

Woodstock Education Collaborative 2003 - 2004

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Development

In the winter of 2003 a few families in the Woodstock, NY area met to discuss options for schooling our 4 and 5 year old children who were coming of kindergarten age. Most of the people in our group had a background in the arts and limited experience in education. Everyone in the group was parenting an only child, twins in one case. By the time spring arrived we had a group of 6 families, consisting of 10 parents and 7 kids.

Members of our group shared a suspicion of conventional education and its emphasis on uniform performance, lack of individual attention, and social indoctrination. We were interested in starting our own education group so that our kids would be supported as individuals. Our plan was to hire a facilitator whom we liked and trusted, and to have them meet with our children for 6 hours a day, three days each week for the coming school year. Aside from this we had no agenda.

We held a dozen organizational meetings to discuss logistics. We interviewed two facilitators, both young women who were child care providers and who were interested in careers in education. We choose the person with teacher certification who demonstrated the clearest activities plan. While none of the parents were set on particular curriculum goals, some wanted to see their kids meet conventional age-based standards.

We agreed that we all trusted our facilitator's judgment and that we would let her design and conduct a program that was responsive to our kids needs. We expected that parents would be

involved with the facilitator to "tune" the program. These were idealistic and heady times during which members of the group built stronger relations between their families and kids. We dealt with conflicts as they arose and we resolved the following issues:

Location:

In an attempt to contain costs, retain control of our space, and draw as little public attention as possible we rented a large apartment that would function as both our facilitator's home and our group's meeting place. The location needed to be affordable, safe, centrally located, properly sized, inconspicuous, and with a supportive landlord. We were lucky to find such a place. In retrospect, we might have done better by renting space in a local church or community center and spending more of our time and energy on organizational issues.

Insurance:

We found an agent who could issue our group liability coverage. The cost depended on the number of kids and the amount of time they would be together. The whole policy cost about \$1,000 for the school year.

Accounting:

We opened a bank account, decided upon a tuition structure and established a payment schedule. Parents would pay roughly \$25/day per child, and could enroll their child for either a 2 or a 3-day week. We had a supplies account, funded by a contribution of \$75 from each family, that would be replenished as necessary. The group paid for insurance and supplies separately, all other monies went directly to the facilitator, who was responsible for paying for rent, telephone, and utilities.

Commitment:

Because our facilitator was depending on us to cover her cost of living, each family made a one-year commitment to the program. Tuition was divided into four "quarters" with the first and the last being paid before the program began. We planned out a school year, complete with vacation days for the group, and an allowance for sick and make-up days for the facilitator. Families could choose their own vacation schedules, but they would not get a refund if they choose to be absent

when the group was in session.

Parent Helper:

We agreed that one parent would be in attendance to help the facilitator every day. This would be a rotating obligation and parents would sign up on a calendar in advance. We did this to ensure that each family would be informed and involved. We also knew that a helper would be needed at certain times, such as when the kids were playing outside. The facilitator was charged with bring a snack for the group. Being a helper also provided parents with the opportunity to share their skills with the group.

State Regulation:

We considered New York State regulations that apply to schools and daycare centers. We spoke to daycare, and pre-school operators, and home school parents. Without making our plans clear we consulted representatives of the various NY State agencies: the Department of Education, who oversees education, and Child Protective Services, who oversees daycare operations.

We discussed how we wanted to present ourselves to the state, and whether we wanted to register ourselves at all. We decided not to register as either an educational program or a daycare for three reasons:

- 1) We did not feel this was required.
- 2) We did not want to bear the burden of state regulation.
- 3) We felt that if the state should require us to register, then we would meet their requirements at that time.

While forming our group some of us, myself included, were involved with the legal defense of another independent education program in our neighborhood. This other group was under assault from Child Protective Services who claimed they were operating an illegal daycare and was threatening the group stiff fines and penalties.

That case was still developing at the time we were getting started. We did not know which side would prevail, but what we saw soured us to the prospect of dealing with state agencies. The issue eventually went to court and Child Protective Services soundly lost its case. Nevertheless, state policy at that agency remains unchanged and the threat of unjustified harassment remains real to this day. As it turned out, the problems our group encountered came from a totally different direction — one that we did not anticipate.

The area where we spent the least energy was program development and decision-making within our organization. We merely agreed to decide all issues by unanimous vote, and to empower our facilitator to make all program-related decisions. We would meet monthly, or more frequently if necessary, to review our progress, resolve problems, and develop new ideas.

Things proceeded smoothly through the summer and everyone's spirits remained high. None of us had organized anything of this kind. I think we were all amazed at how well everything was going. We shared a utopian faith in our process. If you have been involved in independent community organizations, then perhaps you can see the problems that lay ahead.

Too Much Structure

Our program began smoothly enough. Some kids were more comfortable than others. Some parents spent more time during drop-off so that their kids would become at ease and then transition into the day's activities. However, not all kids were equally receptive to the program.

Two of the kids, twin brothers, were familiar with a third boy who had been their playmate. These three had been cared for by our facilitator and had developed their own dynamic with her and with each other. Old rivalries arose that manifested as issues of hitting, biting, and crying. The facilitator tried to defuse the tensions by providing individual attention, but it seemed that the problems had more to do with the way the group was organized, and how this organization brought out conflict.

Our son was disruptive. He refused to follow the facilitator's plan of when to change topics. He wanted to maintain his focus on certain projects for longer periods. He did not like the "circle time" when the facilitator tried to focus the kids' attention on problems pertaining to the group. He had trouble subduing his energy at this time of the day, and he may have felt uninvolved, threatened or misrepresented. He expressed his frustration, as I would have at his age, by tuning out.

The more active, independent, and less verbal kids were rebelling. Some parents felt that the facilitator was conducting overly organized, or inappropriately organized program. They met with the facilitator and reorganized daily activities according to a more flexible routine. The space was reorganized to allow more simultaneous, separate activities. The result was uniformly appreciated by the kids and largely resolved the conflicts.

Too Much Parent Interference

The three girls in the group formed a clique that provided them with a private community away from the frenzied activities of the four boys. One girl expressed her frustration at the gun and swordplay. Another pressed her dominance in the clique in a way that intimidated the youngest girl. The parent-helper intervened. After review, some parents felt the helper's action was heavy handed.

There were other problems with parent helpers. The facilitator was not aggressive in circumscribing the parents' role. On the other hand, it had not been made clear that she had such power. Some of the parent helpers may have, or appeared to have exercised executive oversight at the same time that they were supposed to be supporting the facilitator. Kids different behavior in the presence of their parents undermined the standards set by the facilitator.

After a few months the role of the parent helper was scaled back. The new plan was that the helper would be there only during drop-off, and during snack and the subsequent free-play

period. At other times parents were asked to leave the kids alone under the facilitator's supervision. This was a positive change.

A Real Battle Over Weapon Play

The issue of the boys' aggressive play-fighting continued to rankle certain parents. They felt that this aggressive and noisy play was intimidating their girls. They insisted that their kids were suffering and a new policy against this kind of behavior should be put into place. Parents lined up on opposite sides of this issue with the parents of the girls advocating limits on play fighting, and the parents of the boys insisting that it had an important developmental role.

The facilitator listened to the parents dispute this issue and said that she and the kids would address it themselves. She implemented a policy of no gun or sword-play while inside, except as part of an inclusive activity such as a drama, or during a period explicitly devoted to play of this kind. Some parents insisted the facilitator follow a harder line against weapon play, and that it was their right as parents and group organizers to set this policy. The parents' faith in the facilitator was being tested, and the facilitator's autonomy was at issue.

One group felt that it was disrespectful to subject kids to the pressure of having to resolve this issue after they had already asked for our help. They felt that it was their obligation as parents to protect the interests of their kids. The second group, to which I belonged, felt that the facilitator and the kids should be given the chance to define and resolve the problem themselves. We felt that an executive decision was disrespectful to the facilitator and to the kids who were learning how to control their environment.

Our parent meetings became fractious. Some parents were more concerned with their own issues, than the orderly operations of the group. We could not reach a consensus and we had no protocol on how to proceed without one. Because we had no group leader, no rules of order, and no limits on discussion our meetings amplified our differences rather than resolved them.

A Fundamental Conflict Over Group Control

I found the events that were unfolding to be fascinating. The central issues were those of decision-making and control. Dealing with these issues is essential to both personal and community development. Most other parents found the events disturbing and unproductive. Some saw these struggles as evidence that the collaborative was not working.

During this struggle the facilitator was pulled in different directions. Each parent took a different role, and each had some claim to authority. Some offered to work with our facilitator, some tried to convince her to act on their behalf, and some insisted that their needs were paramount. At the same time our facilitator had to plan her program, address the kids' needs, redress individual problems, act as the advocate for the kids, and act as her own advocate in creating the program. And while a parent who felt burned-out could take a break, the facilitator could not.

Issues Reach An Impasse

Our group meetings degenerated into hostile arguments over abstract issues. There were accusations of insensitivity and disingenuity. Frustrated parents stopped attending the meetings. Subgroups met with each other privately in order to clarify their position and solidify their base of support. Once this came to light there were others who wanted the private meetings to cease, arguing that things were being said behind their backs. Still other parents attempted to play the role of peacemaker, but these efforts backfired and the group became completely polarized. The issue of weapon play, which was the pretense for much of the discussion, appeared to be of greater importance to the parents than it was to the kids.

A breaking point was reached when some parents became angry and accused others of being deceptive and manipulative. Some people were offended and broke off further discussion. Group meetings stopped. During this time the kids continued to meet normally with the facilitator, and the facilitator worked with the kids to address their problems. During this final period the kids

had some of their best times together.

For the last 2 months of the year the two groups of parents largely avoided each other. At most we exchanged pleasantries when we dropped our kids off. Some of us were concerned that the kids would be infected by the negativity of their parents. As far as I could tell this did not happen.

Once the school year ended it was clear that the group would not reconvene. Not only were the parents unwilling, but the facilitator also had no desire to continue with the program.

Some Conclusions

It is now 9 months after the end of our experiment. Our kids have gone in different directions: some to private school, some to public school, and some are being home schooled. Two of the boys, including ours, now attend the local Sudbury Valley School. The other two boys go to public school. All of them say they are having a good time at their respective schools and they remain close friends.

I cannot gauge the effect that our short-lived group had on the development of our kids. I doubt there will ever be a consensus about our experiment. I do know that our son is now more enthusiastic about attending the Sudbury Valley school than he has been about attending any other program in the past: he wants to get to school each day, and will spend as much time there as he can.

What transpired between the parents had nothing to do with their kids' education. In gaining what was probably our first opportunity to revisit our own conflicted and unhappy past, some of us were swept away by our feelings. We started what we thought was an education collaborative for our kids, but what we really poured our hearts into was an education collaborative for ourselves. And to this degree I feel we achieved something truly spontaneous, unprecedented, and deeply therapeutic. I'm glad that our kids survived unscathed.

Some Advice

This project taught me why organizations, even small ones, develop written plans for governance. All those tedious rules of order could have saved our group from spinning out of control. I'm referring to things like regular meetings, assigning the roles of chairman and secretary, electing a president, having an agenda, taking and approving minutes, passing motions, and following written guidelines.

I have since spoken to experienced organizers, people who have organized successful schools. They listen to my story with knowing smiles. They've been there – it's familiar terrain. They confirm that organizational structure is the key to keeping everyone focused on the goals of the organization.

Had we followed this approach we would have had a more successful program, and we would have saved our facilitator much anguish. But this is all we would have had, and it's my feeling that the implosion that we experienced will do more for us as adults, and probably more for our kids, than anything we could have planned.