Creating a School Meant for Children: A Multi-Media Presentation

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Acknowledgements

We are in a bleak time in education: Public schools are under crushing pressure to raise standardized test scores; teachers and teacher unions are being cast as obstacles that defend the *status quo* for their own benefit; parents are confused about whether they are doing too much or too little to ensure their children's success; school districts are struggling with shrinking budgets and an economy that makes it difficult to pass bond issues even for basic maintenance; and policy makers are being influenced more by business interests and political ideology than the knowledge and wisdom of scholars and experienced educators. In such a time, what can one do? One thing to do is to   try to make changes within the system; many public school colleagues are working to implement practices that are good for children within the constraints and pressures imposed upon them, and I admire them greatly. Another thing to do is to find, develop, grow, preserve and make visible alternate visions of what education is and what schools can be. This is one contribution to that effort.

In 2001, I became the Head of School, or principal, of Whatcom Day Academy in Bellingham, Washington. As an independent school, we do not have access to public funding, which presents considerable challenges, but what we do have is the freedom to chart our own course. It saddens me that we would not have been able to develop this school in the way that we have over the past ten years within the public school system. For all the talk of school reform, the general environment has not been supportive of true innovation. The partnerships we have with the National League of Democratic Schools and the Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University help to sustain our efforts and we are grateful for those relationships. We have become a sort of unofficial laboratory school, which many colleges of teacher education used to have, including Western Washington University, but very few still exist. So, in homage to the thousands of dedicated, caring, and persistent teachers and teacher educators who are promoting and implementing good educational practices in schools around the country, we offer these vignettes of a school our children deserve. We hope that our work on the outskirts assists you with your work in the trenches.

The videos included in these pages were skillfully edited together, using footage from a variety of sources, by Robert Clark, Manager of ATUS Video Services at Western Washington University, and worked into the article by Greg Hoffenbacker, Director of Technology Services at Western's Woodring College of Education. Graduate students Guava Jordan, Nate Sutton, and Clay Stork filmed some of the interviews and classroom footage. Lars Kongshaug of Vid- smith Productions in Bellingham filmed lessons for the Doing What Works literacy grant (see **Partnerships**). Robert Clark filmed interviews and classroom footage, particularly class meetings. The video of the graduate speeches was our own amateur product. I would like to thank the teachers and students of Whatcom Day Academy for graciously incorporating unfamiliar people with cameras and microphones into their class discussions and activities. It was a testament to the general level of comfort and trust that the children expressed initial curiosity about these visitors, but then carried on as usual. Much of the richness of this portrait of our school is due to the thoughtful insights captured in the unscripted interviews with teachers, parents, and alumni. Thank you to each of you. The teachers deserve additional recognition for their unfailing willingness to tackle the hard work of aligning practice with beliefs and values; it would be simpler to teach from a set of textbooks and administer a prescribed test. Their daily actions and interactions bring a vision to life and give it reality here in this portrait. And finally, thank you to all of the parents and extended family members who bring their children to the school and contribute in so many ways from chaperoning field trips to fixing doors to cataloging library books to fund- raising to creating a new playground. And a *final* final thank you to the special people who serve on our Board of Trustees, without whose phenomenal dedication, perseverance, enerosity,   and far-sightedness this school would not exist.

Introduction

Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts. (Quote attributed to Albert Einstein)

Although it was not described as a progressive school when I joined Whatcom Day Academy in 2001, many of the practices I observed fit the values identified by Kohn (2008) as characteristic of progressive education – "attending to the whole child, a sense of community, collaboration, social justice, intrinsic motivation, deep understanding, active learning and taking kids seriously." These were the characteristics that attracted me to the school. However, although these values were implicit in the visible practices going on at the school when I was hired, there was not a clearly articulated philosophy, or set of beliefs about how children learn, underlying the program. The school consisted of a number of classrooms operating independently of each other; it was not a unified program with a coherent approach to teaching and learning. The teachers were creative and dedicated, but each one made decisions independently about curriculum and assessment. Although there was a written curriculum guide for each subject area that provided some general guidelines for teachers, there were no textbooks or specific information about what should be taught. The teachers had varying levels of comfort and experience planning their own curriculum, and they were not sure how their units and lessons fit with what other teachers were doing. As a consequence, there were sometimes unnecessary repetitions, such as a dinosaur unit being taught in three different age groups, or unidentified gaps in content or skill instruction.

During the past decade, we have been involved in an ongoing process to articulate our beliefs about education, to ground those beliefs in current research about learning, children, and brain development, and to develop a coherent set of practices informed by those beliefs that encompass all aspects of the school program. This has been a very complicated process that has frequently challenged us to uncover and re-examine long-held assumptions, to re-orient our relationships, and to work collaboratively across age levels and disciplines to make changes in the midst of all the activity and busy-ness of a school full of energetic and curious children. It has often felt akin to renovating a ship while sailing through a hurricane.

In this multi-media presentation, I try to give you a sense of the challenges we have encountered during this process and the current issues we are working on. This is not intended to present a finished product, as if we have discovered all the answers and are advocating that all schools should look like our school. As John

Goodlad (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004) says, a school should be in a continual state of renewal, guarding against complacency and inertia. Education is learning, and learning is growth and change. Schools must embody that process. By this I don't mean that schools should adopt every new textbook or pedagogical fad just for the sake of change; but that educators should be involved in a constant process of learning about their students, examining what they are doing, and modifying their practices as needed to support the growth and learning of the unique individuals they have in their classrooms during a specific time in a specific place. This presentation will give you an idea of what our school looks like now. It is different from what it looked like several years ago, or even 12 months ago. In fact, as I write this overview, we are spending three days in a faculty retreat, taking a deeper look at some of our practices, including assessments (*Are we assessing what we want to know?*), inquiry (*How is inquiry different in different subject areas and at different age levels?*), and the alignment of our learning outcomes with our mission and beliefs.

This site is designed to let you explore the many facets that make up our school in whatever order you like. There is no chronological or linear order to follow. All the dimensions weave together like a web to create a holistic experience for the children who attend the school. Throughout this site, you will find cross-links to other areas of the site because of the web-like nature of the various components. Any one facet is not more important than another. And we are working to improve all of them simultaneously, though in any one year, some will receive more emphasis than others. In addition, as we develop our thinking and practice in one area, we realize that we need to make changes in another area. We are constantly working to bring all of our practices in line with our beliefs. As we do that, our understanding deepens and we revisit earlier areas of endeavor to apply what we have learned.

Before you begin exploring, however, I suggest you take a look at the topics in this section, as they will give you background information that will help you as you explore the rest of the site. The School Beliefs about children and how they learn form our core values that determine everything else about our school from class organization, to curriculum planning, to assessment, to management and discipline. The School Profile gives you some basic information about the school that provides context and background. It also explains how our classes are organized into multi-age groups rather than traditional age-based grades; this type of organization profoundly affects how we think about curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Throughout the site, you will find video collages that include interviews with teachers, parents and alumni, along with classroom activities. None of these were rehearsed or scripted. They are intended to give you first-hand accounts, a variety of perspectives, and unpolished windows into the classrooms and practices of our school.

I hope that these important themes are evident in what you see, read and hear:

- While basic skills of reading, writing and math are important, they do not comprise a complete education.
- Engaging children in higher-level thinking and ensuring a safe social/emotional environment will have a positive impact on basic skills test scores.
- Accountability is important, but standardized test scores in basic skills are a poor measure of the quality of a school and what children experience within its walls.
- A safe social/emotional environment supports learning by encouraging intellectual risk-taking for both children and adults.
- Physical movement supports learning.
- The arts, if they are integrated into the curriculum, are just as important as reading, writing and math as tools for children to learn about the world and express their ideas.
- Technology is just another tool for learning, not a savior that is going to reform education.
- Involved parents who are partners in the education of their children are a terrific resource.
- A culture of collaboration and a strong sense of community (and a safe social/emotional environment) support learning and identity development.
- Teachers and children need to have a sense of agency about their own work and learning and to have a voice in issues that affect them.

And, did I mention that a safe social/emotional environment is critical to learning? This is seldom mentioned in discussions about school reform or in articles about how to improve test scores. Yet I believe

that the efforts we have made in this area, to be extremely intentional and consistent about fostering a safe, supportive environment (and it does take great effort), is the most important work we have done to nurture learning. I believe it is among the top reasons why our students now excel on basic skills tests and why over 80% of them are receiving high school credits while attending our middle school. You can have highly qualified teachers, research-based curriculum, cutting-edge technology and common core standards, but children who are not thriving will receive modest benefit, if any, from all that investment of time and money. The coercion, fear, shame, guilt, anxiety, aggressive competition, and various systems of rewards and punishments that characterized the schools I attended four decades ago are still prevalent in far too many classrooms today. Many children come from neighborhoods and families that are violent, dysfunctional, or minimally supportive, but schools can be places of belonging, support, encouragement, and love, places where children can heal, learn to trust, and develop confidence in their own strengths. In such an environment, learning happens (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Whether our students do well on tests or not, our goal is that they emerge as whole people who think creatively and critically, are compassionate and helpful towards others, take responsibility for themselves and their learning, and communicate effectively. Children deserve no less.

School Beliefs

These beliefs about children and how they learn were formulated in the spring and summer of 2001, after my first year at the school. In order to begin the process of bringing all the classrooms under one philosophical umbrella, I wanted the teachers to articulate the principles and values underlying their practices at the time. We spent an entire day together immediately after the school year finished. I asked the teachers to list all the things they did that they felt characterized the school and that made it special. We combined their lists on chart paper, and I went through it item by item, asking them, "Why do you do this?" When we had a reason beside each item, we began to organize them into categories and, in the fall, we adopted this set of beliefs. These principles about learning, which are supported by current
research (Boykin & Noguera, 2011), were informing the practices of the teachers, but not in a transparent and consistent way. Once they were articulated and officially adopted by the entire faculty, the teachers began to use them in a more intentional way as we examined and questioned practices that were taken for granted and as we struggled to realize these beliefs in ever more authentic ways.

Beliefs

All children have intrinsic curiosity and the capacity to learn.
With this statement we are asserting that learning is a child's birthright. They come to us exquisitely equipped with sensory organs and neurological systems that are constantly reaching out and trying to make sense of the world.

Each child is unique and learns in his/her own way. Children have different interests, styles, and paces.
By acknowledging this fundamental truth about human beings, we recognize that variety and flexibility must be built into the structures and processes of the institution.

Children learn as part of a community.
Belonging to a community is important to the development of social skills and a sense of identity, both as an individual and as a member of a group. A supportive community also provides an important intellectual milieu for sharing ideas and learning from others.

A safe, supportive environment nurtures learning.
This statement refers not to just physical safety, but also to emotional, social and intellectual safety. Learning is an inherently risky endeavor; mistakes are inevitable. Children need to be able to take intellectual risks without fear of ridicule, embarrassment or punishment.

**Learning is an internal process that requires personal engagement.**
Just because we are teaching it, doesn't mean they are learning it. A child's imagination, curiosity and interest must be engaged in order for true learning and deep understanding to occur.

Children learn in an integrated way.

Children experience the world as an integrated whole rather than as discrete subjects. The more we can teach in a way that helps them make personal connections and explore the world in a holistic way, the more it will make sense to them.

These Beliefs Shape the School and the Program

Our beliefs about how children learn shape all aspects of the school program and community. We group the students in multi-age classes that provide the flexibility for children to learn at their own paces. This requires that teachers differentiate their instruction for a variety of ability levels. We use theme-based studies to support inquiry and integration of curriculum. Because the children remain in one class for more than one year, the theme studies follow a three-year cycle. Grade-based tests are not compatible with multi-age groups, so we use assessments that are developmentally based and measure growth over time. Curriculum and instructional strategies that create a safe, supportive environment are built into the program. Our professional development activities support all of these practices. The beliefs lie at the center of the web and provide the accountability for all of our decisions about the school program.
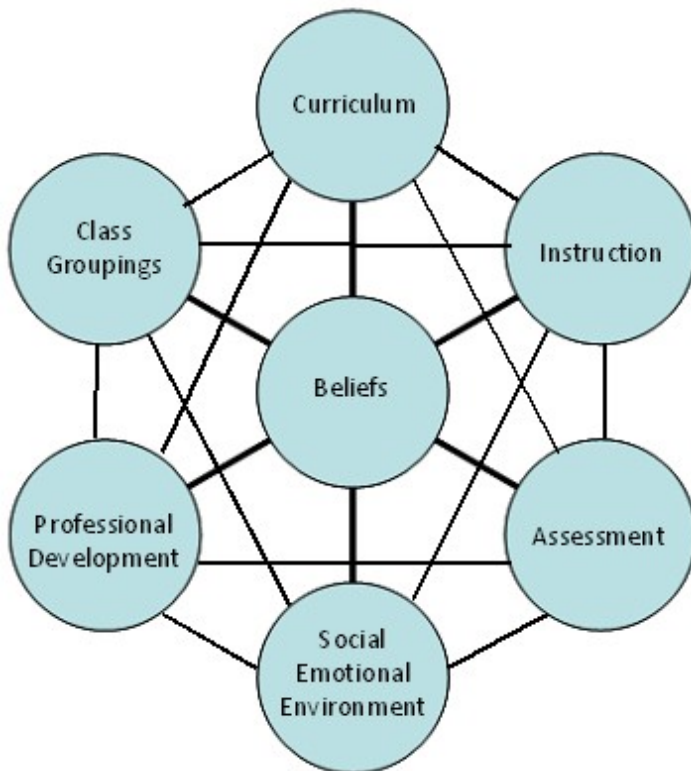
School Profile

History: Whatcom Day Academy is an independent school located in a rural setting outside of Bellingham, WA. When it first opened in 1988, in what is affectionately remembered locally as the "old turkey restaurant," under the direction of a creative teacher named Jan Resick, it was called Whatcom Day Grammar School, a name that reflected Resick's New England roots. The initial group of students included the Resicks' sons and the children of several of their friends. In 1994, the school was converted to a non-profit organization, and the name was changed to Whatcom Day Academy. It gradually outgrew its original location, and, after a difficult time of using two buildings and several attempts to secure an appropriate new location, it moved into facilities previously occupied by Whatcom Community College. The new site offered the advantages of two science labs, enough classrooms for 100-130 children, various

offices, and, because the College had offered child care to students and staff, a bathroom with mini-toilets just the right size for the under-five set. Since the move in 1998, many hours of volunteer effort and generous donations have gone into improving the buildings and outdoor areas.

Geography and Economy: The school is centrally located in Whatcom County, Washington, which has a population of approximately 200,000 and a median household income of about $47,000. The largest city is Bellingham, with a population of 80,000. There are several smaller communities interspersed with mixed agriculture, including dairies, berries, market gardens, horse ranches, and hobby farms. There are several large industrial employers such as Alcoa Intalco, BP, and Conoco Phillips, a variety of manufacturing and construction companies, a growing number of technology and green energy businesses, as well as fishing, lumber and mining. There is a strong entrepreneurial spirit in the county that supports small businesses, the arts, and inventive enterprises.

The school is located just north of Bellingham on a public bus route that provides transportation into Bellingham and to one of the other smaller communities, Ferndale. About half of our students come from the Bellingham area, and the other half come from all over the rest of the county, and even some who commute from the county to the south of us.
We serve families from eight different school districts. It is about a twenty-minute drive to the Canadian border and we have easy access to both mountains and ocean. In the immediate vicinity, we have soccer fields and baseball diamonds across the road run by other non-profit organizations that let us use them, a corner store with its own coffee roaster and small café, and several acres of wetlands and natural areas.

Demographics: The families at Whatcom Day Academy represent a broad spectrum of the population: rural, suburban and urban; professionals, students, and blue-collar workers; single parents, blended families, and non-traditional families; artists and entrepreneurs; young families and parents who waited to have children until later in life. We have about 110 students. Of these, about 2% are African or African-American, 5% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 7% are American Indian or Alaskan Native, 8% are of Hispanic origin, and 78% are White, which represents slightly more diversity than the 2010 statistics for the county as a whole. Three of the children are English language learners and another five speak a second language at home. Twenty-four children receive financial assistance from the school or from state subsidies; several others receive assistance from their family members. Ten children qualify for special education services or are in the process of being evaluated. Seven children have life-threatening allergies or other medical conditions.

School Leadership: Whatcom Day Academy is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. Every family and staff person is a voting member of the corporation. Representatives are elected to serve on a Board of Trustees at general membership meetings. Currently, there are ten Trustees: seven are parents of current students, two are parents of alumni, and one is a retired educator. The Board is responsible for ensuring that the school adheres to its mission and legal requirements, for fiscal management and strategic planning, and for the development of resources. The Board hires and works closely with the Head of School to lead the organization. The Head of School is responsible for hiring the rest of the faculty and staff and for the day-to-day operations of the school.

Faculty: All of the teachers in the elementary and middle-school age levels have education degrees and teacher certification. Three have advanced degrees and two have achieved National Board Teacher Certification. The middle school teachers are certified to teach high school level courses in their respective subject areas. The teachers of the three- to five-year-olds have early childhood education diplomas. The middle school math/science teacher has won several prestigious awards and is a curriculum developer and trainer for College Preparatory Mathematics. The Assistant Head of School is active at the local, state and national level in the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The Head of School and one of the Intermediate Teachers have published several articles on democratic practices, children's art and other topics. Members of the faculty regularly make presentations at conferences and conduct workshops.

Class Organization: In the early years, we offer a variety of schedules to accommodate the needs of young children and their families. Throughout the school, we group the children in multi-age classes because we believe that children learn at their own paces, and we find that multi-age classes allow more flexibility for that to happen. Because we allow children to learn at their own pace and because the teachers make

decisions about curriculum based on what the children are ready for, many of our children are working above their expected grade level on standardized tests. We see this trend increase as they move into Intermediate and Middle School. Because of this, we became accredited as a K-12 school in 2005 so that our advanced students could continue into high school level work while attending Whatcom Day Academy. Since then, over 80% of our graduates have already completed one or more high school courses, including English 1, Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II, and Spanish 1. This year one of our students will complete Spanish 2.

Class sizes range from nine or 10 to 17. However, the staffing is organized so that children work in smaller learning groups throughout the day that range from four to seven in the younger classes and up to 14 in middle school. These small groups are an important component that makes a more personalized education possible. When budget cuts in public schools reduce staffing and increase class sizes, the education of children suffers.

The chart below shows the organization of the classes into levels that promote teacher collaboration and flexible placements. It is followed by some text and a video about the benefits of using multi-age groups.

Early Childhood Division

Early Years

Marmot Class	Chickadee Class
Teresa Millspaugh	Kelly Taggart
T/Th or M/W/F	M - F
A.M. or all day	all day
3-5 year olds	3-5 year olds

Primary Level

Eagle Class	Salmon Class
Susan Dufner	Lindsey Chapman
4 1/2-6 year olds	6-7 year olds

Upper Division

Interm
ediate
Level
8-11
year
olds
Vale Hartley and Kate Sterken

Middle
School
Level
11-14
year olds
Misty Nikula -
Math/Science Jennifer
Deshaies - Humanities

The Benefits of Multi-Age Groups

Extended relationships with teachers
Multi-age classes allow children to stay with the same teacher for more than one year. The teacher gets to know each child's unique personality and approach to learning and can build on that knowledge from year to year.

Group Continuity
Each year only a portion of the students leave a multi-age class. The teacher has fewer children to get to know in the fall. The younger children who enter are helped along by the older students and the class quickly establishes routines and norms.

Flexible groupings
Multi-age classes allow for more flexibility of groupings for the children. There is some age overlap between the classes so that a child who needs more time in one group can remain there without stigma and a child who is ready to move ahead early can do so with very little fuss. Within the levels, the teachers group the children in a variety of ways for different purposes.

Teacher collaboration
We have arranged the groups so that there are two teachers working together at each level. This provides opportunities for collaboration, co-planning, and co-teaching. The teachers mentor each other as they talk about their students and their practice.

Developmental emphasis
Multi-age groupings encourage teachers to view children from a developmental standpoint. Single-age groups often foster the illusion that all the children are at the same level in their knowledge and skills, and there can be a tendency to penalize children who don't meet the normative expectations. In a multi-age group, a wider range of ability and performance is accepted as normal, and a teacher is more likely to address individual differences, not only between children, but also within a child. It is not unusual for a child to be at a different level in math than in reading, for example.

Social skills
Research indicates that multi-age groups foster the development of positive social skills and a sense of belonging. When children work in single-age groups, there tends to be more competition, and there are more reports of one-upmanship and bullying. Multi-age groups foster leadership skills in older children and more sharing and turn-taking among all the children.

Appreciation of diversity
Multi-age groups help children learn to appreciate the contributions of children with a wider range of abilities. They grow up developing relationships with children both older and younger than themselves.

Whatcom Day Academy: Multi-age Groups

Individual and Community

We believe that each child is a unique individual who learns in his/her own way, and we believe that children learn as part of a community. We also believe that a safe, supportive environment nurtures learning. Therefore, we pay a lot of attention to fostering the kind of healthy community that promotes individual learning and growth, and, on the other hand, we expect students to participate in the making of such a community, which sometimes means making individual compromises for the benefit of the group. The dynamics between individual rights and group responsibilities provide endless material for class meetings, which are explained in more detail below.

A Safe Environment Supports Learning

We have high standards for the kind of community we want our school to be. We want it to be a place where children feel safe physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually so that they are not afraid to try new things, to make mistakes, to share their ideas, and to take intellectual risks. It is also important that children feel safe to be their unique and quirky selves and to discuss difficult topics with each other and with their teachers. The following video shows these facets from a number of different perspectives.

We have intentionally developed several all-school practices to establish and maintain this environment that provides deep nurturing and pervasive safety.

These include

- Adopting a social skills/anti-bullying curriculum
- Implementing the Nurtured Heart Approach
- Fostering a culture of collaboration
- Conducting class meetings

Social Skills/ Anti-bullying Curriculum

The *Second Step/Steps to Respect* curriculum produced by The Committee for Children in Seattle was developed as an anti-violence and bullying prevention program. It accomplishes this by being a well thought out social skills

curriculum with developmentally appropriate materials and activities for preschool through middle school. When we first began implementing this program, some parents were concerned that we were taking time away from academics for students who don't need to be taught social skills. However, we have found that *all* students benefit from this attention to social skills in a group setting, and that, along with the other ways in which we address the social/emotional environment, it actually supports academic learning. Students are able to focus better and engage more deeply during academic times when they feel this kind of safety and support. The video below shows how some of the teachers use it and why they value it.

For more information about *Second Step/Steps to Respect* see the **References and Resources** section.

The Nurtured Heart Approach

Another initiative that we have adopted school-wide is *The Nurtured Heart Approach*, originally developed by Howard Glasser (Glasser & Easley, 1998; Glasser, Bowdidge & Bravo, 2007) as a method of working with difficult or very intense children. However, we have extended the use of it more broadly as a way of promoting positive relationships throughout the school, including among adults. Glasser himself now refers to it as "Nurturing Greatness." We think of this approach as a way to manage relationships to promote success and the development of children's strengths. We combine it with the principles and strategies discussed in *Discipline with Dignity (Curwin, Mendler, & Mendler, 2008)* to create a consistent, positive, humane and educational approach to behavior management throughout the school.
Another helpful resource that is complementary to the Nurtured Heart Approach is *Choice Words (Johnston, 2004).*

The principles of the *Nurtured Heart Approach* are outlined in the first video below by Vale Hartley, one of our teachers who is a certified trainer. She is introducing the Nurtured Heart Approach to a class of parents and educators. The second video shows how these principles are put into practice in the classrooms.

For more information about *The Nurtured Heart Approach* see the **References and Resources** section.

A Culture of Collaboration

A strong sense of community supports collaborative learning. At the beginning of the school year, each group spends two to three weeks building a sense of community through a variety of activities designed to share important things about themselves and to learn about others in the group, to develop trust among members of the group, and to discuss

rules and responsibilities. The older groups go on leadership camps that involve outdoor activities, cooperative games, and group challenges. In this video, Vale Hartley talks about how she uses class meetings to establish community and to decide collaboratively on class jobs at the beginning of the year.
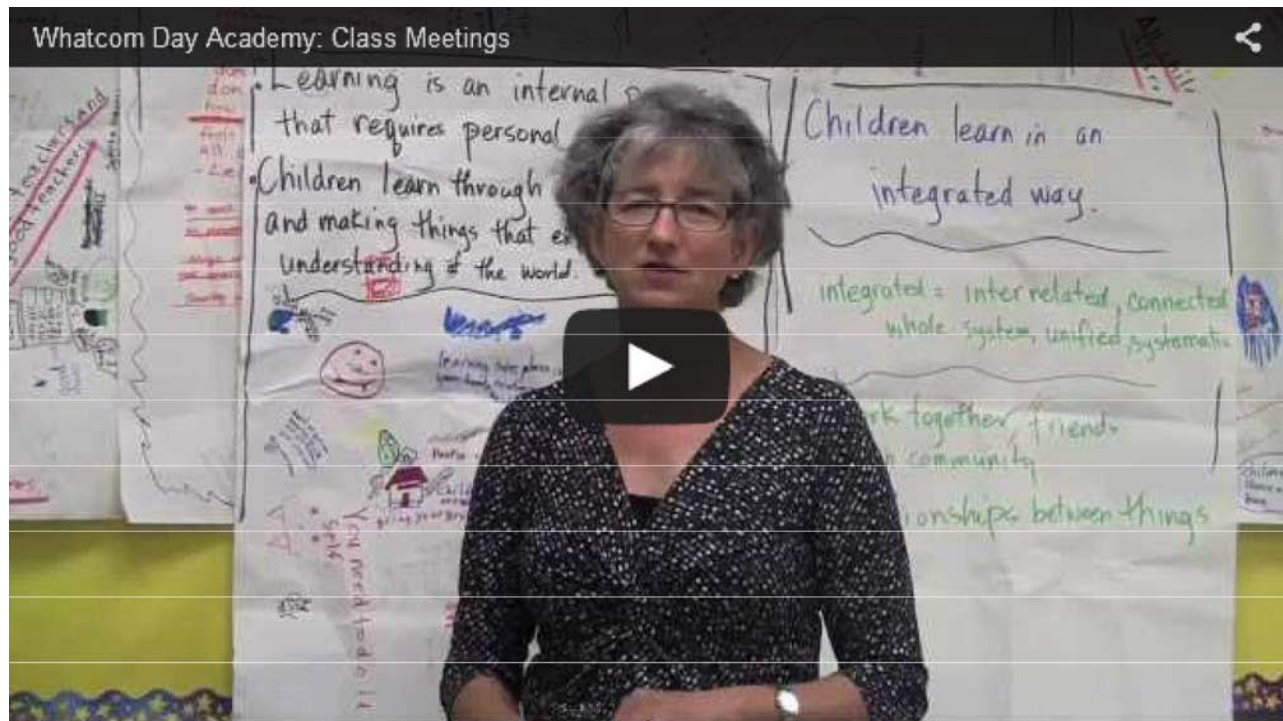

Throughout the year, teachers continue to work on building community in a variety of ways; sometimes they are small strategies that might be easily missed by a casual observer. In the following videos, notice how the teacher in the first clip encourages children with varying reading abilities to collaborate; and, at the end of the second clip, how the teacher points out to the children when they are engaging in collaborative learning.

In addition to classroom communities, a strong sense of whole-school community is also important. One way in which this is fostered is through the Reading Buddy program. Older students are paired with younger students for shared reading times, which helps develop reading skills and precious cross-age friendships. In the video below, a parent talks about the importance of this relationship to her son, and three classroom vignettes show six- and seven-year-olds from the Salmon class reading with three- and four-year-olds from the Chickadee class. In the second classroom vignette, a child who is an English language learner, and still in the emergent reader stage himself, is able

to share his knowledge of the story with a younger child, even though he is not yet able to decode words.
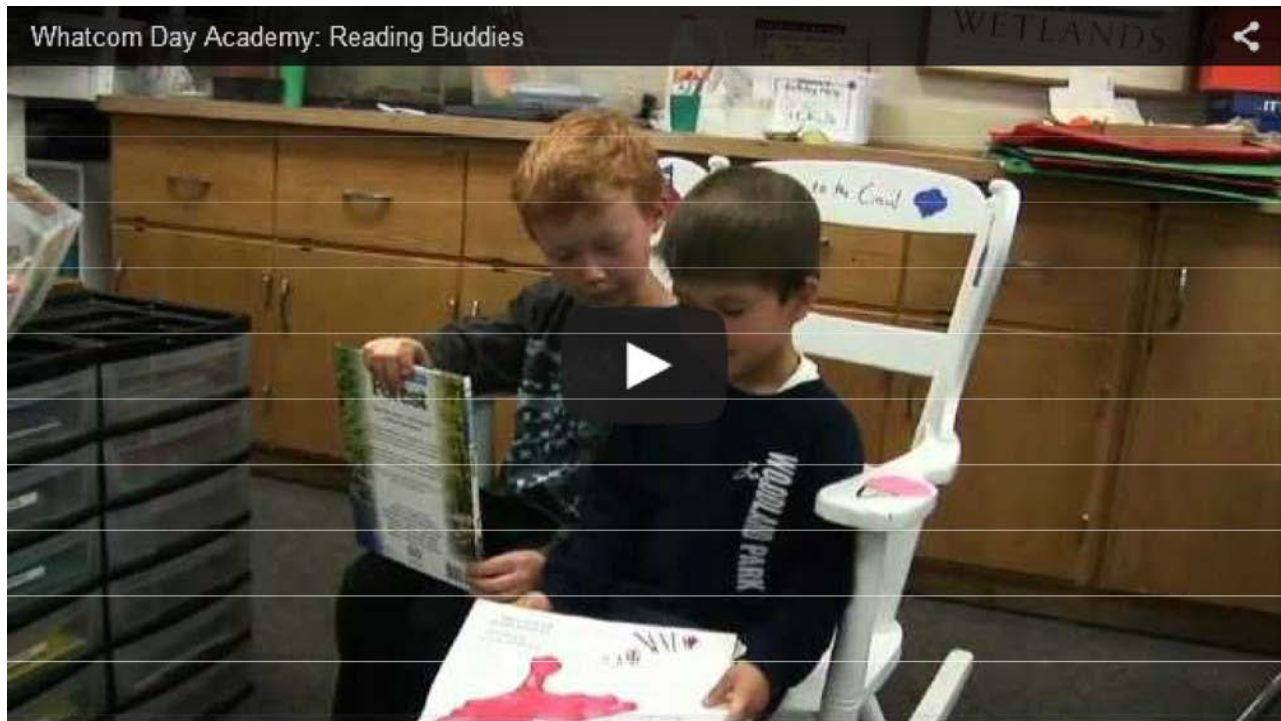
Parents are also integral to the community and work collaboratively with us in so many ways:

- Governance and leadership through serving on the Board of Trustees and various committees
- Classroom participation and field trips
- Facilities maintenance and improvements
- Fundraising activities
- Technology assistance
- Library assistance
- After school activities
- The list goes on and on . . .

We feel that the kind of community we create with parents and faculty working together is an important model for the students. Our collaborative adult relationships are considered part of the children's education.

Class Meetings

Each group conducts regular class meetings to address issues and concerns of importance to their community and has developed its own format suited to the ages of the students involved. However, the goals and expectations for all the groups are similar. Students are taught to listen with intention and to respect others' ideas. They are taught how to advocate for themselves and their ideas with conviction, how to disagree with civility, and how to compromise with integrity. As they get older, they are also taught how to lead a meeting and manage civic discourse in a way that honors each person in the group.

We believe that class meetings are an important part of each child's education for several reasons:

- They provide a venue for the group to address problems that, if left unsolved, create emotional stress within the group and distract students from their learning.
- They give each student a voice in the community and in decisions that affect the community, which contributes to their sense of agency.
- They provide authentic situations in which children have to practice weighing, and sometimes modifying, their own needs and desires in the interest of having a healthy, well-functioning group.
- They help students develop the dispositions and skills to be responsible, participating citizens in a democratic society.

In the following video, you will see examples of class meetings, combined with teacher commentaries, at three different age levels being used for several different purposes.

Curriculum and Instruction

Developing a Curriculum

Framework

The school-wide beliefs about how children learn that we developed and adopted in 2001 (see **School Beliefs**) provided us with the foundation we needed to begin reviewing the curriculum guides and instructional practices that existed at the time in order to align the program across the different age levels and to ensure coherence and consistency from class to class.

We started by re-examining the school's documents about the science curriculum and attempting to align the curriculum across the age levels in a coherent program that would build content knowledge and inquiry skills in a logical way.
Teachers wrote out the units and big projects that they were doing at the time on large chart paper, which we taped to the walls end-to-end to give us a visible continuum from the early years through middle school. We worked on identifying the big questions and main ideas embedded in the units and gradually organized them into six over-arching categories: identification; comparison; relationship; systems and structures; changes over time; and ecology.

When we engaged in the same process around social studies, we eventually came to the "Aha!" moment when we realized the same categories applied in this curriculum area as well, and we decided to use the term social *sciences* rather than social *studies* to emphasize the parallel nature of the two fields of inquiry--one that explores characteristics of people and the dynamics of the social world and one that focuses on the natural or physical world.

At this time, the teachers were beginning to use *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) as a framework for planning their units, which emphasizes big ideas and essential questions as the starting points so that the enduring understandings the teacher wants the children to have as a result of the unit are clear. From there, the teacher plans the activities that will lead to the desired outcomes. We discussed how the questions and ideas in our six over-arching categories were consistent with this framework and decided to use the same terms.

The work described above occurred over a three- to four-year period and involved the entire faculty in numerous discussions that led us into a labyrinth of detail and complexity before a clear, concise and rather elegant organization emerged in this Curriculum Framework.

The big ideas and essential questions of the Curriculum Framework engage the students in exploring questions that have intrigued human beings for centuries. These are the questions that have led to the formation of the various branches of inquiry in both fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, chemistry, biology, archaeology, physics, and astronomy. This is the stuff that is truly fascinating to children, and we have always thought of the social and natural sciences as the core of our curriculum. There is always an element of inquiry in these units of study, but, in the older classes, sometimes content knowledge is emphasized, and at other times, the inquiry process itself is the focus of study. The section below on Inquiry includes classroom examples and examples of unit plans.

In our school, the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics are taught and treated as important tools for conducting inquiry and for learning about the world, from the youngest children all the way through middle school. This provides invaluable motivation for children to apply themselves to learning the basic skills when they are constantly using them to learn about topics of real interest and pursuing questions that they have about the world. The units of study in the social and natural sciences generally involve significant projects that result in presentations or reports in which children are refining their skills to express and communicate their ideas clearly and convincingly to an audience.

As we continued to align our curriculum development with our beliefs about children's learning, we added the arts and technology skills to the basic skills of reading, writing and math as important tools children use to explore questions   and express their understandings of the world. The importance of technology skills in today's world is self-evident.
However, it is poignant, and counter-productive, that the value of the arts for children's learning has become obscured and virtually lost in so many schools today due to a number of factors: The combined pressures of budget cuts and standardized tests have focused attention and available funding on reading, writing and math; but, more fundamentally, the arts have become a commodity in our consumerist society and are only superficially understood by many people. However, the arts are the primal languages of all humans on earth. Before we had language, we communicated with gesture, sound and visual images. Infants begin their exploration of the world through visual images (art), pre-language sounds (music), and gesture and movement (drama and dance)--these are their first languages. There are technical skills to be learned in each of the arts, as there are in reading, writing and math; however, they should not be relegated to specialist classes only (if they are taught at all). As a faculty, we are exploring a variety of ways to incorporate the primal languages of movement, gesture, sound and visual images into the social and natural sciences themes as legitimate modes of learning, expression and communication alongside the other basic skills. The section below on Integration provides some examples.

Inquiry: Because we believe that curiosity drives learning and that all children are inherently curious, we developed an approach to our curriculum that would encourage that natural curiosity and help children learn the skills needed to pursue their questions. Inquiry is central to much of the curriculum, and the teachers engage the students in projects that use increasingly sophisticated inquiry and research skills as they get older. See the video below to hear teachers describe how they support inquiry and to see classrooms in action.

The use of multi-age groupings to allow children to learn at their owns paces poses challenges for planning curriculum, because children usually spend three years in the same level and up to three years with the same teacher. Commercially published textbooks and curriculum materials are generally designed for age-based grades. To ensure that children do not receive repetitive curriculum or experience problematic gaps in their education (two problems that occurred in the early years of the school), we developed a three-year cycle of Themes Studies in the social and natural sciences.
Examples of several units are available in the Curriculum Maps linked to the names of the units.

Differentiation: In addition, multi-age groupings require teachers to differentiate their instruction for a variety of developmental levels within the group and to engage children with various learning styles, paces and interests. The video below on differentiation shows what this looks like at different age levels.

Whatcom Day Academy: Differentiating Instruction to Better Server All Students

Integration: Because we believe that children learn in a holistic way, the teachers integrate the curriculum across disciplines in a variety of ways. Reading, writing, art, music, movement, drama, math and technology are all used as tools for exploring, understanding and expressing ideas. Many of the inquiry projects culminate in a performance, project, or presentation that usually includes several modes of expression. The video below shows the middle school humanities teacher describing how she integrated literature, field trips and speakers into a study of the Holocaust and genocide to help students make personal connections that contributed to their deeper understanding of terrible events. On a lighter note, the second section of the video shows middle school Spanish students preparing and then performing a puppet show about *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 1605 and 1615) for younger students.

Social and Natural Science Themes

Themes		Early Years 3 - 5 years	Primary Years 5 - 8 years	Intermediate 8 - 11 years	Middle School 11 - 14 years
Year 1	Social Science Theme: Cultural & Global Awareness	• Feelings • Stories Around the World (Goldilocks and the Three Bears)	• Family History • Homes Around the World	• Native American History • Explorations	• Colonization • Government • The Holocaust
	Natural Science Emphasis: Earth/Life Science; Natural History	• Plants/Insects • Bears • Dinosaurs	• Animal Life Cycles and Habitats: Mountain and Forest • Geology/Land Forms	• Present Earth • Animals & Plants • Human Growth & Development plus Body Systems or Nutrition	• Ocean Systems • Geology/Earth History • Evolution, Plant/Animal Systems • Sex Education, HIV/AIDS & Nutrition
Year 2	Social Science Theme: Growth & Change	• Family Holidays and Traditions • Transportation • Stories Around the World (The Gingerbread Boy and Little Red Riding Hood)	• Me and My Community • Making Decisions (Civics) • Where Does the Money Go? (Economics) • Exploring the Past (History) • Where Do I Live? (Map Skills)	• U.S. Regions • Colonization	• Create a Culture • (Mesopotamia, Rome, Greece, Aztec/Mayan, Asian) • Myths

| | Natural Science

Emphasis: Physical Science | • All About Me
• Transportation
• Shapes & Colors | • Animal Life Cycles and Habitats: Birds and Migration
• Properties of Water
• Light & Color
• Force & Motion | • Beyond Earth
• Matter
• Human Growth & Development plus Body Systems or Nutrition
• Force & Motion | • Force & Motion
• Matter
• Sex Education, HIV/AIDS & Drug Awareness |
| | | | | | |

Year 3	Social Science Theme: Environmental Relationships & Adaptability	• City Life and Country Life (Farming and The Little Red Hen)	• WA State & Pacific Northwest: • Exploring Past and Present (History/Civics/Economics) • Expanding Horizons (Geography)	• Whatcom County • Westward Expansion	• Middle Ages • Renaissance • Washington State History
	Natural Science Emphasis: Earth Science	• Birds • Farm Animals and Crops • Ocean	• Animal Life Cycles and Habitats: Fresh & Salt Water/Estuaries • Water Cycle • Weather	• Weather • Watersheds • Electricity • Human Growth & Development plus Body Systems or Nutrition	• Plate Tectonics/Rocks & Minerals • Ocean Floor Topography • Photosynthesis/CellStructure/Genetics • Waves (Light & Sound) • Sex Education, HIV/AIDS & Diseases

Assessment

We have encountered many challenges in our efforts to find assessments that are consistent with our beliefs about how children learn. We used the state standardized tests for a number of years to have a point of comparison. However, the state tests are designed for age-based grades and are difficult to use for multi-age groups. In addition, the questions on the state tests often address content that does not coincide with our curriculum theme cycles, the results are not available to the teachers until the fall of the next academic year, they measure a narrow range of basic skills in reading, math and writing, and they provide aggregate scores about the children's achievement levels rather than detailed information about their development.

We searched for assessments that would help us assess a child's development and provide more useful information to the teachers. We looked at a couple of tools that organized reading, writing and math skills on a developmental continuum that looked promising, but they didn't cover the full age range of our students. At one point, we spent a year- and-a-half trying to develop our own continuum of skills so that we could assess children based on their developmental levels as opposed to their grade levels, but that proved to be much too complicated.

Over the years, we have assembled a variety of Assessment Instruments that serve our purposes and are compatible with our beliefs:

- As a collection, they address all areas of a child's development, not just academic skills.

- They focus on development and growth over time.
- They provide immediate, usable information to help teachers plan curriculum and differentiate instruction.
- Most of the assessments are conducted with no interruption to instructional or learning time and with minimal stress on the students.
- Many of the assessments are integrated into the curriculum as projects and presentations.
- They help us identify learning problems that require further investigation.

Beyond Basic Skills

More recently, we have begun to tackle the question of how to assess higher-level thinking and life-long learning skills. These skills are practiced daily as students conduct inquiry projects, and they are evident in the students' reports and presentations. Now, we need to develop consistent methods for assessing, documenting, and reporting on the growth of these skills over time. We began by drafting a list of the skills that we feel are important for students to have in twenty   years and asking our Board of Trustees to do the same. We are also drawing on books and Internet resources that address critical thinking, higher-level thinking, and essential life skills. Here is an initial draft that we will be reviewing and revising as we develop ways to assess and document their development over time:

Higher-Level Thinking and Life-Long Learning Skills

Demonstrate the focus and self-control necessary to accomplish tasks.
Show flexibility in social and academic situations.
Demonstrate the ability to use literacy, math, art and technology skills to communicate ideas effectively and with confidence.
Be able to speak in front of a group and to listen with intention.
Collaborate effectively with others.
Make connections and discern meaningful patterns.
Use higher-order thinking skills with fluency:

Analysis and
evaluation Logic and
reasoning Judgment
Problem-Solving
Creativity and creative thinking

Apply effort and perseverance when faced with
challenges. Be able to organize and carry out a long-term
project.
Take responsibility for their own learning and set goals for themselves.
Demonstrate ongoing curiosity and the ability to ask questions that lead to more learning.

Professional Development

The faculty conversation we had at the end of the 2001 school year, when we began to formulate our statement of beliefs about how children learn, set the tone for our professional development activities for the past decade. (See **School Beliefs**.) In that conversation, the teachers were looked to as the source of information about their practices. As they talked about their practice and why they were doing what they were doing, they each contributed a valuable perspective that enlarged the group's perspective. We did not call in an expert or bring in a consultant to observe, evaluate or coach us--we drew on the knowledge and wisdom of the teachers themselves. This process ensured that the teachers felt ownership of the Beliefs as they were articulated from that conversation, and they were empowered as authors and experts about their practice.

Over the years, we have continued to see the teachers as the principal agents of their own growth. Each fall, they set personal goals, and together we formulate school goals to work on, which generally overlap with their personal goals.   When a teacher pursues an area of interest or develops their knowledge and skills in a particular practice, they become the on-site expert and mentor for other teachers. In this way, the faculty has developed dispersed leadership among the group. One person leads workshops and provides coaching in the *Nurtured Heart Approach*,

another teacher leads the efforts with a newly adopted assessment system, and a third helps lead workshops about differentiated instruction.

Much of our professional development occurs on-site and involves all faculty members, using published books, articles and training videos as resources. See **Five Years of Professional Development** for a history of our professional development efforts.

Whatcom Day Academy: Professional Development

Over the years, we have gradually purchased a collection of books for each teacher so that we have a set of consistent, essential resources to support school-wide practices, including *Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)*; *differentiated instruction (*Tomlinson, 2001, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms); Discipline with Dignity (Curwin, Mendler, & Mendler, 2008);* and *the Nurtured Heart Approach (Glasser & Easley, Transforming the Difficult Child, 1998)*. Many of our professional development resources are published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. By investing in our internal resources in these ways, we make extremely efficient use of a modest budget for professional development. In addition, we are growing our own teacher leaders, which increases continuity and coherence as newer faculty members have many mentors to turn to. When teachers attend outside workshops or conferences on topics of their choosing, they share their learning with the rest of the faculty.

A critical factor for this kind of professional development, in which teachers take on leadership roles and provide mentoring for others, is an environment that is safe and supportive for adults to take learning risks. In a school that pays a great deal of attention to the social/emotional environment for children, this might seem self-evident. However, we did not adequately anticipate the potential problems and risks inherent in the change of roles among colleagues and had to address it head-on at one point. It is now part of our conscious efforts to support each other and to recognize publicly the ways in which each person contributes to the group and to the learning of others. Our work with the Nurtured Heart Approach (see **The Individual and the Community**) has contributed to the success of these efforts. In this ongoing school-wide professional development process, teachers engage in the kind of learning that we expect of our students and provide authentic and empathetic role models as lifelong learners. An additional source of collegial professional learning is the Student Success Team (SST), which meets as needed to support teachers in their efforts to provide the best possible educational experience for students.

See the section on **Partnerships** for information about our ongoing work with professors at Western Washington University as well as with a network of schools across the country that promotes democratic ideals in education;

these also provide important opportunities for professional development.

In 2008-09, as part of our 20th-Year Celebrations, we launched a community speaker series. These events have added to our own professional development, while engaging the broader community in discussions about topics of concern to schools, students and families.

> 2008 - 09 Dr. Edward Hallowell http://www.drhallowell.com/ - author of *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness* and several books about ADHD, parenting and mental health and well-being.

> 2009 - 10 Alfie Kohn http://www.alfiekohn.org/index.php - author of numerous books on education and parenting, spoke on the topic *The Schools Our Children Deserve.*

> 2011-2012 On April 11th 2012, Howard Glasser http://www.howardglasser.com/ - author of The Nurtured Heart Approach, will speak on *Nurturing Greatness.*

Partnerships

We have two long-standing partnerships with professors at Western Washington University that provide opportunities for ongoing professional development, connections to current research and practice, and avenues for us to share our work with a wider audience of educators and those concerned about education.

Early Literacy

We have been hosting an early literacy course for several years taught by Dr. Matthew Miller, which has brought prospective teachers of young children to our school to observe and participate in our classes for three- to five-year-olds.

This partnership led to a joint application for a federal grant, which we received in 2011, that focused on two specific early literacy practices: phonological awareness and dialogic reading. Dr. Miller worked with our teachers to develop lessons using these practices, which were videotaped and edited into case studies for use in his classes and in workshops that we will be offering for other early childhood educators and parents.

Whatcom Day Academy: Literacy Grant Partnership With WWU

Democratic Education

In 2004, Dr. Lorraine Kasprisin and Whatcom Day Academy joined as partners in The National League of Democratic Schools (NLODS), founded by John Goodlad and Dick Clark, a program of the Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI). Beginning with several charter member schools, Whatcom Day Academy being one, the League is presently a network of public, charter, and private elementary, middle and high schools located in three geographic regions: Western, Rocky Mountain/Plains States, and Eastern.

According to the League's website http://nlods.com/National_League_of_Democratic_Schools/Home.html, a democratic school is a learning community characterized by a commitment to democratic goals and values. This is evident in the curriculum, school policies, practices, and organizational structures. All League schools strive to be exemplars in Characteristics of Democratic Schools as outlined by Goodlad (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004):

1. Democratic Purpose—developing in young people the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for successful participation in our nation's social and political democracy;
2. Student Achievement—students are successful academically, socially and personally;
3. Ongoing Professional Development—members of the school community engage in continuous learning for excellence in teaching, school leadership, school renewal, and stewardship;
4. Approaches to Learning—schools use a variety of approaches to learning, and are learner centered;
5. Personalization—schools personalize the relationships among students, teachers, parents, and administrators by gathering as a group for dialogue and by other arrangements that facilitate communication among the members of the school community;
6. School culture and practices– schools engage in reflective, democratic action in all aspects of the educational process and governance; and
7. Community engagement –Schools connect with parents and the larger community to inform and strengthen ties around education.

See **The Individual and the Community** for videos about democratic practices being practiced in class meetings at Whatcom Day Academy.

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*Indicates references cited in this paper. Other resources used by the teachers of Whatcom Day Academy but not cited are included on this list.