is diverse or what their experiences are like because we don't provide a space to hear our stories.'

I will begin with a very brief overview of the research and then I will dive into the interviews with parents and faculty. I am very fortunate – well you are fortunate because I have my colleagues Mel and Neha supporting my presentation tonight as well as WA parent, Carolina. They will be stepping into read some of the interviews. It should not be too long- tonight- I have really scaled back- about 45 min and then we will open the floor to you.

Slide 3: Before we start I want to offer you a listening tool that I used for my interviews developed by Theory U ( a change management method). Theory U was developed by a Professor at MIT, Otto Scharmer who has strong Waldorf/Anthroposophical connections. I will provide resources on our school's BLOG.

Slide 4: Image of Listening: If there is one thing I would wish for you all to take home tonight is the importance of listening and the levels of listening. For example, are you thinking already that you have an answer or do you already have an opinion? You may be downloading thoughts from habits of thinking – this was key for me to prepare for as I entered into an interview and it is not easy but if you develop the discipline it can be extraordinary and humbling.

Slide 5: Practitioner Action Research: What is it? "Practitioner action research, like any other type of research means different things to different people. However, it is generally agreed that action research is about addressing a particular problem or a specific practical issue within one's

own workplace. It is therefore about change for those involved; change of practice and often change of one's theories of learning, underpinning beliefs and values.”

Slide 6: The problem: My work is primarily in the area of enrolment management. What I am seeing and hearing from families is that we do not reflect the diverse city we live in. I am aware that we have low enrolment. Gaining a deeper understanding of why that is could help the school in attracting and retaining new families.

Slide 7: One of the first questions you have to ask and justify- is there a need for this research? Many Waldorf educators agree there is a need to consider incorporating new methods of learning to better reflect the complexity of change in the world that surrounds children today and the one that will surround them in the future -

Slide 8 and 9

8 Semi-structured Interviews guided by Theory U listening tools and methods

Slide 10 The Interviews- Analysis

Slide 11

“I was looking at all the alternatives. Reggio Emilia and Waldorf was what I wanted. They were a fit for me. Some see Waldorf as kooky and airy fairy but I found all that other stuff outweighed by the emphasis on cooperation, nature, and the kind of back to basics, such as the setting aside of technology and to really get back in touch with the earth. ‘

Early research and an initial attraction - The fact that Lily was pregnant and already looking for a fitting school is also an important factor in outreach and marketing strategies

Slide 12:

Interviewed parents said that an open and progressive community was preferable over a diverse community that may not be open. All 4 parents suggested that there was a greater chance of bullying and racism in the public-school system.

‘When I first read about Waldorf I was in California, pregnant, and had this book that had all of the alternative philosophies for school. I was already looking for alternative school rather than public school. I grew up in a New York public school with 40 kids in a class and it was survival of the fittest—it’s a jungle and teachers don’t have resources.”

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‘I was a touch hesitant. I wanted to identify with black and in an all-white school environment that was less likely to happen. Even though I loved the Waldorf philosophy – the faces he would see every day – that was concerning. There would not be many friends of colour whereas a

public school setting would be more diverse. For me, the issue was his identity. So I decided I will supplement his education on issues of race and diversity – what the school may not be able to provide. The school gets all these other things right, so I will have to work extra hard to a positive black identity.'

#### Slide 14

All four parents interviewed admitted to supplementing the school's curriculum with their own to support a positive identity of diversity for their child.

Two parents said they brought this issue to their child's teacher who empathized, but they also felt that at no point did the school, as an organization, reach out to discuss the content of the curriculum or provide a clear and enforced diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy

#### Slide 15

The participants were also concerned that there was a lack of discussion within the school on issues of diversity

'When you sign on, you accept it is white-centred and don't question the curriculum. I assume there is diversity but because we don't talk about it, I am not sure. Parent participant Mary felt there was a silence around issue of diversity because of Waldorf's Germanic roots

Rita said that she compensates for the lack of LGBTQ content in the curriculum with her own purchases of books and connections with the LGBTQ community network.'

Lily felt that although she was ensuring her son was reading books about race, disabilities, and children that are gay, "it would be much better if the school did it, because they can deconstruct it, contextualize it, and that is important for non-mainstream classics."

#### Slide 16

Varying perspective between diverse families:

There was a conversation about a book- in our grade 3 or 4 parent evening- talking about an assignment. One parent of diversity said 'should they have to read X' and another parent of diversity said 'you have to read some things you don't want to read- its life.' I got what the other parent was saying but it got lost. It was about her child not getting into it but some parents thought 'suck it up.' Possibly if there was a different make up of parents or teacher it might have been followed up- but we just went back to the agenda.1

Slide 17: 'The barrier to join Waldorf is the digging people are doing on the internet--into the religion/cult side. When you are here, in the school, you don't experience that or think that they are secretly teaching a moral code. Mary, a white parent of a bi-racial child' The internet, although a source of outreach, can also act as a barrier in determining whether a parent will even come to see the school.

**Slide 18: When I came here- I felt oh my- I felt the magic!**

Rita, an LGBTQ parent, learned about Waldorf through a 'queer spawn' group, but in doing her internet research was not comfortable with the spiritual esoteric nature of Waldorf education and pursued a local Montessori. But she found the environment at that school cold and her child was not happy, so she hesitantly tried Waldorf.

Through the child's experience, particularly with the teacher relationships and the warmth of a progressive community, the parents overcame their discomfort with the so-perceived religious aspect of Waldorf but many of those in their community are not willing to risk it.

Slide 19

David who identifies as Asian -grew up in Toronto and had never heard of Waldorf- never! It was only through a small event posting about making crafts at a winter fair. Their child loved crafts!

"So- by observation we are a minority in the school if we are talking about skin colour or our background. I recall our first experience at the Winter Fair and our child was 3 years old- and we felt like- "should we be here?" and going into the café- I feel like I am in high school again- the environment was new and we didn't see anyone similar to us. I remember someone collecting tickets who was Asian- and thought we should be fine. Although Asian is a lot of different cultures- the same skin colour does not mean you have the same background. We are from Japan, a unique culture and distinct- 1000 years of a proper etiquette for everything including walking in the door. –David, Parent

Slide 20

What attracted David was the Process of thinking and learning

"I am very much on the other train – academics and science and I found himself wondering, who's Steiner? That was my question. We went to an open house to learn more after the Winter Fair. What is the idea? The process? It appealed to me as I hire 60 university students to help with my workload and I have to explore the process of their thinking because they are all incredibly smart. I didn't think there was a school for that young of an age that was interested in the process of thinking: putting it in front of you and not telling you what the answer is. It made sense to me." David

Slide 21-

Because we are not Catholic or religious I felt that it was –a little too much out there- the bible thing.

We pretend to be inclusive by offering a little bit of this and that.

When reading the Garden of Eden what they are telling you is what the child is going through- the change from innocence- no longer believes in fairies – kicked out of paradise. The way we are referencing this are the things that are turning people off but if we refer to it as what the child is going through and not through Adam and Eve will be more open. There are other stories that could be used. So people from the outside they will say I don't want my kid to be here I am Muslim

I have five friends who won't come here because they are atheist or agnostic. They don't want to come here because it is too Christian. It is not Christian, but it reads that way. My daughter believes in Mother Earth as a Goddess. We had an argument two years ago, because what does she mean she does not believe in God? And she said she believes in Mother Earth. It was a deep, great conversation because of what they're being taught here and what they open up, but people don't really see that on the outside.

## **Slide 22**

### **The experience of a bi-racial child**

Mary said, "I am an educator, so I knew the realities. Public school kindergarten was horrifying. I studied and learned about alternative options and took a parent and tot program at this Waldorf school. I felt a sigh of relief. I had found a nurturing and safe place for my child."

"The older my daughter gets, the more she can express her lack of inclusion at the Waldorf [community]. My daughter clearly sees her identity represented in other schools that she visits with posters on the bulletin boards and the walls and through diverse teachers. She feels seen there.

I understand the Waldorf aesthetic, it attracted me in the first place but I also see my daughter's reaction. We rely on the teacher, but it is her experience that I have to listen to and wonder – she is the one that is of colour."

Eventually, Mary and her daughter did leave the school

## **Slide 23 -**

A different Pie:

I did not choose a private school for the academic challenge, [or] to get into the best university but from a place of child development that was holistic and [that guides the child] to become a good human being

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Diversity can be great but not why I am here- way beyond that. The community is beautiful. Every time we had a conflict we had a solution- how to – given from a teacher- how to handle it with kindness and understand why. Not just paying for education but how to parent. Teaching our children to respect the other

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I think there is a progressive mindset and culture at the school. That felt like ok- a good jumping off point. Given it is a private school- it was as good as it would get. I assumed other private schools had tunnel vision focus- more white. This school was more open where other private schools are about money. In Waldorf there is some money but it is not the culture.

## **Slide 24**

Parent Suggestions

### **Marketing & outreach to diverse communities:**

All eight participants in these interviews perceived a need for better marketing to and recruitment of diverse communities from birth to preschool that also focused on the philosophical ideas in Waldorf education.

### **Religion**

Address it in on website and in community forums: The Christian undertones are the biggest barrier to LGBTQ and Muslim families- maybe a bullet point of the vision and say that- we focus on diversity- spiritual aspect means we say this in the curriculum- why we are using it or consider other narratives to address stages of child development

### **Racism/cult**

Clear Statements on Diversity- Address racism- demonstrates inclusivity, and honesty - If you say we are addressing where we live- represent Toronto- we are not Waldorf in Dominican Republic but we are in Toronto and we represent this.

## **Slide 25**

### **Let our voices be heard**

Community storytelling, visits to the classroom

### **Diverse material**

Include diverse material in curriculum

### **Visual diversity**

Look around- what are the images, who are the people, the festivals

### **Strategic plan**

Make diversity a part of the Strategic Plan – currently hear nothing, silence

### **Communication**

Communicate the strengths – open community, safety, collaboration, nature, faculty that care, process of thinking, values we love and that attracted us.

## **Slide 26 The Decision to Enroll:**

- The Waldorf developmental approach to learning
- Safety
- The focus on relationships with the teachers
- Progressive community

These factors took priority over the lack of diversity in the school

## **Slide 27 Conclusion: Unconscious Silence**

The reaction of the participants indicates that the school's unconscious silence on diversity ultimately weakened the integrity of the school's mission for social renewal and transformation, further supporting the need to address diversity as a social issue.

## **Slide 28 Faculty Interviews**

Faculty participants were specifically asked to reflect on social justice pedagogy within the Waldorf context and on the value of a diverse student population.

Faculty participants also shared their own biographies and how they discovered Waldorf education.

### Slide 30

- The results of.... showed that there was a shared belief among the faculty that diversity is intrinsically important to the social mission of the school.
- Recruitment of diverse teachers
- Building capacities for questioning the body of knowledge (e.g., Waldorf curriculum content) given to teachers
- A desire for a cohesive exploration of diversity with the community
- Improving outreach to spread the ideas of Waldorf education and the fundamental differences from other educational models.

### Slide 31: Outreach

'We need to go to those new immigrant communities. They are looking, trying to stay as a collective but also want to bond with Western culture. Waldorf is a wonderful way to bridge the gap to their culture and to Western society. I actually found that it helps you maintain your cultural identity.'

'Promote to them that this is a really cool and an interesting idea of child development. Would you like to learn more as a teacher or family? Those communities left their home. They left their foundation, their own culture, their own island. It is frightening to leave and arrive to a new culture but they also need to understand that there are ideas in this new world- that are very similar and relatable to their own beliefs and systems.'

### Slide 32-

Why Waldorf as a teacher: What I didn't experience in my own education

For another faculty participant, Cindy, it was not until she left her native country that she could reflect on the impact of her education and her attraction to Waldorf: "In Taiwan, I grew up in a system where since kindergarten I was in school from 8am until 5pm, a one hour break and then more study until 9pm, and on Saturdays too. I never liked it, there was so much pressure and study. All memorization."

It was there that I realized I had to leave my country to escape the pressure. Eventually I made my way to Canada and I went to college to earn my degree in Early Childhood Education. We spent one class talking about different pedagogies and I heard about Waldorf, but before that I never heard of it growing up. My College teacher had visited a Waldorf school and was showing us photos. And what got me was the connection to nature, back to nature. That is how I got interested. I never grew up with nature

Slide 33 Why do you think parents choose a Waldorf school:

When a parent begins to look outside their catchment area and consider paying out for their education, what they really are looking for is what is this school about and how will my child be

most advantaged by going to this school? Parents choose a private school because they are perpetuating a status quo and everybody wants a piece of that pie. We are selling a very different pie and we don't have the same version of success.

This is a holistic education and we want well-rounded students. They (parents seeking private education) are not looking for good citizenship or a well-rounded education. They want to know that their children are going to get high scores on the SSAT's. **We don't compete in that world.** It's really like how did the Eastern philosophy slowly insinuate itself into the Western world. It is a shift in values. (faculty member, Ruth)

Slide 34 Barriers to shift the curriculum

Some faculty were ready for action, while others were more contemplative. Elizabeth, a faculty participant, provided examples of how she incorporates diversity in her lesson planning: multicultural stories (being mindful of cultural appropriation), non-binary nature stories and created tales (no specific gender assignment), puppet shows representing different family constellations (one parent, same-sex couples, extended family, older parents). Elizabeth has actively sought out methods of teaching to be more inclusive. Her efforts, however, demonstrate an individual's solution rather than a collaborative effort orchestrated by the school.

Barriers to addressing diversity ranged from a fear of tokenism to a need for a larger discussion regarding the framework of Waldorf pedagogy and its epistemological differences with mainstream approaches. Faculty member Ruth reflected: They're really, really big questions, and I think that one can't jump too soon to how one speaks to the students until one has resolved in themselves and then also in the collective what we think, what practices we'll adopt, what is our positionality, because you can't but take a certain position on these issues because they are loaded.

Highlights from Academic Research

1. Data important- otherwise patterns of oppression can go undetected, trivialized or silenced
2. Canadian Identity – A colour-blind Canadian identity also impacts the curriculum content of schools, including Waldorf schools. Generally, there is a lack of content highlighting Canada's history of slavery and segregation and the positive history of black institutions and black resilience (Maynard, 2017). Angod (2015a) also connects the rise in social justice education with the Canadian national identity of 'humanitarianism abroad', as an essential aspect of how Canadians of European descent come to see themselves as racially superior. Angod suggests that multiculturalism and humanitarianism, as practiced in social pedagogy through student volunteer trips at elite schools, were linked to a racial logic of white dominance.
3. The Rise of Social Justice Schools – more about ensuring compliance rather than providing a voice for marginalized students or developing allies. the rise in social justice education with the Canadian national identity of 'humanitarianism abroad', as an

essential aspect of how Canadians of European descent come to see themselves as racially superior.

4. Increasing Diverse Students: Simply increasing diverse students not linked to social justice or inclusivity—but on its own is a fragmented strategy that ensure the entrenchment of systemic racism.
5. Recruitment of Diverse Faculty - Recent research has identified that when white teachers are working with a diverse student population, they cannot assume to know what is best for individual children or how they experience micro-aggressions but, as Johnson (2018) suggested, they could learn more from their students.

Multiracial teachers are said to be uniquely situated to reflect the experiences of and to support mixed race students (Sykes, 2015).

6. Knowledge authority in the Waldorf classroom- the Waldorf historical yearly themes can lead to a form of knowledge that is out of sync with the students' emerging faculties of comprehension, self-reflection and world awareness

Slide 42-3

Chart:

These demonstrate that the human capital of the organization is currently operating at a level of fragmented strategies and individual solutions.

Why a Strategic Plan:

From an organizational perspective, Johns and Saks (2017) write that valuing diversity – rather than tolerating diversity – could yield strategic and competitive advantages beyond increased enrollment.

Managing diversity extends to the entire organization and can include diversity metrics, recruitment strategies, creating and communicating anti-discriminatory policies, and raising awareness externally, internally, and within the curriculum (Johns & Saks, 2017). Research has shown that getting in the door can be a problem for marginalized families when the admissions person is white and can be equally challenging for multiracial and LGBTQ teachers (Wolfe & Freeman, 2013).

Simply hiring teachers on the basis of their ethnicity, however, is a fragmented strategy without an overall strategic plan.

An LGBTQ-identified teacher will be more aware of the gender segregation in schools that can escape notice; but if there is no framework for collaboration, that teacher may end up working in isolation and may eventually leave the organization, draining the decisional capital of the school and further deterring the recruitment of multiracial faculty (Fullan, 2014).

Closing:

There have been many wonderful teacher innovations to support marginalized children, but it will take a collaborative effort to ensure that children learn about racism, social identity, and micro-aggressions, so that these topics are not left to the parents to supplement their children's education.

The Waldorf commitment to life-long learning means that every aspect of Waldorf education must be open to continual reflection and to building the capacity to challenge biases within the Waldorf body of knowledge, the field of social justice education in an elite school environment, and one's own society (in my case, Canadian society).

When something becomes institutionalized it can lose control of its original purpose and become standardized

Develop your own commitment to exploring your own biases -

Thank you to the wonderful parent and faculty participants that placed their trust with me and their willingness to share their stories.

Q & A

Jen Deathe

Parent Presentation

July & September 2020