

Discovering Educational Agency

An Exploration of the School of Environmental Studies,
Cornerstone Montessori School and the Minnesota Waldorf School

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Abstract

The guiding question for this paper is: How do varying schools create educational agency? I define educational agency as the ability to actively self-motivate and take ownership over your learning process. Over the past four years of field and course experience, educational agency has been my focus. I argue that it should be the goal of any schooling experience. This paper explores the ways educational agency develops in terms of Space, Work, Time and Student-Teacher Relationships in three varying school systems: Cornerstone Montessori School, Minnesota Waldorf School and the School of Environmental Studies.

Over the past four years I have visited schools across different contexts and locations in both the United States and abroad. Although previously motivated to discover the best school system with success that could be replicated to replace all failing schools, I learned that success happens in multiple forms depending on the intention of the school. Success at Kamehameha Schools in Hawaii involves teaching native Hawaiian children respect for their culture and language so that the Hawaiian culture continues to develop and flourish. This definition of success certainly does not apply to Andersen Elementary School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where success involves helping students reach college in order to break free from the poverty cycle. Educational activist and reformer Ted Sizer believed that no two schools should look alike because they each serve a unique body of students with varying histories, strengths and learning styles. A good school, Sizer (1989) says, “respectfully accommodates the best of its neighborhood.” For this reason, Sizer founded the Coalition of Essential Schools which is based on ten core principlesⁱ that can be adjusted to reflect a particular school community, instead of a blueprint school model.

Influenced by Sizer, I chose the value, “educational agency” to examine in three different school systems: The School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo, Cornerstone Montessori School and the Minnesota Waldorf School. I define educational agency as the ability to actively self-motivate and take ownership over your learning process. My understanding of educational agency is largely through the influence of education activist Alfie Kohn who is a strong believer in the power of intrinsic motivation. Throughout this paper I will use Kohn to explain the educational agency I found in each of these three schools. Through observing, interviewing and learning about each school’s philosophy and practice, I identified the ways in

which Space, Time, Student-Teacher Relationships, and Type of Work given allow for educational agency to develop.

The Schools:

I. School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo:

The School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo (SES) is an environmentally-infused, optional high school for juniors and seniors that teaches its core subjects through the context of the natural world and a partnership with the Minnesota Zoo. SES is built on the Minnesota Zoo's campus. The school strives to be "a community of leaders learning to enhance the relationship between humans and their environment," and it is committed to "[developing] active citizen leaders who are environmentally informed, self-perpetuating learners and connected to the local and global community." SES was designed by a small body of individuals who believed students learn best in a small, highly focused and contextualized school environment. For that reason, the Minnesota Zoo was the chosen partner for the Environmental School to provide students with authentic, real-world learning experiences that would put their classroom work into perspective.

Space

SES was fortunate enough to design and construct its school building. Todd Carlson, one of the contributing founders of SES, explained how the philosophy of the school was built into the "bricks and mortar" of the school (Carlson, T. "personal communication" February 28, 2013).

By this, he means that the school building reflects the values of which SES was founded. Dedicated to collaborative and community based learning SES created a space to encourage that type of learning. Rather than long hallways and cube-like classrooms, SES is a comparatively open school. The upper level is divided into four sections called “Houses”- two for each grade. There are no doors to get into the Houses, but rather low dividers and broad openings. In this way, entire Houses can meet undisturbed in their own space, yet the classroom area is not segregated from the rest of the school. The middle of the space is open with enough tables and chairs arranged so that all 100 or so students can meet when needed.

Within each House, there are separate student work “Pods” each accommodating ten students. Low walls surround the pods so that students have privacy over their space, but understand that they are being overseen by teachers. Rather than lockers, these desks are where students keep their personal belongings and serve as a type of office space. Pods are one way SES communicates their value of collaborative learning to students, both in the very design of the pod and by assigning pod-group projects throughout the year.

Students I observed seem to have both freedom and flexibility over their learning environment. Walking through the pods, I noticed how each student had in some way decorated their desk and bulletin board. I was shocked to see that some students had pets on their desk! Additionally, students are allowed to relocate themselves to work independently or with groups in other parts of the building. I often saw students sprawled out on the floor or congregated around tables to work together. In nice weather, students and teachers can use an outdoor classroom space. The freedom to manipulate their classroom space gives SES students agency.

Work

Houses are not just community hubs; they provide a unique teaching opportunity in which three teachers collaborate to teach broad themes across the Science, English and Social Studies disciplines. The theme becomes the canvas upon which teachers paint their curriculum. For example, first trimester 11th grade students explore the relationship between humans and water and complete an extensive group project called Pond Profiling. Although water is the thread through the three disciplines, students learn to approach the concept from scientific, literary and sociological angles. Studying pond ecology prepares students to take water and soil samples and identify native flora and fauna. Reading books such as Thoreau's *Walden* or Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* teaches students the art of subjective nature writing as opposed to disciplined scientific writing appropriate for a research paper. As social studies prospective, students study how human interaction affects the pond habitat and learn about organizations that bodies of water from human destruction. In this way, every learning opportunity relies on the collaboration of all three disciplines.

SES emphasizes authentic, experiential learning and therefore students are frequently involved in long term projects that require researching in the field. Apart from long term projects like Pond Profiling, SES designed a week long program called Intensive Theme that takes place near the end of each trimester. For an entire week (or up to 10 days), students chose an elective that goes in depth in one particular topic. SES offers a number of Intensive Theme travel trips and through conversations with students, I learned that past trips have gone to Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand, the Galapagos, Canada, Costa Rica. Students spoke enthusiastically about these study options and valued the SES curriculum for creating that opportunity.

A number of students told me that although the work at SES is challenging, they would much rather be at SES than in their public high school where they didn't learn nearly as much.

Time

There is no typical model for a day at SES. As social studies teacher Scott Haisting said, it adds “a vibrancy to the day” when students can't predict what will happen (Haistin, S. personal communication April 24, 2013). The structure of the three hour House block allows for flexibility in what is taught when and for how long. Haisting explained to me that collaboration among House teachers is essential. They cannot stick to an individual agenda. Collectively they work with a theme, such as humans and water, but the time spent specifically on Science, English and Social Studies is not always divided nicely into thirds. The whole month could be about Social Studies and involve taking House wide field trips. A day could be dedicated to work-shopping papers on *The Old Man and the Sea*. The fact that SES was purposely built without a bell system allows teachers the freedom to determine what needs to happen in a given day.

The extended block of time and flexibility of the schedule creates conditions for experiential learning. During House time, students can go on field trips and visit the Zoo or work on long term research projects without being restricted by a 50 minute time block. Intensive Theme serves the same purpose, if only for a week. Students benefit from learning experiences beyond what the classroom can offer and the SES daily and annual schedule accommodates for that.

Student-Teacher

I learned from conversations with students that a major contributing factor to their happiness at SES was the relationships they had with their teachers. Multiple times, I heard that teachers “really care about you” at SES. The overall opinion was that teachers want to see you succeed and students respected their teachers for being so dedicated. Many students expressed appreciation the amount of trust teachers have of students. From the start, students are trusted and expected to work independently. The intentionally small design of SES, no more than 400 students, allows for this kind of trusting environment.

This arrangement encourages As each House has three corresponding teachers, when students are in small groups, teachers move about the room overseeing and assisting their work. In this way, teachers form more personal build personal connections with their students and vis versa.

While touring the school, I had trouble knowing where the teachers were. Walking around one of the Senior Houses, it was unclear to me who was “in charge”, because everyone was everywhere. SES was designed to force teachers to use a more engaging pedagogy style than lecture. Teachers act more like coaches who guide the learning and require students to engage with the material independently. With this system, students and teachers are collaborate in the learning process; students are just as much responsible for creating the learning as the teachers.

Discussion

To remind us, Educational Agency is the ability to actively self-motivate and take ownership over your learning process. In order to do this, however, students need to be properly

motivated. Kohn (1999) refers to the “three C’s of motivation”, collaboration, content and choice, to discuss how to motivate students in school (p. 187). Collaboration creates an appealing work environment because it brings people and ideas together where thoughts can be exchanged, discussed and reimaged. Successful teamwork inspires a sense of community and passion within the group (p. 188). The unique structure of SES in which Science, English and Social Studies are taught in conjunction with one another naturally facilitates cumulative projects that require students to think about the whole world and not just a small section of it. While SES successfully balances a contextualized curriculum, Kohn finds that opposite is more often the case in schools:

We break ideas down into tiny pieces that bear no relation to the whole. We give students a brick of information, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, followed by another brick until they are graduated, at which point we assume they have a house. What they have is a pile of bricks, and they don’t have it for long. (p. 216)

In order to make learning more meaningful and comprehensible, schools should teach students things that are of value and relate to the world they live in. An authentic curriculum is one reason why SES was developed to have a partner (the Minnesota Zoo) to provide students with authentic learning experiences that pull together multiple disciplines. Lessons should spill into one another because “[w]hen things are taught in isolation, they are harder to understand and harder to care about” (p. 219). Kohn’s research shows that giving students choice repeatedly results in a higher quality of work. Autonomy is empowering and in a classroom setting it serves as a powerful form of motivation. SES strikes a balance between teacher and student initiated decision making. Within the frame of an assignment students are given choice to chose topics that interest them, but are not given ultimate control. Notably, not all aspects of learning will be inherently interesting or enjoyable, but granting self-determination will facilitate the completion

of these less enjoyable lessons. “Children start out enthusiastic and skillful learners”, Kohn says, “Helping them to stay that way through school is partly a matter of what we give them to learn” (p. 225).

II. Cornerstone Montessori School:

Cornerstone Montessori School, located in St. Paul and partnered with the Montessori Training Center of Minnesota (MTCM), is the pilot school for the “Montessori for All” program. Montessori For All seeks to close the achievement gap by providing high quality Montessori education to “culturally and economically diverse” populations. Under the Montessori for All initiative, MTCM plans on building more schools like Cornerstone in the Twin Cities area in the near future.

Montessori education was founded by the Italian pedagogue, Maria Montessori in 1907. Today the Montessori practice is globally recognized with over 4,000 certified Montessori schools in the United States alone. Maria Montessori described children as having “absorbent minds” that learn from simply interacting with their environment (Standing, 263). Given their innate curiosity and absorbent tendencies, Montessori believed children should be placed in a “prepared environment” that is equipped with all the proper learning tools to teach children. Montessori believed that children learn simply from the experience of living and therefore should be in a learning enriching environment (265).

Space

Walking into Cornerstone's "Children's House", I was given a small chair to observe from near the entryway. The classroom was large and the shape of the room naturally divided the space into multiple areas. From my perch, I could observe the 20 or so three to six year olds busy at work. To the right of me was a full child-sized kitchen area complete with kitchen table where four children were enjoying their breakfast. When they finished eating, the children brought their dishes to the sink to wash and dry, rapidly and methodically moving through the routine motions. Everything from the counter-height down to the dish sponge was fit for a child. Maria Montessori believed that children had to be shown that the world was for them, too; one way of expressing that sentiment is by creating a place specifically designed for a child, unlike an adult's world they must accommodate into. The unique structure of the classroom allows children to problem-solve independently of adults and thus become masters of their environment. Montessori refers to this skill set as "functional independence" (Montessori qtd. in Hainstock, 1978, p. 72).

Every area of the classroom is arranged by subject or purpose. To the left of my chair, was the practical life work area, where children could learn and practice skills to use in the home such as pouring, washing and polishing. Across from that area was the mathematical center with things such as counting beads, geometric shapes and block sets that proportionally decreased from one another to stack and form a tower. Surrounding these two areas were a few small tables and child-sized sofas, on which sat two girls practicing finger knitting. Across the room I saw the reading and science area with more child-sized furniture and cozy reading nooks. The learning tools are strategically placed around the classroom and always remain in the same spot so that students can learn the layout of the classroom and always find their desired project. Children

learn to respect one another by returning materials the way they found them so the next child can have the same experience.

Desks and chairs are movable and no one child owns or belongs to a specific desk. They are encouraged to move freely about the classroom and use whatever space is available to them. The mat is a quintessential part of a Montessori classroom; the mat marks the children's work spot and can be used at the child's disposal anywhere around the classroom. I heard a teacher tell a student that she "need either a mat, chair or table so that I know this is your 'work'." Children have freedom and flexibility to chose where and on what they want to work as long as it does not disturb another child's work. It is a lesson in body control and fine motor skills to carry themselves around the classroom without disrupting one another. As I heard one instructor say, "All children have a right to choose their own working spot. You may move your own spot, but you may not ask someone to move theirs."

Notably, I was not given a full sized chair on which to sit. I imagine that my small chair symbolized that I was a visitor in the child's space; I had to accommodate to their world. I noticed that the children who did come to ask me what I was doing in their classroom spoke to me with respect, but also with a level of confidence that might not be expected from three to six year-old children. I hypothesize that the confidence is a result of feeling in control of their environment.

Work

There are multiple types of learning materials in the classroom, as discussed in the Space section. Some are classified as "practical life" work and include exercises such as washing, pouring, sweeping, dusting, polishing and food preparation etc. Others provide children the opportunity to practice fine motor skills such as tying a shoe, lacing a bag, or hooking pieces of

cloth together. Other tasks develop long-term skill sets such as reading and writing (i.e. sandpaper letter tracers, letter stencils and flashcards). Montessori believed young children are tactile learners and should experience learning through their hands. Each of her learning tools are not only hands-on, but also self-correcting, meaning that children discover their error on their own.

All of the materials come on a tray that the child picks up and carries wherever in the classroom she wishes to work. Because there is only one of each material, students are required to respect each other's rights in the classroom and therefore patience is taught from a very young age. If they choose to work on the floor, children must lay a mat down on the floor to delimit their work space. Children are taught to be respectful of one another's space by carefully walking around, and not through, someone's work mat. In that way, walking calmly and carefully around the classroom becomes work in itself that builds on students' fine motor skills.

Time

Montessori schools group students into age categories spanning three years. Ages three to six are in what Maria Montessori calls The Children's House. Ages seven to nine, or are in Elementary 1, Elementary 2 is ages ten through twelve and junior high encompasses ages thirteen through fifteen. Grouping students in this way partially eliminates age-based standards since children can grow at a faster or slower pace within that three year range. This also allows students to accustom themselves to their environment over multiple years, often growing in the way they use the environment.

As a Children's House teacher explained, at age three, children are very observant and spend much of their day walking around the classroom, looking at everything and noticing when

anything is out of place. Three year-olds also tend to prefer individual work over groups. Age four is when children experiment more in the classroom and want to try new things. By five and six, children are masters of their environment and often serve as role models for the younger children. These are common trends in the children, but a Montessori classroom allows for some children to be outliers in their environment. For example, a five-year old child may be reading at a 7-year old reading level, yet not able to count to 100. The flexibility of a Montessori classroom allows students to develop both slower and faster in different capacities as long as they reach the standard level of accomplishment by the end of the three years.

The structure of the day in a traditional Montessori classroom allows students two and a half to three hours of independent work time in which students are free to select materials in the classroom to work with for a desired length of time. Montessori believed students need deep concentration to engross themselves in their work, free from interruption, for essential cognitive growth.

Student-Teacher

A Montessori teacher is a role model for how children should act in the classroom space; through her voice and body language, the teacher sets the classroom tone. She must constantly observe each student's learning progress to gauge when she is ready to learn a new material. The teacher's job, therefore, is not to lead instruction. Maria refers to teachers as directors or directresses to emphasize the fact that they are guiding and not teaching. Each learning material is "presented" (taught) to the child in a one-on-one meeting with the teacher before the child is allowed to use that material. I observed a teacher sitting beside a three-year-old showing her how to complete "banana work". This entailed peeling, cutting and tweezing cut banana pieces into a

bowl before carrying the glass bowl to the kitchen area to eat. The teacher demonstrated each step of the banana work process and before allowing the child to complete the work. This is an example of teaching children “functional independence”; the child is learning to take agency over their physiological needs rather than relying on an adult to provide everything for her.

Elementary classrooms operate in a similar fashion, however, teachers also meet with small groups of students to introduce new concepts. Emelia Carroll, a Montessori student through 8th grade, explains “the teacher would set a schedule and meet with different grades throughout the day to teach math, for example, but then set goals for the class, like ‘you need to be practicing your multiplication facts for 15 minutes every day’, but it was our responsibility to make time for that” (Carroll, E. Personal Communication, May 10, 2012.). In this way, teachers hold students accountable for learning the required material while still allowing students the agency over the decision making process.

In their way of speaking to the children, Montessori teachers are very cautious of usurping the children’s agency and projecting their own choices on the children. Here is one scenario I observed while in Cornerstone’s Children’s House:

Instructor: (seeing a boy run across the room) “Your body is out of control, how can I help you?”

As she says this, she stops the boy in her arms and speaks to him very clearly so that he knows he needs to make a change, yet with enough respect so that he is not being scolded.

Boy: “I’m thirsty”

Instructor: “Well, I’d invite you to go get a glass of water”. In her reply, she makes a suggestion of what the boy can do without taking away the free will of the child to make decisions on his own.

Other phrases I heard frequently during the day were “where is your work?” or “what is your work right now? I need to see you with your work on a mat, or in a chair.” All the while, the teacher speaks in a calm, slow and polite manner. The intention of the teacher is not to assign work to the student, but to provide her with options.

A key operating principle in the Montessori school is that children are capable of taking care of themselves. As young as three years old, children begin learning the skills of self-sufficiency. Observing at Cornerstone Children’s House, I watched a three year-old girl, Noel*, clean-up after her breakfast. Each child prior to Noel systematically rinsed her dish in a bucket of soapy water, scrubbed it with a sponge, dried it with a towel and placed it on the drying rack. Noel, however, spent nearly twenty minutes at the sink dipping her bowl in the bucket of water and watching the water pour out. I was surprised at how long the teachers allowed her to experiment in this way. Eventually, after quite a bit of water had spilled on the counter, the teacher came over to comment that her bowl was definitely clean by now and called Noel’s attention to the soapy counter. After helping Noel find a towel, the teacher walked away so she could clean up at her own discretion. In this situation, the teacher granted Noel the space to process the chore of washing a dish and reminded her of how to clean up after herself.

Discussion

A Montessori school perhaps most saliently achieves my ideal of Educational Agency because it emphasizes self-directed learning. As Alfie Kohn’s research proves, giving children choice in the classroom creates an overall more effective learning experience for both student and teacher (p. 221). Assuming as Kohn and Montessori do, that the desire to learn is innate, schools need not offer incentives or reward plans to convince children to learn; they come to

school with their own curiosity. As Kohn discusses, reward systems are necessary in convincing students to complete work they don't find interesting (p. 149). When we force learning on students (both in content and in the style of teaching) we are creating a negative relationship with learning for the student rather than showing them and allowing them to enjoy the fulfillment in learning.

Kohn shares a quote from Richard Ryan and Jerome Stiller in *Punished by Rewards* on the effect that controlling learning environments can have on students:

The more we try to measure, control, and pressure learning from without, the more we obstruct the tendencies of students to be actively involved and to participate in their own education. Not only does this result in a failure of students to absorb the cognitive agenda imparted by educators, but it also creates deleterious consequences for the affective agendas of schools [that is, how students feel about learning].... Externally imposed evaluations, goals, rewards, and pressures seem to create a style of teaching and learning that is antithetical to quality learning outcomes in school, that is, learning characterized by durability, depth, and integration. (Kohn, p. 149)

A Montessori school does not try to control students because teachers trust that students are self-motivated. Perhaps we have gone so far in the opposite direction (i.e. using incentives to learn) that it is hard to believe a school like the Montessori could ever be successful. Perhaps it is unbelievable that a child's own curiosity and will is a powerful enough tool to motivate learning, even more powerful than a colorful sticker chart. Yet in each of my visits to a Montessori school, I have observed students just as engaged, if not more, as students working for an external incentive.

III. Minnesota Waldorf School

The Minnesota Waldorf School was founded in response to a parent-initiated movement for Waldorf education in the Twin Cities. Enthusiasm for Waldorf schools eventually grew into what is today the City of Lakes Waldorf School in Minneapolis and Minnesota Waldorf School in St. Paul.

The Waldorf school movement began with Rudolf Steiner in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919. His first school served the children of parents working in the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory, and since then all future schools are known as either a Waldorf or Steiner school. Steiner is the founder of the spiritual science Anthroposophy¹ which he uses to explain both human nature and child development. Steiner adamantly expresses that a Waldorf school “does not intend to drum anthroposophical or other dogmas into the children.” In a speech to parents of Waldorf students, he reiterates that the purpose of a Waldorf school is “to develop an art of education on the basis of what Anthroposophy means to us. The ‘how’ of education is what we are trying to gain from our spiritual understanding” (Steiner in Clouder and Rawson, 2003, p. 127). The “how” of Anthroposophy is viewing the child holistically with a body, soul and spirit and educating the child in all three of these aspects (Steiner, 1921, p. 58). Without including all three, a child’s “innermost” being will not be revealed (Steiner, 1921, p. 61). Although even Steiner (1921) admits that “one cannot formulate the methods of the Waldorf school in a few abstract rules” (p. 59), ultimately a Waldorf teacher sees a child as a whole being, consisting of complementary

¹ Anthroposophy is a spiritual science that seeks to bridge the gap between the scientific and spiritual world. Steiner wanted a way of understanding the world without having to rely on the scientific.

parts, and seeks to educate these parts to create a well-rounded person. As Rudolf Steiner is well-known for saying, “Receive the children in reverence, educate them in love, Let them go forth in freedom.”

Space

There are three primary focuses in the elementary curriculum that a Waldorf teacher hopes to communicate: truth, beauty and goodness. A Waldorf classroom embodies these ideals by creating a warm, natural and wholesome space conducive to student learning.

Walking in to the Minnesota Waldorf School second grade classroom I immediately felt at ease. The natural light streaming in through the windows reinforced the Waldorf commitment to a natural and organic environment. Long wooden desks, each accommodating two students, were positioned in slightly curved lines, angled towards the front of the classroom where a blackboard stretched across the entire length of the room. The teacher had used colorful chalk to write the math problems of the day on the board and, along the side, an illustration of Aesop’s Fox trying to eat a bundle of grapes boarded the problems. It is the Waldorf custom to create an illustration of the Main Lesson on the blackboard. The walls were painted a warm orange color in the Lazure style of painting. As I learned later, the brush strokes of Lazure painting are intentionally wide and circular to give the room a sense of breathe (Anastas, 2012). Soft pastel drawings were selectively hung on the wall in a way that left some parts of the wall empty. As I learned later, classrooms are simply decorated so as not to create an over stimulating, cluttered space. Along the bookshelves were woven baskets full of wooden blocks, seashells, pine cones and other natural playthings, which allow the child to be creative in inventing how to play with these open-ended materials.

As students began to arrive for the day, I watched them slowly file into the classroom and greet their teacher at the door with a handshake. This is typical of a Waldorf school; it sets an expectation for respect in the classroom and a readiness to learn. The teacher reinforced this sentiment with the way she took attendance. As she sang out each pupil's name, they each sang back, "yes Ms. Gamble and I'm ready to work." This ritual establishes the classroom as a sacred space that deserves respect. After talking with both a Kindergarten and French teacher from Minnesota Waldorf, I learned that students are the caregivers for the classroom, in charge of cleaning up after themselves, maintaining a clean classroom, and assisting in chores. They did all of this without much fanfare leading me to believe that taking responsibility for the classroom is routine.

As explained by a Kindergarten teacher, the Waldorf classroom extends beyond its asymmetrical walls. Showing the beauty of the world and teaching children to revere the earth is an important part of the Waldorf curriculum. A portion of each day, therefore, is spent outside, but a teacher tries to incorporate as much of the natural work into the classroom as well. The baskets of shells and acorns are examples of this, as are the nature arrangements scattered about the classroom.

Work

Based off his understanding of child development, Steiner grouped child development into three seven-year phases (0-7, 7-14 and 14-21), but for the purpose of this paper, I will only address the first two groups. Work in the youngest ages is play, and children are encouraged to remain in this imaginative and fantastical world until first grade when they are required to think academically. Apart from fantastical play, French teacher Jennifer Bishop explained that one task

a Kindergartener could be asked to do is take all the wooden furniture outside on the patio and polish it (Bisoph, J. “personal communication” May 8, 2013). In this way, children experience the process of working hard and finishing a task (Steiner would call this principle “disciplining the will”). Other Kindergarten practices are baking, especially bread, and making soup on a weekly basis. Children are a part of this cooking and cleaning process so that they understand the work that goes into both preparation and clean-up.

Work in the middle ages continues to show children the truth, beauty and goodness in the world as children move into an academic environment that wasn't present in the Kindergarten setting. The teacher uses techniques to focus the child's thinking, feeling and willing. Feeling and willing deserve the most attention here as the methods to teach children how to feel and will are less clear. Activating a child's feelings is an engagement of the spirit in each child. Waldorf teachers prefer oral storytelling to teach new lessons because it promotes empathy with the characters, be it either fictional or historical, and it brings concepts to life. Incorporation of the arts is hugely significant to a Waldorf school. Not only are students learning how to work with their hands, but they are engaging their senses to see and create beauty. Drawing, movement, singing, reciting verse and poetry, playing an instrument (a pipe in elementary grades) are daily activities within a Waldorf classroom.

As mentioned earlier, disciplining the child's will is a crucial part of a Waldorf education so that children have inner strength to rely on when they encounter a difficult task later in life. In late middle school, Waldorf students carve an egg in woodworking class. This tedious task requires patience and meticulousness. While the students can admire their egg as evidence of their hard work, the real reward is the self-discipline it took to complete the project. In a lecture on student discipline Steiner (1921) said:

In our school, where authority plays its proper part, pupils are expected not to shy away from the most demanding tasks. In Waldorf schools, students are encouraged to tackle wholeheartedly whatever is to be mastered. They are not to be allowed to do whatever they feel like doing.” (p. 81)

Bishop explained how Waldorf schools believe learning is inherently valuable and therefore need not be rewarded with systems such as grades. According to Bishop there is an “implicit rule that we just do our work well because that’s what we do.” Students are encouraged to “do something really wonderfully because they can (“personal communication” May 8, 2013).” The Main Lesson Books children begin completing in first grade reinforce this power and freedom. Only a child’s best work goes into these books, Bishop explained, and teachers emphasize how valuable the lesson books are. With such strong teacher-student relationships, teachers know when students aren’t producing their best work and students are asked to repeat an exercise if it is not their finest quality.

Time

Based on his understanding of child development, Steiner designed the rhythm of a Waldorf school day to fit the needs of the developing child. The day is divided into three sections and can be thought of as the Head, Heart and Hands. The morning period is reserved for the Main Lesson, educating the Head, when children are most awake and engaged. The late/morning and early afternoon is for activities involving the Heart such as foreign language, drawing and painting, eurythmy, music etc., and the afternoon engages the Hands in multiple forms of handwork (AWSNA, 2013). The very structure of a Waldorf school day shows Steiner’s commitment to the education of the whole child and finding an inner balance between all of these capacities.

Student-Teacher

Possibly the most unique features of a Waldorf school is the tradition of having one classroom teacher follow students from first through eighth grade. Waldorf teachers, to the best of their ability, will remain with the same group of students, teaching them all subjects (apart from woodworking, language and eurythmy), until they graduate eighth grade. Teachers develop close relationships with their students and can follow their growth from year to year, providing the necessary support. A Waldorf teacher explained to me that over the summer months students can make huge leaps or regresses; if teachers did not “loop” with their students they wouldn’t be able to recognize those changes and teach accordingly. Part of Steiner’s philosophy is acknowledging and teaching the whole child. In order to do this teachers need to have a deep understanding of the child which wouldn’t be possible without this process of looping. Although not always possible, the eight year looping cycle is ideal.

Waldorf teachers are seen as an authority figure that embodies truth, beauty and goodness. They serve as both an example of what the world is like and also what children should strive to be like. In one of his public lectures, Steiner (1921) said:

[T]eachers prepare their pupils not by controlling their intellect or their capacity to form judgments but by setting the right example as living human beings. Life can evolve only with life. We make our students into proper citizens of the world by presenting the world to them in a human being—the teacher—not through abstract intellectual concepts.
(p. 79)

Although students are taught responsibility for themselves (i.e. carrying their belongings, washing dishes, getting dressed), until puberty, the student is the imitator of the teacher. As Bishop explained to me, this is not just copying what the teacher does; students follow the teacher’s example because the teacher has the ability to produce something truly beautiful. As

students grow, they develop the ability to produce something beautiful of their own and do not need to rely as heavily on the teacher's example (Bishop, J. personal communication). During the second grade Main Lesson, I observed students continue their work illustrating a picture of the tortoise and the hare in their Main Lesson book. Ms. Gamble had hung two examples in the front of the classroom for students to replicate in their own books.

Discussion

Waldorf schooling is an art; it is an engagement of the spirit and soul, and perhaps for these reasons, it is difficult to understand. To fully grasp Steiner's education system, you need to accept his world views. If you believe that a human being consists of more than just a physical body, and that all humans have a soul that must be nurtured and nourished, a Waldorf education makes sense.

The goal of a Waldorf school is to teach children how to think, feel and act; those skills prepare students for life. The system emphasizes gaining skills versus content because skills can be applied throughout life whereas content knowledge is highly specific. In this way, a Waldorf education contradicts Kohn's vision of creating learning that is directly relevant to students. Activities such as carving a wooden egg may ultimately teach students self-discipline and route determination, but the process of carving an egg may be highly unappealing to a given student. However, it is the accumulation of these skills (i.e. discipline, determination, beauty, truth etc.) that Steiner believes will ultimately produce a "free" human being. Where I would say educational agency, Steiner would use the term "freedom".

Waldorf schools are not for everyone. I disagree with the notion that Steiner's outline of child developmental is universal. His way of teaching may not interest every child and forcing a

child to conform to a Waldorf style of teaching could create a negative relationship to education that Kohn warns of in *Punished by Rewards*. Still, I believe his intentions of creating children who understand themselves as physical, spiritual and mindful being is commendable. Waldorf students are taught an awareness of themselves that I think is necessary in order to arrive at some degree of educational agency. Without a sense of inner reflection, you will not know what motivates and engages you.

Conclusion:

All students have the capacity for educational agency, however, controlling school systems that do not rely on collaboration, content and choice to motivate students, usurp an individual student's agency in the classroom. The structure of the school, therefore, plays a major part in the power of a student to become an agent of her education.

The defining significance of this research is that educational agency, as I have come to understand it, can be supported in three distinct school models. Despite having various definitions of success or visions for their schools, the School of Environmental Studies, Cornerstone Montessori and Minnesota Waldorf have all created school cultures that value student agency. I have identified a few common factors present in each of these schools that influence student agency. They are: a student-centered curriculum and classroom, trust of students behavior and capabilities, less, or no, emphasis on learning for an incentive (i.e. grades), authentic learning from real-world examples and personal interactions with teachers.

How else then can educational agency happen? The three participating schools in this study all have unique education structures whose pedagogy is reflected down to the physical building of the school. Since rebuilding, or even restructuring, a school is not a feasible task, I

would offer one suggestion for schools looking to create a culture of agency. Of all factors considered, I believe teachers serve in one of the biggest roles to creating agency in the classroom. The way the teacher assigns work, structures lessons and speaks with students can either give or take away a student's agency. Just slightly reimagining the teacher's role in the classroom from instructor to a facilitator creates a student centered dynamic and enables educational agency to begin.

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ⁱ [i] Ted Sizer's Ten Core Principles that affiliated members of the Coalition of Essential Schools respect are as follows: 1) Learning to Use Their Minds Well 2) Less is More, Depth Over Coverage 3) Goals Apply to All Students 4) Personalization 5) Student-as-Worker, Teacher-as-Coach 6) Demonstration of Mastery 7) A Tone of Decency and Trust 8) Commitment to the Entire School 9) Resources Dedicated to Teaching and Learning 10)