



# QUIETLY CHANGING THE PLANET

an ethnographic study of  
former Awakening Seed  
students

by Mary Glover and Penelope Denton



# Quietly Changing the Planet

an ethnographic study of  
former Awakening Seed students

by Mary Glover and Penelope Denton

Awakening Seed Press  
@ 2008



for all of the Awakening Seeds,  
past, present, and future



# Table of Contents

Foreword.....	3
Introduction.....	5
<i>History of the School</i> .....	5
<i>How This Study Evolved</i> .....	6
1 Using Words, Not Fists: Respect.....	9
2 Every Color: Diverse Perspective.....	11
3 The Place and the Kindness: Meaningful Human Interaction.....	15
4 Here There Is Enough Knowing: Family Feeling.....	19
5 Learning That Happened at School: Academic Learner.....	21
6 Taking It from Page to Page: Sense of Self.....	23
7 Setting Up My Whole Life: Self-Directed Learner.....	25
8 We Made Everything Ourselves: Creativeness.....	29
9 It All Started Here: Advanced Placement and Influence on Life Intentions.....	31
10 To Be Graceful to Human Nature and the Environment: Environmental Awareness/Outdoor Environment.....	35
11 Where You Don't Have to Worry: Comfortable and Open.....	37
12 Keeping It Small and Kid-Centered: Physical Aspects.....	41
13 The Rules Were More about Learning: Strictness and Structure.....	45
14 Easier to Learn from A Friend: Calling the Teachers by Their First Names.....	49
15 Toward the Places We Needed to Go: Teacher As Guide.....	53
16 It Came from Their Heart: Teaching As A Humanistic Value.....	57
17 Becoming More Ourselves: The Gift of Life in A Community.....	59
About the Authors.....	63
About the Participants.....	65



# Foreword

This project has evolved over many years. Its original purpose was to gather information in response to the question: How do Awakening Seed students do when they leave the school? The entire process was an act of love for both of us; the interviews, data analysis, writing, and revisions all squeezed in between our full time jobs over a period of seven years. We intended to have it published by a commercial publisher, but somehow that never happened. We realized recently that we should just publish it ourselves and offer it to all of you in gratitude for your many contributions to Awakening Seed's history.

As we finished up the study, new questions arose. We were impressed by how deeply the Seed years affected these amazing young people. We noticed that of the 41 students we interviewed, 85% stayed at the Seed into their elementary years. Simultaneously, in the years we spent on the data analysis and writing, we have observed a decline in enrollment in our elementary classrooms. Certainly there are external influences, such as economic factors, an increase in the number of tuition-free options for elementary students, and the overwhelming emphasis on standardization and high stakes testing. However, we thought perhaps there also might be a misperception that the Seed is just for preschoolers.

Both the staff and board of directors are strongly committed to continuing to offer the elementary grades at Awakening Seed. We believe the older children add a dimension to the school that would be sorely missed if we just became a preschool. Their absence as older buddy readers, helpers in setting up and organizing activities, and role models of kindness would significantly alter the chemistry of the school. Additionally, there is something more that the children receive in terms of experience when their Seed years extend beyond preschool. This study reveals that "something more."

As you read through these pages, it's important to remember that the "something more" children receive from their Seed years, especially as elementary students, may not show up until a few years later. Now that many of our former students are young adults, we are receiving story after story of their world travels, their passion for living a life filled with meaning, and their commitment to serving humanity. It's inspiring, to say the least, and it is a story that will continue to unfold for generations to come.



# Introduction

*“Knowing everybody at the school from preschool to third grade was really important. Knowing that I always had those people gave me a lot more confidence. You know you can come back any time. They were just like family and I knew that they would always be there. When I left, it was a little more comforting because I knew everyone here had the confidence in me to go out and make new friends, but I would never forget where I came from.”*

--Nick

## History of the School

Awakening Seed School (referred to as the Seed from here on in the text) was established in 1977, in the garage of Bill and Mary Glover’ home. Originally called The New School, it was founded by Mary Glover and Anne Sager. The first year there were nine students, ages six months to five years. The school began with no money, Mary’s daughters’ toys, a backyard swing set, and a vision of a school where children could be honored for who they are, diversity celebrated, and creativity encouraged. From the school’s inception, there was a strong emphasis on being strong planetary citizens and a commitment to world peace. The school remains true to this original vision over 30 years later.

In the decades that followed, the Seed moved to three different locations in Tempe, Arizona. In 1979, the school became a licensed preschool with the Department of Health Services and moved to the Unitarian Church on River Drive in Tempe. The building was shared between the Unitarian Church, a Spanish speaking Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and the school. Every weekend all of the school equipment had to be locked away in cabinets so the classrooms

could be used by the other two groups. Kindergarten was added in 1979 and the name was changed to Awakening Seed after it was discovered that another school in central Arizona was also called the New School. The name Awakening Seed came from a dream Mary had in 1980 and it’s been a perfect name for the school. Each year another grade was added until the Seed reached 5th grade in 1984.

The Seed had about 45 students by 1984, the year it expanded to the Unity Church on McKemy Drive, giving the school four classrooms. It was a shared space again, so the weekend routine of taking things off the walls and storing equipment continued. The playground was on an asphalt parking lot, and the kids ate lunch in the walkway between the church sanctuary and an adjacent building. Although many good things happened at the McKemy location, including a huge fundraiser in the spring of 1985 to help raise money for starving children in Africa, the Seed was growing quickly and needed a bigger space.

During Spring Break of 1986, a week of pouring rain that didn’t let up, the Seed moved into its largest space ever, the first space that didn’t have to be shared with another organization. Located at 23rd and

Industrial Parkway, all of the art could be left on the walls, equipment could be left out, and the playground was able to be used in more expansive ways. Over the course of time, the asphalt parking lot was converted to a playground with sand, trees, a basketball court, climbing structures, and a small grassy area. The school grew to 140 students, from preschool through 5th grade.

With the school still growing, the Board of Directors established a building fund for a new facility. After searching two years in Tempe, Chandler, Ahwatukee, and southeast Phoenix, a terrific piece of land became available at 40th Street and Vineyard in Phoenix. The price was right and through the help of many generous friends and family members, the Seed had its first very own piece of land, 4.3 acres near the base of South Mountain in 1998. The Seed was accredited by NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) for the first time in the summer of 1999, just before moving to the new facility in Phoenix.

Once the land was purchased, everything came together quickly. The groundbreaking ceremony was held in the spring of 1999 and by August the new building was constructed and ready for classes to begin, opening up growth opportunities. For the first time, each classroom had high ceilings, large windows, skylights for natural lighting, and an outdoor area adjacent to each classroom. In no time at all, outdoor patios, sitting walls, gardens, a full-size basketball court, shade trees, and a pond sprung up. The playground opened up a myriad of new possibilities with its rolling grassy hills that allowed students to run, tumble, imagine, and explore.

During the 2000 summer program, the Seed enrolled its first second generation Seed student. Additionally, in the coming years, several alumni Seeds joined the staff, either as full time staff members, Board members, or as college students employed during the summer program. Several of them were

included in this study. In 2000, during the second year in the new location on 40th Street, the inaugural toddler program began. It was expanded to two classes in 2005. Currently the Seed has 150 students enrolled, and a staff of over 30 people.

## **How This Study Evolved**

Since the school's foundation in 1977, we have made concerted efforts to create a strong community of learners. We have built a school based on principles that are universal and supportive of growing human beings. We've kept our eyes and ears open, as well as our hearts and minds, to the latest developments regarding best practices for educating children. Our staff has worked long and hard to apply what we know as professionals to our classrooms in innovative and creative ways. In many respects, we know that we have succeeded.

However, our perspectives as adults are different from those of children, in part because we are primarily the givers, rather than receivers in this process of learning. Our purpose in conducting this study was two-fold. We wanted to hear from our former students, in their own words, about their experiences. We wanted to know if what they encountered in their school lives at the Seed matched our intentions in establishing such a school. We also wanted to find out, as a result of a board meeting discussion regarding potential funding, what it is about the Seed that creates a unique type of education, and what having had this experience means to our students. We had no preconceived ideas of how our students might respond, although as the interviews went along, we were not surprised by the themes that emerged.

To provide consistency with the data we planned to gather, we asked each former student the following questions during a 30-

minute audio-recorded interview:

- What were your most important learnings at Awakening Seed?
- How have these learnings contributed to your life and how you are today?
- What significant element of the Seed environment stands out in your mind/memory?
- What was it about the Seed environment that made your important learnings possible?
- What makes a good teacher?
- How was your next school different and how has it been the same?

The data analysis revealed several consistent themes. The five primary themes were:

- community
- honoring the true learner in each student
- the school environment (both external and internal)
- physical and emotional dynamics of the school
- the teacher as mentor

These themes were prevalent throughout the responses to the various questions and appeared with students who attended the school at varying ages and at different periods of the school's history. During further work with the data, we discovered several sub-themes which are discussed in the following chapters. The sub-themes ranged from the importance of creativity and having a diverse perspective on life, to the significance of being able to call a teacher by

his/her first name.

Of all the themes, the sense of community was by far the most frequently mentioned and important to our former students. Metaphorically, community was the heart of the flower and the other themes were the petals attached to it, extending outward. Although we looked at community as a separate aspect of the school in the responses, it was also present in how students were honored as learners, the environment (both physical and emotional), and how teachers taught and treated the students. Many of the sub-themes overlapped and were considered in a variety of ways. For example, the "family feeling" of the school is examined by itself in Chapter 5, but this sense of family is also a part of later chapters that address emotional safety and the influence of feeling safe or a student's willingness to take risks, ask questions, and not be afraid of rejection or ridicule in the classroom.

We were also struck by the manner in which students articulated their thoughts during their interviews. Some had attended the school for a long period of time and were as old as 11 when they graduated. Others attended for only a few years when they were preschoolers and had to reach further back into their memories to answer the questions. Some had attended the school quite recently, and others hadn't been students at the Seed since the early 1980's. Each one of them demonstrated the kind of communication skills we'd hoped they would have after they left the Seed. Each still felt a tie to the school in some way and was able to express clearly how the sense of belonging allowed everything else to happen. And each one gave us hope for the future, knowing that many of these young people are and will be leaders and decision makers of tomorrow. It was inspirational to hear their responses, and to know that they are already out in the world making a difference.



# 1 Using Words, Not Fists: Respect

*“An important learning here was just to be nice to people. That was a big learning thing, to have respect for others and say it with words, not with your fists.”*

--Arianna

One of the first attributes of community that we encountered was respect. The students we interviewed mentioned experiencing a sense of respect for differences in others as human beings, and the importance of understanding another person's perspective. They commented on how they felt respected by the teachers and other children, and how they learned to be respectful by the behavior the teachers modeled and by the idea that our lives are all interconnected. As Arianna put it, they learned to “say it with words, not with your fists.” They realized that respectful choices generally produced more beneficial results.

Several students described how they learned to be nice to their friends. They learned how to behave in a way that helped them get along with others and how to work out problems that arose. There was a strong emphasis on verbalizing thoughts and feelings rather than expressing anger physically. Learning how to be kind and respectful was directly taught, rather than assuming children would just figure it out. Some mentioned the frequency of situations wherein teachers sat down with a group and talked through difficulties, and kept at it until everyone felt respected and heard. They were given guidance in “how to break down situations when something happened so you could change it in the future.” For example, if a group of children was having a

conflict while playing a game, the teacher might help them sort out the various dynamics and behaviors that contributed to the dispute. One child's inexperience with how to enter into the group, and consequent immature choices in this process, might be at the center of the conflict. Through experienced guidance, the children learned to solve a problem and enter into future situations with better tools for interaction.

There were frequent comments about how much they felt respected by teachers at the Seed. A significant part of feeling respected was being able to call teachers by their first names and 43% of the interviewees said this was important to them. In the words of one interviewee: “We knew all of the teachers by their first names, they all called us by ours. There was no ‘Mr. or Mrs.’ We dropped pretenses and the teachers respected us as individuals. But we also understood that they had the supervisory role. While they supervised us and made sure that nobody was getting hurt, they also did not elevate themselves above us.”

The first name issue was brought up so many times that we decided to examine it separately in Chapter 14. In general, as it relates to respect, being able to call a teacher by her/his first name enabled students to identify with them as another human being. As one student explained, “I at least had a deeper respect for my teachers just because I

identified with them as a person instead of as the figure behind the desk. I don't know this for certain, but I would say it probably convinced me to listen to what they were saying more than it would have otherwise." Because this student felt more respected, he was willing to give more respect in return. Another student saw it in a slightly different way when she said, "A lot of what makes a good teacher is the mutual respect. Some teachers think, 'You have to respect me because you're just another student.' I think this is a completely wrong attitude. I am not just another student. Students are what it is about and why we have schools and teaching. I think teachers kind of get sidetracked and forget that."

An additional benefit of feeling more respected by a teacher was that students acquired a stronger sense of self-respect. The role of respect as it relates to self-esteem will be examined further in Chapter 6. Students learned to follow their own "understandings of the universe," and to trust their own ideas and intuitions. They were more likely to show respect for others and themselves because they felt respected by teachers and peers. As their self-respect grew, they "learned how to be successful, how to do the right things to be successful, to make good choices," and in general how to practice kindness toward others in the process of building and maintaining a close-knit school community.

## 2 Every Color: Diverse Perspective

*"It opened my eyes really early to different kinds of people... there are different religions, different kinds of people from different backgrounds. I really got to see the diversity in people really early. Now in my life when there are so many people to get to know and learn about them, I can understand the process because I was introduced to it really early."*

--Paige

The Seed community that so many of our interviewees mentioned encouraged them to view diversity early on as a positive aspect of life. Diversity and a diverse perspective of the world are the norm at the Seed and many of our former students remembered this with fondness. As one girl put it, "If I had to describe this place in colors I would describe it as every color. Like red, green, yellow, purple flowers." There was a certain joyfulness and pride in being part of an environment that celebrated diversity in the way many of our students did when they attended the Seed. They recognized the value of the experience and it carried over when they moved on to other schools. In the words of one young man, "It is a place where you don't really worry about too much. There are so many different types of people. When I went to elementary school, I'll be honest, I was the only black kid in my class. But when I was at the Seed, there were people from different nationalities, Indians, Mexicans, Caucasians, Blacks, Asians, but we all worked together as if we were the same. So there was really no difference. Sure we learned about each individual culture, but that didn't make the person sitting across from you any different."

Having friends from diverse backgrounds helped our students develop a

perspective of life that was noticeably different to them, especially once they left the Seed for their middle school, high school, and college years. It helped them be more open-minded and it gave them a certain comfort level with people of all different races and backgrounds. In the words of one student: "When I went to college, I was working with a lot of groups that were minorities. I really felt comfortable with people who weren't like me because I had experienced that as a kid, and I had learned how to ask questions with an honest and open heart without feeling worried that I was going to offend someone, or be worried about how to learn about other people in a kind way."

The comfort level many of them spoke of was related to having culturally and racially different friends, and also the learning opportunities to study topics related to race and culture. One girl described the civil rights study they conducted in second grade: "We did this big study on civil rights. We made a quilt of different people. I made a little square about one of the African American folk tales. Someone else made Rosa Parks. We would do research of other cultures and you would see that they are not a whole lot different from us after all." Another student, in a different class,

responded to the same civil rights study a few years later: "We learned a lot about the Civil Rights Movement and I thought that was really important. Later on I just thought it was important because why would anybody want to judge someone differently or not let them play with them just because of the color of their skin? That was really shocking for some of us then."

Once they left the Seed, the shock of coming face to face with other children who didn't have a similar belief in the value of diversity was mentioned by several of the students we interviewed. They had difficulty understanding why others didn't share their same views, because the ideas of acceptance and diversity were almost second nature to them. They could see that their values were, in many ways, different from children who had been educated in mainstream settings. One student attributed it to trust and appreciation: "The bonds that all of us made have lasted. I still remember just about everybody in my class. We had trust in other people. We didn't focus on status as much as at other schools. We didn't have that barrier of race in the way that other people do. We had appreciation for a variety of cultures."

Our students remembered learning that there are more ways than one to viewing and approaching a problem, and this was taught to them as children. They learned this in class studies, and also from the examples of the adults who were teaching and caring for them. It was modeled from the top down: "The whole school was like one big family. Everyone from the principal to someone who was cleaning the school, it was all just a really happy atmosphere. Everyone seemed like they were equal people. That is something they emphasized a lot, everyone being equal. It was the kind of stuff they were demonstrating. We learned this at a young age and it was great."

Not only did our students appreciate what they'd learned about diversity at the

Seed, but they also showed an inclination to try to instruct others in this same approach to life. "We always learned about every culture, it wasn't just Anglo-Saxon or whatever, we learned about Native Americans, African Americans, Asians, and people all over the world. I have more tolerance for people, and if they were not exactly understanding [a cultural difference], I might try to teach them."

We saw this in what former Seed students did with their lives after they graduated from college. One student who completed two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cote d'Ivoire doing public health service, returned to the United States for additional training, and then traveled to Kenya for further work. Another student, also interested in public health, chose to devote herself to AIDS education for adolescents.

What they learned at the Seed about the importance of diversity carried them beyond merely accepting others to a broader perspective of celebrating differences. They were able to develop "a real interest in the diversity of the human potential and the different ways of being human." Through the diverse perspective they acquired at the Seed students not only learned how to treat others in a more open-minded way, but they also seem to have carried with them a deeper, more profound curiosity about and understanding of the human condition. One young man said it so well: "There is a sense of respect for difference, a sense of respect for other people as human beings and the importance of understanding their perspectives. In my life this is something that has served me very well. I've done a lot of international travel, a lot of inter-cultural exchange and I have always been very good at it, frankly. I think the reasons go back to learning it on the playgrounds at the Awakening Seed, the importance of approaching other people without a lot of presuppositions and pre-judgment. There is

a sense of the importance of peace, which I learned here that has stayed with me.”

For many of our students those seminal learnings about peace were instilled in them during their days at the Seed. It allowed

them to successfully move into the next phases of their lives equipped to respond compassionately to others, and in many cases, even take a leadership role to help others do the same.



# 3 The Place and the Kindness: Meaningful Human Interaction

*“They did a really good job in teaching us the golden rule, but not in a religious way, because everybody has a different religious background. That was really important for me to learn. Some of my friends that I know would have been kinder people if they had come to the Seed. It is a community and everybody really cares about each other. If you get hurt, physically or emotionally, people will try to ask you what is wrong and they will try to make you feel better. “*

--Kelsey

Our former students frequently noted the depth of human interaction and guidance for establishing healthier relationships with others at the Seed. As Kelsey pointed out, there was strong support for learning how to be kind to others. Often, as in her case, they were unaware of the significance of this guidance until after they'd left the school. In looking back at their Seed experience, our students mentioned the skills they acquired for

- developing friendships
- learning strategies to adapt in new school settings
- becoming more adept with communications
- utilizing opportunities to strengthen their interpersonal skills

They also described the value of connection that they felt at the Seed, especially once they left the school and didn't have that same sense of belonging.

Many students described the importance of learning how to make friends. As one young man put it, “What I learned here gave me the tools to really explore the diversity of human interaction and to be willing to adapt myself culturally while being treated well myself.” Several talked about how much easier it was to make friends at other schools because they learned how to do it at the Seed. In the words of one boy, “It definitely made me a friendlier person and taught me how to handle certain situations.” Another girl said her Seed experience helped her “become an individual and be a little bit more open because I was really shy.” In addition to situations with friends, one student commented that the Seed gave her better coping skills regarding grades. Having learned at the Seed that grades are based on effort and individual potential, as well actual performance, she added, “I was calmer and didn't get frustrated with grades like others did.”

An integral part of guidance for friendships for our students was how to treat others. They viewed the Seed experience as a

time when who they were was deeply influenced, especially related to how they should behave toward others. The amount of time spent learning how to work out certain situations, as well as the attention given to the process, were contributing factors in learning how to treat others. One student said her time at the Seed “felt like it was sort of my roots, because of what I learned here.” Part of that learning was actual instruction in how to be with other people. Another aspect was what they felt and noticed from the adults offering the instruction: “For me it would be a certain kind of egalitarianism. I know. I just remembered. I never felt afraid of the adults. You never felt the presence of authority as being the primary guiding factor, which is sort of something that I did feel in later schools. In other schools, the authority of the teacher structured the whole experience. At the Seed I always felt as long as you were doing good things, you were sort of free to do those things. There wasn't that kind of ‘authority’ atmosphere.”

The atmosphere she speaks of was simply, yet profoundly, touched upon by one eleven-year-old we interviewed. When asked what significant element of the Seed environment stood out in her mind, she responded, “Do you mean the environment WHERE (the place), or the kindness?” This level of appreciation for the school environment was largely due to the time and attention given to feelings. One girl stated, “I am a better person to people and kinder because of what the Seed taught me about people’s feelings.”

Along with feelings, students discussed the significance of their Seed training in how to be more effective communicators. The use of writing as a communication tool was described. As one girl said, “I have used writing to communicate in my personal relationships. I can communicate effectively and I don’t just like to let things sit. I can be forward about things but in a non-

threatening way. This has helped me be effective in my relationships.”

The ability to talk, interact, and get along has helped students be open to ideas and the different things people have to say. One young woman said, “I learned how to ask questions with an open and honest heart without worry of offending someone.” The work with communication was seen by one student as an on-going process, always guided by the teachers: “How you communicate with people, how you convey your feelings was stressed a lot at the Seed. If you had problems with another student they were always dealt with. The teachers made you work out your own problems effectively, not just arguing with each other. They asked us to sit down and communicate about the problem. Or sometimes they took you aside personally and said, ‘Well, how are you going to deal with this situation? You need to find a way that you can work through this. If the other person isn’t going to cooperate with you, how can you be at rest with it and carry on?’ Personal relations with people were stressed.”

The modeling of communication and interpersonal skills at the Seed created a contrast for some students once they left the Seed. It also provided a standard from which to create change. In one young man’s words, “When I left the Seed I found that the world is apathetical to values instilled within me. I felt opposition to society, and its standards led me to believe that the system needs to change. The forward looking ideals of the Seed helped me formulate a lot of how I view the way a system should run.”

The idea of a standard for human interaction came up with another student we interviewed. He realized years after he left the Seed how extraordinary his experience had been: “There is this real emphasis on negotiation and democracy. At the time it just seemed totally normal. It was 15 years gone before I realized how unusual that was.

It is something that has carried on into my life. I don't have a lot of tolerance for bullies or for pomposity. I can certainly deal with people, but at the same time it is not something I believe in or have a real respect for. I don't consider myself to be a crusader or fighter necessarily, but at the same time there is a very definite part of me that continues to question anything that isn't based on consensus and real communication."

At the heart of guidance for human interaction is being aware of placing other people's needs before one's own. This altruistic view helped our students "put together their perspective of the world today." As they learned to be less self-centered, it opened up a variety of opportunities. One student expressed it this way: "It helped in working with other people and getting along better, and also it opened up opportunities to go places and do things you normally wouldn't do." Another young man had this to say when he became involved with the Crisis Nursery through Boy Scouts: "I learned a lot of things at the Seed that kind of made me want to get involved in Boy Scouts. And through Boy Scouts I have done several things. I participated in other people's projects and I am an Eagle Scout."

Finally, the sense of belonging to a school community like the Seed gave our students a model for what a community should be like. It gave them a reference point as they moved out into the world and into other relationships besides those they'd forged at the Seed. "We did everything together. Teachers would not always be a teacher showing us things and how to do things. A lot of it was working with classmates on things. I remember how we had free time to just play games or play house or dress up. They had all these ridiculous clothes that I

remember, things that created community among the kids. I think it is really important to have everyone within a classroom be involved with everyone else. Everyone feels some sort of connection to other people. Whereas in my other schools we rarely did anything together in class."

The sense of togetherness described here helped some students make decisions regarding work and organizations as they moved into adulthood. These words of a young woman who spent her childhood at the Seed express this well: "I have always looked for community, everywhere I went. I wanted to always be a part of something, people who cared about each other and a very supportive group. Whenever I have interviewed for a job, the most important question I have is, 'Is it a team?' "

Having belonged to a community like the Seed has given our students a sense of belonging in a way that transcends the actual years they spent at the school. They have found a connection to humanity that is both comforting and hopeful. "There is definitely a special connection that you feel from being a Seed, not in an elitist way, but it is a special group of people. I don't know anyone going to the school at this time, but I feel a connection with them and that comes from having had a very good experience. It means a lot to know that kids going here now are still getting that experience. There is no doubt in my mind about that." As they have gone on from the school to make their presence known to the rest of the world, they carry in their hearts the inspiration and devotion to community that they experienced as a Seed student. Along with that, they celebrate the opportunities others will have to know the same sense of belonging, and hopefully, can use what they've learned at the Seed to create their own communities.



# 4 Here There Is Enough Knowing: Family Feeling

*“Here there is enough knowing. Everybody knows just about everybody. It was a happy feeling. It was a joyful feeling that my younger buddies wanted me to come play with them.”*

--Jenna

One aspect of community that several of our former students referred to was the small friendly environment that felt much like a family. With a school population of less than 200 students, small class size, and considerable parent involvement, opportunities for meaningful interaction were always available. They noticed the absence of this feeling when they went on to other schools and observed that other students didn't watch out for each other in the same "family" sort of way as they did at the Seed. At the Seed they felt "a lot of positive reinforcement." One boy said, "Your teachers are just like your aunts and uncles, and the other students are like your brothers and sisters." They felt the level of caring was much higher at the Seed.

Knowing everyone else's name contributed considerably to the family feeling of the school. Doing activities with buddies and learning from buddies helped everyone learn more. They said the Seed was more friendly and, as many mentioned, calling every single person by their first name gave the school a strong family feeling and helped everyone get to know each other well. As one young man, now a college student, said, "Knowing everybody at the school from preschool to third grade was really important.

Knowing that I always had those people gave me a lot more confidence. You know you can come back any time. They were just like family and I knew that they would always be here."

Feeling really welcome and supported played a big part in some of our students' perceptions that the school had a family feeling. The guidance and patience offered by teachers, in the same way a wise and skilled parent would do, gave students the same sense of safety and belonging they felt as a family member. One student put it this way: "There wasn't something that you did the day before that you couldn't correct the next. So if you got mad at your friend, you could come back the next day and apologize and everything was all right. There were no real intense emotions. You would sit down in groups, talk, have snacks, and make juice. It's not something that is too much different from what you did at your house with your family."

The similarity of home and school was mentioned by another student: "When I came here, home and school were a lot more alike. I felt like when I was here that the kids in my class were sort of like cousins. We spent a lot of time together and we took a lot of risks. We had so many fun memories and it was really more of a family environment." As an adult, now teaching at the school, this

student added this perspective: “I have had some hard things go on in my life over the last couple of years. I felt like the kids at the school and the teachers really helped me to pull through it. That is really nice when your work environment is so supportive.”

Several students compared the Seed to their other schools, noticing similarities and differences, especially regarding the family feeling. One girl said that the Seed parents were more involved and she knew their names. That wasn’t necessarily the case once she left the Seed. A couple of students who attended less traditional schools once they left the Seed said their schools were more “similar to the Seed, like a community with a close-knit class, not a lot of teasing, and lots of fun learning.” One student commented on the difference between social structures at the Seed and at her other schools. She said, “Here you don’t have jocks, or popular kids. You just have your class and your friends and everybody is just here and you are family.”

As we have mentioned throughout earlier chapters, the level of respect and care was one of the most significant contributing factors in our students feeling a strong sense of community and family at the Seed. They were taught how to deal with other human

beings in thoughtful and respectful ways, and their teachers modeled this every day. In reflecting back on the difference between her experience at the Seed and other schools she attended, one student said this: “The most important learning was how to interact with other people and it was like you have such a sense of family and community here. Everyone has a mutual respect for everyone else. And it got me so far in life. After I graduated from here the whole mentality was different. You are not in the small community anymore, not in the whole family environment. People don’t really care. I mean they care, but not nearly as much as they did here.”

Knowing that they had the kind of unconditional love and support from school that one would normally feel from family enabled many of our students to thrive and excel as learners, both while they were at the school and after they grew up and moved on to other educational settings. Having grown up in a school environment that “had enough knowing” of others who cared about them equipped our students with the sense of self to go after their dreams, take risks, and push the edges of possibility as they matured into adolescence and young adulthood.

# 5 Learning That Happened at School: Academic Learner

*“When I came to school here at the Seed, learning became something that happened at school again.”*

--Aimee

As we listened to one student after the next describe his/her early learning experiences at the Seed, it was evident that children who are involved in determining the course of their own learning and have a chance to use their imaginations and creativity to shape their learning process have a strong, clear view of themselves as learners. As they grow up and move on to other school settings, they are able to articulate the profound influence of their early learning. They speak of what was important to them as young learners, both in what was taught to them and how it was taught.

Writing was mentioned frequently as a significant subject in their early educational experiences. Making up stories, writing in journals and the teachers' responses to journals, influenced many students' lives as learners. As one student put it, "I became proficient in communicating effectively through writing and being grammatically correct because of early writing." Others said early exposure to poetry was important to them as learners. They loved having the opportunity to write creatively and do their own drawings to go with their poems and stories. Learning to write at an early age helped them be more reflective about life, and make a connection between the natural world and themselves. One student said, "We learned that gardens aren't just for

plants, but a place where we could reflect and write poems." Along with writing, others commented that the exposure to literature through stories read out loud, literature studies, plays, and reading quality books instilled in them a love of reading. Such experiences stretched their literary skills.

The way subjects were taught was significant to some students. They appreciated the way in which they "managed to have fun and do academics at the same time." They were grateful to be learning WHY rather than HOW in some cases, and to have experiences that required that they come up with the answers themselves. At the Seed "the answers were not always laid out for us and sometimes we needed to really dig to find them." Furthermore, one boy stated, "It was the first place I was encouraged, REALLY encouraged, to take interest in and learn the things I wanted to, as well as draw and develop my imagination." This encouragement helped students have the confidence to try new things and not be afraid. As learners at the Seed, free of textbooks and topics selected by others far removed from a specific classroom, they were given the freedom to expand their horizons as learners. As they wondered, asked questions, and developed the inquiry process, their appreciation for reflective learning deepened. One student said, "I

loved thinking about things and reflecting about things. The Seed instilled a lot of those values in me.”

Learning how to learn was mentioned as an important aspect of several students’ experiences at the Seed. They said the way they learned helped them be better listeners and to follow directions more completely. They liked being able to explore and do things that they hadn’t done before, and this inspired them to want to learn more. Developing a strong work ethic was expressed in this way by one girl: “I was taught good work ethics, to always do my best, to accomplish both things and goals that were set for me. I think that was definitely taught just by giving you the drive to learn. Even if it meant that you couldn’t get the best grades, you were trying your best and that was what was most important.” Several voiced their appreciation for being able to learn for learning’s sake and to select topics of their own choice, rather than having to learn what someone else wanted them to learn. This enabled them to trust their own judgment and instincts about what was important for them to learn.

Along with the importance of learning how to learn, early exposure to certain topics (in addition to writing and reading) was helpful for some students. Topics such as the human body, sharks, Spanish, and outer space remained as vivid memories for Seed

students well into their college years. One avid kindergarten space expert is now studying astrophysics in college. The early experiences in such subjects as mathematics and art have become a strong foundation upon which life work is built, and in some cases, allowed Seed students to access advanced placement classes in middle school, high school, and college.

A common thread in several interviews was a deep appreciation for having had the opportunity to use imagination and creativity. Students loved having the chance to learn how to build things, to be creative and inventive, and to be problem solvers. As one girl said, “I felt very free to explore things. I could imagine whatever I wanted and follow my curiosity as far as it would go.” Being able to apply creativity to problem solving situations and thinking of different ways to go about learning something was highly empowering for many students. It affected their view of themselves, and their attitude about school. Some attended the Seed for many years and didn’t know another way of learning until after they went to different schools. For students like Aimee, who started elsewhere before coming to the Seed, the shift in the approach to learning helped them learn to love school again, and ultimately appreciate themselves for all they were able to do and learn.

# 6 Taking It from Page to Page: Sense of Self

*“The longer I have seen the world and the way it operates, and the way human beings operate, the more clearly it seems to me the people with a strong sense of who they are don’t feel the same need to oppress and suppress other people.”*

--Josh

When a child grows up in an environment that allows a strong sense of self to flourish, awareness of the human condition can be profound. Insights that take devoted scholars a lifetime of study to experience arise in the everyday lives of children who are supported in their individual process as human beings. Children learn how to choose friends selectively and how to cope with those who challenge their individuality. They learn the value of eating healthy food, of using one’s voice, and how to wisely take risks. They know when to engage in confrontations and when to remain steady in their silence, as they hone their social abilities. The time and attention given to careful modeling of problem solving skills in the early years set the stage for a successful future. As one student put it, “They taught me problem solving. That was a big thing here; you don’t beat around the bush, you just kind of get straight to the problem. I wouldn’t have learned that as quickly as I did if I hadn’t gone to the Seed.”

A strong sense of self gives children the courage to move through life with confidence, while honoring the early experiences that led them to it. Several

factors contributed to the strong sense of self we observed in many of the students we interviewed. Some students indicated that it was the respect they received early on that influenced their sense of self. One boy explained, “If you get respect at a really young age then you can demand it for the rest of your life. You know it is what you need and you know it makes you feel better.” Another student added that having felt respected, he was able to see the differences between himself and others, and this gave him a chance to give focused attention to the learning that was setting up his whole life ahead of him.

Being able to see through the differences in the way others were treated, especially when it came to academic success, also contributed to a strong sense of self. One girl remembered, after leaving the Seed, how she felt when some children were taken from the classroom to go to the gifted program, while others were left behind: “I remember them taking all of the gifted kids away for a whole day once a week and leaving everyone else there. And immediately the teachers went through and picked ones that should be taken away. That carried on into junior high. If I wanted to get into a gifted class I had to

test into it, which I did. But I didn't like any of the kids so I just decided that I didn't want to be gifted." Even though being in the gifted program held prestige, her sense of self gave her the intrinsic courage to be true to herself.

Learning at a young age that everything doesn't have to be figured out right away and that a child's ideas can be allowed to unfurl gradually help to formulate a sense of self. One of our former students, now a college graduate, commented, "My whole philosophy is that if you just do what your interest is and what excites you for the moment, something will come of it eventually. You just keep going and see. It is almost like when we would write our books at the Seed. Even when I was drawing the artwork, I didn't necessarily know what it was a picture of until they asked me what it was and then I had to explain. Then you have to go to the next page and have to explain that and it has to make sense from the page before. Well, it doesn't necessarily have to make sense. I guess that's how I am living my life right now. Where I just take it from page to page and just see where it leads me. I don't want to have everything figured out right now. But I am excited at some of the different things I have been able to do."

The authentic work completed as a child was another important influence in the development of some students' sense of self. The work was valued as a direct expression of themselves and reminded them as they grew older that the self, like the work, was worthy of honor and respect. As one girl put it, "I still have pictures in my drawer with my work from the Seed. My dad says to throw out my books and all this stuff, but I refuse to. This stuff was, you know, so me, and it expresses me in a nutshell. I still think sometimes I am that little kid, and I know how to still have fun and I can still find that little girl when I look through my drawer."

Underlying the responses regarding sense of self was a feeling of being honored for remaining true to one's self, thoughts, ideas, and creative expressions. Appreciation for the time and care taken by teachers to help nurture this honoring was evident. For some, this appreciation is then carried beyond school life into young adulthood, as life experiences help formulate a view of how the world works. In coming to understandings such as Josh's regarding oppression and suppression, a renewed hopefulness not only for the individual thrives, but also for all of humanity.

# 7 Setting Up My Whole Life: Self-Directed Learner

*“Awakening Seed wasn’t afraid to teach us things. I was able to learn as opposed to just being entertained. I was able to explore my imagination and not be judged about it.”*

--Rachel

Our former students were, for the most part, articulate and clear about the Seed’s influence on whom they have become as learners. Many of them expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to self-direct much of their learning as a young child, and how that foundation helped them as they grew up. One boy said that the school helped him set up his whole life ahead of him so he could give learning more attention as he grew up. Among the aspects of the Seed environment that assisted our students in becoming self-directed learners were:

- being able to figure out things for themselves
- being able to move at their own pace
- developing values and study skills
- being supported in asking questions
- having opportunities to explore and follow interests
- learning with teachers who promoted a student driven curriculum
- receiving encouragement to be creative and expressive

Throughout the interviews, students mentioned that at the Seed they were either taught how or were allowed to figure out things on their own. They said they had flexibility and freedom to try out solutions to problems, make mistakes, and adjust their thinking to reach a suitable resolution of a problem. They learned "why" instead of just "how." One girl said that it was like that especially in math. She said, “We always went into WHY that equation worked because the teacher would explain how you do it and how you figure it out.” Another student expressed it this way: “I was encouraged to explore ideas and they asked me questions. It was much more of a conceptual thing than it was ‘memorize this and regurgitate it.’ Of course we did get the basic skills, but the goal was not to train our minds to absorb information and spit it out again. The goal was to get concepts into our mind and expand it. Activities that were planned were designed to alter your perceptions.”

This notion of figuring it out for yourself came up in many of the interviews. The level of student involvement (rather than just being told) played a big part in this. One student said, “In the environment and what we were taught, students were always very involved. It was never, here’s the teacher and the teacher is going to lecture the students

about what they are supposed to learn. We were always involved in the learning. They said, 'Okay, we're going to take this bucket, tie a string to the handle, put water in the bucket, and we're going to swing it around in a circle. Now why isn't the water falling out?' That was how you learned from the experience. You did it instead of just being told. So everything was very involved. You had to learn for yourself. You had to think about things, not just be told what to think."

Being able to learn at one's own pace was mentioned by a few students. They appreciated the individualization of learning that was available: "Moving at your own pace was important. If you wanted to you could work at a higher level and then you could get more out of things. You wouldn't be stuck because the whole class is doing one thing. There was a very large ratio of teachers to children and you had one-on-one attention a lot. It was personal caring attention, not just cut and dry."

Another element of being a self-directed learner was having practice with learning how to focus and establish study skills. Many of our students said they were able to focus well as students later on because they learned how at the Seed. One student explained, "I learned that I'm pretty good at studying because I knew it was going to pay off one day." The value of study skills and focusing on schoolwork was impressed in our students' minds. Having had the opportunity to learn in a meaningful way, with subject matter that had relevance, played a big part in this. As one student commented, "I feel that the experience I had here gave me a sense of focus when it came to learning. When I decided to sit and study something I just had a stronger point from which to start, and a more focused point because there really was an aspect of curiosity and interest and I was more involved in my learning." Along with valuing learning and establishing strong

study habits was the appreciation of the opportunity to develop values and make choices about learning: "There was a sense of freedom to make your own values, to choose what you feel is right, and to learn in such a way that the knowledge becomes your own."

The self-involvement with learning was tied to creativity for a number of our former students. They mentioned the value of writing creatively for personal enjoyment and some stated that they still write for this reason as well as to sort out thoughts, communicate with others, and to express themselves through print. One boy mentioned that by learning to express his creativity, he was led to music and art as he grew older. Encouragement to be creative at the Seed helped one student develop excellence and do extra work on future assignments. One girl explained, "When we had projects at school I liked the drawing ones and not just the writing ones, so that I could express myself on paper. I liked showing my writing and not just getting an easy way out of it." She went on to say that she liked doing more than the required amount, and if given the option to write one or two pages, she'd always write two. She also added that she didn't write really big at the end to fill the page like some of her peers!

Our students were able to apply other aspects of self-directed learning to their lives as they grew older. One student said that her learning at the Seed encouraged her to keep asking questions and not be afraid to inquire for further information: "Even when I left the Seed, I wound up being somebody who would ask a lot of questions and get taught a lot of things at home by my dad or other people because I started wondering about the world. A lot of that started when I was here." In reflecting on her Seed experience, she said she was impressed with how often the teachers said yes to her ideas. "It was at the Seed that my voice started to be heard, and

my ideas were responded to. Everyone listened.” Knowing that her ideas were valued gave her encouragement to continue trusting her interests to guide the direction of her learning. It also kept the attention of our students and made the process easier because the learning was more interesting. One student said it was so interesting that she never felt like she was going to school. With the interests came questions and a thirst to pursue personal affinities.

Pursuing personal interests in classrooms that supported this kind of learning was the final contributing factor for self-directed learning at the Seed. Many students spoke about this as being a significant part of their learning. They liked how the teachers “picked up on anything a kid showed interest in or talent for, and just encouraged that so it started to flow.” They mentioned that even after they left the Seed, they continued to learn things on their own because they wanted to. Interests sparked at the Seed influenced their work while at the school, but also was carried with them as they went on to other learning environments. As one student put it, “I felt encouraged to explore interests and creativity, and continued to do this at other schools because it had been encouraged at the Seed.” Our students appreciated the opportunity to learn from different teachers and each other as they followed their interests. In one young man’s words: “I remember the difference in the organization of the classroom. It wasn’t ever someone projecting information at you, it was more organic. You could learn from other people you were with, learn from more than one teacher in the classroom. We always had new people coming in and doing projects. You had it constantly hitting you from every angle, it wasn’t ‘this is the syllabus.’”

For several students the interests in art,

music, math or science carried on well into their college years and became their fields of study. For one student, sadly, this wasn’t the case. He said, “This is where I got most of my art. It was even amazing, I had two people want to buy my art and it all came from doing these classes. After I left I just stopped and I didn’t do art again.” Hopefully, for students like this, even though art may not be his mode of self-expression, the self-directed learning he experienced as a child at the Seed will enable him to pursue other areas of interest as they arise in his unfolding life. This certainly was the case with many of our former students and it had a strong influence on their future lives, as we shall see in Chapter 9.

When our students felt supported as self-directed learners, they were able to establish a strong foundation not only for learning, but also for self-expression. One young woman said she still keeps a journal and writes poetry, which helps her deal with her life. As we mentioned previously, areas such as the arts and music also opened up as opportunities for self-expression. One of the students we interviewed had only been at the Seed for a couple years when she was under five. Even though she’d been away from the school for over twenty years, she remembered the importance of the work she’d done as a young child, especially with writing her own books. In her words, “I like the idea of being able to put stories and pictures together and making something, creating something, from nothing. That is what I’ve done in different dimensions my whole life.” Applying creativity to various aspects of their lives was a theme that arose in many of the interviews. We shall next explore how our students were able to create “something from nothing” using their Seed experience as a foundation.



# 8 We Made Everything Ourselves: Creativeness

*“We were always encouraged to do, and were celebrated for doing things the way that we came up with in our heads.”*

--Sharon

Creativity was mentioned repeatedly by our former students as something many of them valued as they grew up. It entered into their lives as Seed students in a number of ways. They appreciated both the quality and quantity of their creative experiences. Additionally, they commented on the support they received for expanding their imaginations, and developing the creative aspect of themselves, both artistically and intellectually. Our students were grateful for the time allowed for creative expression, and the way in which their creativity was permitted to unfold. Many students we interviewed acknowledged the valuing of creativity by the teachers.

Our students commented on the quantity and quality of learning experiences they received at the Seed that directly affected creativity. One student said, “There was so much to do you never got bored.” One girl said, “It was like a big place to play and there were so many hands-on experiences that we were able to have. Classrooms were filled with lots of cool things to look at, and cool things to do.”

The hands-on approach definitely appealed to our former students, particularly as it related to the expansion of imagination. One boy explained, “My imagination was expanded here. There was

freedom of information, and free time was still a learning experience. The time allowed for creative pursuits was acknowledged. They let us create. They taught us the basics, taught us mechanics, and then they let us put it to use. Actually that is something that I found really special and haven’t seen any place else.”

Time given to explore social issues was a different kind of creativity mentioned in the interviews and opened up possibilities for creativity in a broader sense. As one person put it, “Being able to have free time to explore social things as well as time to learn in a very unique, exploratory way, helped you explore the creative side of who you are.” There was a definite sense of freedom to express creativity, yet the presence of teachers as guides in this process was felt. In one young woman’s words, “We were never taught the right way to express ourselves. We were just taught that it was acceptable to express ourselves. We were taught to explore our curiosity and to explore things that interested us and not just have to follow the straight and narrow, which is good. It is hard to figure out what you want to do in life and what is going to be important to you. It should involve a lot of exploration and we were definitely encouraged to do that here.” In listening to the words of our former

students, it was clear that they appreciated the opportunities to develop their creative senses of self, with support and guidance, instead of having it stifled as it was in learning environments after they left the Seed.

The valuing of students' creativity, the time given for the process to unfold, and the continual encouragement enabled some students to reflect on themselves in terms of their own creative process as they grew older. One boy said, "The opportunity to experience art but accept that it's not something I'm good at, and being okay with that was helpful." Another student talked about the chance to express creativity at the Seed and how it has influenced her interests later in life: "Another thing the Seed does teach, they let you express your creativity a lot, so now I can do the art and music. I

don't think I would have been into art and music as much if I hadn't gone to the Seed." Finally, one student, who is now a teacher, reflected on her experience as a child and how it has affected her views of creativity in her work: "I was able to get creative with certain examples that the teacher gave us. It has led me to believe that as a teacher you should let the students be creative, let them lead you. The teacher just provides a seed. We should give the tools to students so they can develop their own creative process."

Many of our students felt this way, that they were given the tools to develop their own creative process. In the following chapter we shall examine how the learning tools given to them as children at the Seed affected our former students' career intentions, as well as their creativity.

# 9 It All Started Here: Advanced Placement and Influence on Life Intentions

*“I am a reporter, so that might also be why I remember the importance of reading comprehension and writing because I really latched on to the writing aspect. Not only writing but also I remember doing a lot of poetry and getting to draw my own drawings to go with my stories. I really enjoyed writing and I learned to enjoy it here. Certainly the writing has stuck with me since I was here and it has really shaped the career I chose.”*

--Anna

In conjunction with the strong creative influence the Seed had on our students, a few commented on the advantages they experienced later regarding advanced placement in school. They also mentioned how the Seed experience influenced their career intentions and interests. Although at first advanced placement and career intentions seemed to be separate, we decided they indeed are connected, because both are related to learning opportunities the Seed provided.

One student said he was grade levels ahead in math when he left the Seed. He explained how this happened: “We used to have these math study groups where we would have a 20-30 minute period where we would do nothing but math. Our teacher had us work independently at the board and when she saw we were doing problems easily, she would dig through her books and think a little bit and then come up with more challenging problems from that. I’m 2-3 grade levels higher in math than I normally would be. So I guess that helped me out a

lot.” He said he was also placed in all honors English classes and he had a strong vocabulary and fluency as a reader. Another student commented, “If I wasn’t at the Seed I don’t think I would have gotten into any of the honors classes because at the Seed they taught us the process of learning. If I hadn’t learned how to learn then I probably wouldn’t be in some of the classes I am now.” Learning how to learn was important to her and to others we interviewed, in this case because it gave her an advantage for school placement. Some students mentioned they were placed in honors classes because they learned how to discuss and write down what they thought. One student verified this by saying, “All of the writing made it a breeze to get through the rest of my schooling.”

Another advantage students had when they left the Seed was early exposure to topics that were covered later. In one boy’s words: “If I think back on what I learned then, I can still remember some things I learned. If we start out on a subject that I already learned back then, I already know

some of those things and feel ahead of people a little bit." His previous experience at the Seed gave him extra confidence because he'd already been exposed to the material at a younger age. The confidence gained from learning at the Seed also influenced career decisions of several of our students.

As Anna expressed so well in the opening quote of this chapter, the enjoyment of reading and writing at the Seed shaped her decision to become a reporter. Other students mentioned the early exposure to the process of writing, and it stayed with them in college and beyond. One student said, "I really feel to this day that writing is an outlet that I use when I am stressed. Writing is something that comes fairly naturally to me. My writing really took off when I came to the Seed and that was something that stuck with me. I tutored in college." Another young woman added this: "For some people writing papers was a chore and it was no big deal to me. I enjoy writing still; I enjoy writing creatively. I can just sit and enjoy that. I think it reflects that at the Seed, writing was made enjoyable right from the beginning. As far as relationships with people go, I think I have very effective ones, be it business relationships or personal. I feel I can communicate effectively and I can be forward about things but in a non-threatening way. I guess I just feel effective in my relationships and I think that was taught." Today she has a chance to practice her interpersonal relationships on a daily basis as coordinator of the Outreach Department programs at the Phoenix Zoo. Her department takes zoo animals to off-ground locations, such as schools, libraries, senior communities/care centers, and special events, etc.) to present entertaining educational programs about the natural world. The Seed influenced career and life intentions in other directions. The young man mentioned in Chapter 2 who was a Peace Corps volunteer said this of his Seed

experience: "I think that my real interest is in the diversity in human potential and in the different ways of being human beings. And that, very definitely, started here. I think that what I learned here gave me the tools to really explore human diversity and to be willing to adapt myself. I think that being able to adapt culturally while being treated well myself is something I learned here." Another one of our students, interested in the arts as a career, had this to say about how the Seed had some bearing on his life intentions: "It was the first place I was really encouraged to take interest in and learn the things I wanted to learn, like learning to draw and develop my imagination. They started to tell us we needed to look towards what we wanted and to begin thinking how to do that. If we wanted to draw or if we wanted to develop any interests. I would eventually like to get into visual computer graphics. I like story lines too, so I would like to get into video game design because that incorporates story lines, graphics, characterization and a lot of things I really enjoy." Like Anna, who became a reporter, he could see how early interests can become ones' life work.

To no surprise, quite a few of our students have become teachers or are planning to teach after college. Some pursued other paths first, but eventually turned to teaching. In the words of one student, "Because I studied psychology in school, I didn't even study teaching all through school. It took me a year after I graduated college before I taught. So I took a year's worth of classes in that year and I felt like it was very easy and came to me. All I had to do was reflect on ways that I was taught." Drawing on her childhood experience as a student, teaching came naturally. Other students knew for a long time that they wanted to be a teacher. "I want to be an elementary school teacher. I've wanted to do that for a really long time. I can't remember really wanting to do

anything else. So thinking back on the time I had at the Seed, I would love to teach in an environment like this. Just the way the kids interact with one another. I never felt like I was going to school."

For some students, their Seed experience not only influenced the decision to teach, but also the kind of teacher they wanted to be. One young woman, a primary teacher in the public schools said, "Being a teacher now, I teach my students to think for themselves. It is not on the paper, it is not in the book, it is in your brain. Come up with it yourself. It is hard for a lot of the kids because they were trained to have the tunnel vision. Then they come into my room and I say, 'No, think for yourself. Write your own story, I am not going to give you the idea. You need to write your own story and do your own thing.' I really push my kids to think for themselves."

Having had inspiring teachers definitely influenced the kind of teacher our former Seed students want to be. A graduate student in literature at Johns Hopkins University, one of our former students said, "I

have started to teach. My experience of how to be a teacher has to do with the teachers I had. I know the most important thing for me, as a teacher, has been to set aside the difference between the students and myself and be more interested in the pursuit of what I want them to learn, hoping that they will be interested in it as well. I would say definitely the idea that teachers are to assist you in your pursuit of knowledge is the most important thing, rather than a teacher who has expectations that may not correspond with yours, or may limit you rather than help."

It is encouraging to know that such reflective and thoughtful young people are choosing teaching as their life work. They confirm our belief that change is possible; that there can be hope for a bright future, and that generations to come will benefit from the dedication and hard work of the Awakening Seed staff. Their words remind us that our work is worthwhile and that truly we are making a difference.



# 10 To Be Graceful to Human Nature and the Environment: Environmental Awareness/Outdoor Environment

*“The Seed taught us how to be graceful to human nature and to the environment. That stuck with me a lot. The school reinforced all that kind of stuff.”*

--Benjamin

One aspect of the Seed that makes it unique is the availability of interaction with the outdoor environment. Over the years, the curriculum has evolved to include an outdoor space for each classroom and age level. The outdoor environment includes a place to play and dig in the dirt, mix mud, and construct with natural materials that enhance imaginative play. In the older classes, each child has a plot of dirt available for an entire school year to develop into a “house,” a place for storing resource materials, a spot for hanging out with friends, or a hub of commerce using glass blobs as currency. Furthermore, opportunities to garden and conduct scientific investigations are plentiful at the Seed. Children learn to use the natural environment as their laboratory for growing vegetables and flowers, and for developing some of their “I wonder” questions into science experiments unique and innovative.

When we asked our former students what their most important learnings were and how these learnings contributed to their lives today, a few of them mentioned their experience with the natural world at the Seed. Although most of their comments addressed the feeling and emotional

environment of the school, enough of them talked about their experiences with the outdoors and nature to make it worth reporting.

A few students said that their work at the Seed encouraged them to appreciate and care for nature. A respect for nature and all of its creatures was instilled in them as children. As one girl put it, “My most important learnings were to care for even ants and spiders. I also learned that gardens aren’t just for plants but to reflect and write poems.”

The appreciation for the gardening and plant environment was important to some of our students. Not only were they inspired by the natural world for writing and reflection, but also they felt the inner, emotional influences of their environment. In the words of one student, “It was really nice because most schools you go to there is no plant environment and there is not a lot of gardening and nice things. It almost makes you relax and just kind of Zen out in the garden. I really like that. It makes it a happier place with a garden.” Having a garden around made happier students, and it also gave them a slightly different perspective on the world.

Having a chance to grow a garden, observe insects, study the changing seasons, and discuss environmental issues gave our students a hands-on opportunity to enrich their view of life and the world, sometimes setting them apart from their peers who hadn't had the same experiences. One of our students said, " I can say that I'm a lot more of an individual, with a different perspective on things, being aware of how certain things affect nature and the world. We always did so much with the earth and helping each other out. I just got a different perspective on things. I look at it in a different light." This same student added that her hands-on work with the earth helped her get involved in earth-related topics and issues.

On a different note, one student vividly described how much fun she remembered having just playing in the mud: "The Seed is just a warm environment. I remember 'water time.' In the summer we used to do this a lot. We would go and make the playground into all this mud. We would play in it and would be so disgustingly messy and that was okay. It was just so great to have fun sometimes, to take a break in the day."

In addition to having fun, one boy mentioned that what he remembered about the outdoor environment was how it helped his learning. He said, "Outside it was learning about working as a community and inside it was more about the skills you need." His comment implied that his experiences outdoors helped him learn to apply what he was learning in the classroom. It helped him see how to use his individual knowledge to be part of a team working together on

common projects. It also gave meaning to his classroom learning.

Interestingly, this data coincides with Howard Gardner's recent addition of an eighth intelligence, "naturalistic intelligence." In *Last Child In the Woods*, Richard Louv's engaging and important book about nature deprivation with children, the author describes Gardner's eighth intelligence and how this designation can help educators and parents understand the importance of nature experiences for learning and child development (Louv, p. 72). While we have always recognized the value of the outdoor environment and its importance in children's lives, it is encouraging to know that researchers, scholars, and individuals interested in child development are realizing its value as well.

One of the Seed's primary goals is to help children learn how to be strong advocates and stewards of our planet and all of its inhabitants. We believe this is happening partly because of the significant outdoor experiences they have had at the Seed. It is also occurring because of the school's social and emotional environment, which is the foundation upon which the school community and all of its participants thrive. It is what allows us, as Benjamin stated so well, "to be graceful to human nature and to the environment" in which we all live, breathe, and move through our daily lives.

Louv, Richard. *Last Child In the Woods*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005.

# 11 Where You Don't Have to Worry: Comfortable and Open

*"This is the kind of environment where you can make friends easily. You knew everyone's name and everyone knew your name. No one was a stranger, so you didn't have anything to worry about."*

--Allen

We were not surprised at all by the different responses to our questions regarding the Seed environment, both what stood out in their memories and what element of the environment made their important learnings possible. (See Introduction for the specific questions asked) What did take us by surprise was the consistency that ran through almost every one of their responses. Their comments varied with specific examples, but the underlying theme was how safe, open, and comfortable their Seed experience was for them. One young woman said, "I remember it being a very unpretentious yet loving place. It didn't have an ounce of snobbery or any of this kind of stuff. I remember sitting around making Native American popcorn and when I ate it, it tasted kind of dirty. But I guess the popcorn is a good metaphor for how I felt about the Seed. It had a grittiness about it that was important to me. What I learned is something that I carry with me even now, just the idea that things don't always have to be pristine and beautiful to be real."

Several students mentioned that the Seed was a place where they didn't have to worry too much about anything. They felt safe emotionally and physically. The safety issue came up in a variety of ways. First, some of

them described the school as "a really nice open environment where you weren't really pressured to do stuff and if you didn't do something you wouldn't fail." They spoke of how encouraging the teachers were who would "do all in their power to help and encourage us." There was a sense of safety in that teachers didn't force anything. One student put it like this: "I never felt like I was beaten over the head with anything...it was just a gradual learning process that I feel all the teachers just eased us into it. I just remember loving every minute of it."

Another quality of the Seed environment that numerous students mentioned was the positive, open mindedness. One student remembered how nice and positive the teachers were. He remembered how the teachers tried to calm his brother down and talk to him. Another student said, "I remember how accepting people were and how open minded, just by the fact that they had everybody together so much, and that they didn't separate the classes so much." Along with that open mindedness, one girl commented about how excited teachers were "to see what we created."

Interestingly, many students mentioned how the Seed environment gave them confidence as learners because they were encouraged to ask questions and felt safe

doing so. "It was a really personal environment, it helped me listen to them, and it helped me understand what was happening. Those personal relationships helped me to learn a lot more because I didn't feel tied down, I wasn't afraid to ask a question. The whole environment allowed students to be a lot more free with expressions." The fact that "everything negative was discouraged" helped students feel confident that they wouldn't be put down or ridiculed for asking questions.

Rules and limits were described by a few of our former students. They talked about the relationship between the rules and a sense of freedom and safety. "There was an overall sense of freedom. You weren't allowed to physically harm someone; in fact, in many ways my view of what society should be was shaped by the environment at the Seed. The limits that were in place there so you wouldn't be able to hurt anybody." Additionally, the relationship between the rules and learning was addressed. "The rules reinforced mutual respect. You learned to respect others but you also learned to respect yourself."

The comfortableness also had to do with the familiarity with the people in the Seed environment (see Chapter 4 regarding the family feeling). One student commented that the teachers and students comprised that sense of family. Because the school was small, it allowed everybody to know each other, particularly as the children got older. "You felt like a family and it was fun to come here, therefore, fun to learn." Part of the fun was helping other classmates and helping them to feel comfortable and successful: "You could help your classmates out a lot. One girl was having trouble with long division. And the best part was that the teacher suggested we help, which was really good for the person. I remember the day when she did a long division problem and we all said, 'YEA!' Everyone gets involved

and gets to help out. I think it is good also because the teachers don't let the challenged students become a burden to the rest of the class."

There was a sense that everybody is a friend. "You might have a rival or something but it's not going to escalate to anything higher than just poking." Really knowing others contributed to the safe and comfortable feeling, as well as experiencing personal caring and lots of one-on-one attention. Knowing all of the teachers helped, too." One student remembered, "how often the teachers said yes. I felt like once I came here my voice started to be heard. Everyone listens to you here. "

Another theme within the comfortable and open aspect of the environment was a relaxed attitude about freedom of expression. In the words of one student, "You feel like you could say anything and you wouldn't be knocked down. Expression, even if it's getting the wrong answers, is okay." Students said they liked coming to school every day and they weren't afraid to express themselves. "I liked coming to school every day. I was so excited about learning. Sitting on the floor and calling the teachers by their first names made the environment really comfortable and open. I was willing to let my personality out and really be able to learn."

Finally, it was the opportunity to "explore who you really are" that made the Seed such a comfortable learning environment for our students. "I would say this school is a wonderful place. If you would send your kid here, they will grow so much from the time they step foot in here to the time they leave... academically and emotionally and mentally. I just think this place really lets you explore who you really are. You are allowed to sit on the floor and lay down when you read or go outside if you are writing. We were not judged by what we say. It's just the family environment. Such a unique place."

The uniqueness of the Seed comes, in part, from the faculty emphasis on maintaining an open mind while encouraging and supporting students in their

efforts to express who they are. Other day-to-day practices and organizational aspects support this perspective, as we will see in the following chapter.



# 12 Keeping It Small and Kid-Centered: Physical Aspects

*"I remember all of the color and the vibrancy and creativeness. This school is so kid-centered. The kids make everything. You don't have the pre-made posters all over the place. The kids have made everything."*

--Astraea

When we asked our students to explain the difference between the Seed environment and other schools they attended, they were very clear about the differences. Many of them addressed aspects of the physical environment, including everything from desks, windows, and books to class size and the general size of the school campus. A number of them mentioned the importance of the smallness of the Seed and how it made them feel safe. They appreciated how the small size of the school and knowing everyone better supported their learning.

A few of the students we interviewed spoke directly about how inviting the Seed environment was. One girl said, "We didn't sit at desks so it wasn't that closed cubicle environment. You were at tables and were always sharing with each other and it didn't feel like a chore." The physical arrangement and even the furniture promoted a meaningful kind of learning. Another student said it this way: "I'd say it is an environment where kids can learn who they are and become the best that they can be and get a chance to show their great qualities and to explore everything that they want basically through their learning. It is not just a total free-play; it is learning, but learning in a way that is fun for kids and speaks to kids. Not like a sterile desk and chairs that just sit

there. You know, bells ringing that you have to move around to and get there right on time or else you go to detention. I just don't think that's a fun environment for kids to want to come to school and learn."

A couple of students even mentioned the presence of books as being a significant part of the Seed experience. In one student's words: "You can look around the classroom that we are in and there are books all over. Books just become a part of everything. Everything is tied back to it. If they are doing a play, it is of a book that has been adapted that maybe we all know or doing a project there is a certain amount of reading involved with that. Any sort of unit will have books. The book you are reading in the afternoon will probably tie back to that and we will all probably be reading our own books that tie back to that. It's just everywhere. It wasn't separate at all. It encourages kids to look at it not as a task but just something that is part of life and something that most of them enjoy."

Parallel to the books, one student recalled a strong memory of "the actual space, the toys, and the projects and different things that we did." One girl commented about the windows into the outside world and how they added to her happiness and desire to learn: "The windows, you can see outside.

You are not closed up and it is almost like you are free but you are still inside, so you don't feel like you are forced to do anything. It is nice outside. You get a view and it makes you happier and you are more eager to learn." For many of our students, the physical set-up played an important role in supporting their learning.

Another significant aspect of the physical environment was the overall smallness of the school in comparison to other schools. "Everyone knew each other because it was so small. It helped with the interaction between all the kids and the teachers and the aides. I think keeping it small made it possible to be able to learn so much." One of our students reflected on how the smallness promoted positive relationships across age groups: "Here it is nice and small and the big kids help the little kids. At the other schools the little kids run in fear of the big kids." Along with that, the smallness allowed for a lower student/teacher ratio, which enhanced supervision and a feeling of support. In one boy's words, "My learning was made possible because the school doesn't have so many kids. Probably because there is a higher ratio of teachers to kids so there is a lot more supervision going on. It is a little bit safer because it's not possible to have 50 kids running at you at one time." The smaller ratio allowed for "a personal rapport with each teacher and each student." The smaller environment allowed students to know each other better. As one young man put it, "This being such a small school, it just allowed you to get to know so many different people through the environment that it fostered. It brought such a diverse group in for a school this size. And to this day I still keep up with some of the kids I went to school with here." This getting to know everyone better helped kids feel more involved because they knew each other.

The sense of knowing everybody was a strong experience for several of our students.

One boy said, "Knowing everybody, if you didn't understand something you could go to somebody and they would know." Having a strong connection with others helped our students when it was time to branch out into other environments. "Knowing all the teachers and all the kids and growing up with all the kids and being in this close environment helped when I left. After third grade, I went to an elementary school. The first couple of days I was overwhelmed because there were so many kids and it was so different from here. But then I remembered everything I had done here and it sure helped me get to know everybody there."

Class size came up frequently as a significant difference between the physical environment at the Seed and other schools. Several of their comments addressed how aspects of their other schools were less appealing than the Seed's, although in general most of them were able to point out positives about a larger environment as well. One student explained it like this: "It was larger, with more kids, not just the same 15 you've known all along. It was so much wider. You feel very small until you have the confidence to go out and meet people." They said the largeness of other schools and big class size "didn't seem like a family atmosphere" and "there was a little bit less to go around" because of the higher number of students. Some commented on the larger playground with less equipment to play with, and the feeling of being "lost in the crowd because you are a number now instead of a person."

Along with the smallness of the Seed came a greater feeling of being safe. One boy noticed the increase in fighting and conflicts on the larger playgrounds with less supervision. Another student commented on the unfriendliness of the new playground initially and how it took two weeks of standing under a tree not having any friends

at all before she finally felt safe, accepted, and included. The safety issue was articulated so well by one of our students who later returned to the Seed as a student teacher and staff member: "This has been a place where I felt really safe taking risks as a child. Then, coming back, when I student taught, I felt comfortable taking risks and trying things. And sometimes they failed and that was okay. Feeling that comfort level here really inspired me to teach and help kids to feel that same comfort level themselves so that they can grow."

Feeling safe at school because it was a small, supportive environment allowed our students to thrive. There was a vibrancy in their school experience that was present from the inside out. The "kid-centeredness" of the school was reflected in the way the children were taught, how they and their work were honored, and how they were allowed to make nearly everything themselves. This honoring was enhanced by the smaller, more intimate physical environment, and it was also present in large part by the way the curriculum was structured and how the teachers conducted their classrooms.



# 13 The Rules Were More about Learning: Strictness and Structure

*“There were obviously rules but the rules seemed much less arbitrary than a lot of the rules in my life now. The rules were more about learning. The rules were so that you would learn...and not hurt people.”*

--Caitlin

A final feature of the environment that our former students addressed in their interviews was the way the classes and the curriculum were structured. Furthermore, they spoke of the differences between the non-strictness of their Seed experience vs. other schools they attended later. Their remarks fell into several basic categories:

- freedom and scope of the curriculum
- movement within the classroom and school
- classroom arrangement
- time indoors vs. outdoors
- how the curriculum structure supported learning
- creative opportunities
- freedom of expression
- stress level of academics
- general school structure
- the teacher as a human being

Once students left the Seed, one of the first aspects of other school environments that was noted was how forced the curriculum felt. As one boy put it, “There were no ‘have to’s’ at the Seed except that you had to restrain yourself from doing violence and stealing things. At my other schools the projects were fun, but they weren’t as fun as at the Seed because they were just sort of forced through the curriculum.” He added, “I had a good 4th grade teacher but she had a rigid curriculum that she had to follow and the students were more restrained.” One of the girls commented that there were very few projects given as assignments and it was rare that she experienced any discussions about the differences in people and diversity issues. One student noticed how much more narrow the focus of his education was after he left the Seed. “Here (at the Seed) it was controlled but not narrow. Public schools tend to have a more narrow focus. You either stay on those narrow paths or you get run off them.”

Another observation was that at the Seed there was more moving around and interacting with everyone. When students left they missed “those reading times where you could get a pillow and go into the corner and read.” They commented on having to sit in an assigned desk and missing the mid-

morning snack break they had enjoyed at the Seed. One student added that at his new school “the classrooms were bare, and didn’t have all the stuff the Seed has.” Even the way the furniture was arranged made an impact, particularly how the desks were lined up in rows at other schools. “It was very structured. You sit there and you listen to the teacher. We didn’t even know the teacher’s first name.”

Some students commented that when they left the Seed they felt like they were inside too much, and not given the opportunities to do much outdoors. In one girl’s words, “There was a strict curriculum. There wasn’t time to go plant. There weren’t the outdoor things.” One boy who did have a chance to be outside after his Seed years said, “There were more things to do outside at the Seed. There were no toys outside at public school, or a garden like at the Seed. There were no open spaces where you could do anything.”

The ability to move around and explore the outdoors was important to many of our students, as was the way in which the curriculum was structured. For example, being able to ask questions and discuss content was preferred over drill and memorization. “Here if we had a question about why something worked in a certain way, we could ask.” One student noted that in her opinion, Seed kids “retained information a lot better, and a lot of Seed kids were in the gifted program” after they went on to public school. The drill and textbook approach to learning was viewed by some students as an ineffective way to learn. “At the Seed we didn’t read out of a book, like ‘This is photosynthesis, blah, blah, blah.’ We actually got to go outside and plant plants and watch them grow.” When one of the girls was faced with memorizing the state capitals, she had this to say: “Everyone knew their state capitals and I asked why do you have to know your state capitals? How is

this going to help you? That’s why they make maps!” Had she been given the choice to learn this content through a creative project, her enthusiasm would have undoubtedly been higher for learning such information.

The amount of art and creative expression available at the Seed was something several of the students mentioned they missed when they left. As one student explained, “The Seed fed your creative self. They gave you an hour every day to be creative and find something that made your dreams.” What they noticed in place of art and creativity was structure and more categorized learning. There were more cliques, more rules, and “more discipline for things we had done badly.” Things were more traditional after they left the Seed, which for most was viewed as less appealing. One student, who studied in China after the Seed, however, noted, “In China there was extreme structure, but the content was always exciting.”

The structure of other settings seemed to limit self-expression for quite a few students. One girl said, “It was difficult to be who I was when I left the Seed. I learned to bide my time and learned to do things at home. I learned how to get around what was going on in my other schools.” While this student figured out ways to adapt to her new school setting, keeping her sense of self intact, others said the limitations affected their self-confidence: “It was better when we could do it our own way. It gave us more self-confidence because we could do it. But when we had to do it the other way we just couldn’t get it, then it lowered our self-confidence.”

Freedom of expression and its connection to independent thinking was addressed by one articulate young man in this way: “At the Seed a lot of free expression is encouraged, provided it doesn’t hurt anyone. In public school you can get hurt by

expressing freely because it may not follow the constraints that are set by the curriculum. It is more formal.” He went on to say, “The Seed is a school that will teach your child to become an independent thinker. I don’t think there is anything better than being an independent thinker. No matter where you move on after you leave this place, if you spend enough time here, you will be able to take in whatever you learn and formulate your own opinions of the world. This school allows you to take in whatever you are being taught or whatever your read and it allows you to examine whatever perspective you have on it. It shows nothing but respect for the differences of opinion or values that one person may have compared to another.”

The use of textbooks, stressfulness of academics, and emphasis on testing and homework in other schools came up in a number of the interviews. For some it wasn’t the actual content, but the way in which it was approached and assessed. Students felt less valued as learners and felt more pressure to pass tests. “At the Seed they don’t emphasize grades, it’s more being and finding yourself. When you go to a public school, all they want to do is check the grades and pass tests.” A few reported more strictness about handwriting and homework. One student said, “It was harder to understand learning from a book. I had to show my work more and I got confused on paper because I’m more of a mental math person.” Another one addressed the issues of having to practice the same thing over and over: “I remember having to do something longer if you didn’t get it as opposed to shorter amounts of time. I remember having bad handwriting and having to practice in enormous volumes. There were plenty of covert ways to help me improve, and nowadays it would be totally different...you can just type. I could type 80 wpm in fifth grade and I never went back. Now computers are what I do for a living.”

Several observed the lack of fun and enjoyment they experienced in their schoolwork once they left the Seed. Getting used to textbooks, as opposed to a more organic, student-centered curriculum presented challenges for a few students. One young woman said, “I had to find a way to teach myself that I knew would work.” Another one put it this way: “When I was at the Seed the only standard type textbook we had was our math book. We used workbooks and were tested at that level. But then I went to public school and I had eight textbooks in my desk. The first day I got my spelling list. I said, ‘What is this? What am I supposed to do with this?’ I remember going home crying and I threw it at my mom and said, ‘You didn’t teach me how to do this.’ We sat down and she taught me very quickly because it was a pretty senseless activity. It was the lack of thinking for yourself that I really missed. It was more like a copy machine had thrown up in my classroom.”

Like these students, others found ways to adapt, adjust, and thrive. They learned how to ride the school bus, change classrooms, deal with much larger numbers of children in a class, and be in schools where the only teacher they knew was their own. They figured out how to navigate in a whole environment that was different, bigger, and operated by an entirely different administrative style. Although this challenged many of them, they managed to make the transition. This was, in large part, due to the teachers they had at the Seed, and their understandings of what makes a good teacher. They noticed the differences in how their teachers conducted their classrooms and approached their students. One student shared her perspective in this way: “When I left, the difference was that I immediately felt as though there was a class and there was a teacher and the teacher was trying to do things with us but there wasn’t the individual pursuit of learning and respect of the child.”

Put another way, "It is kind of like the teacher is way up on the pedestal looking down and pointing down and yelling at the students about something that they did bad. And the student looking up and not being taken seriously. That is something that doesn't happen here at the Seed. Everybody is on the same level even though you know that they aren't. There is still that sort of communication where the students know that it's easier. It's a lot easier and laid back here and everybody is just very connected. It is not that they don't get anything done, they

do. They get everything done whenever they need to and the students learn everything that is required of them. I think that is wonderful."

In the final chapters we will take a look at the wealth of insights we gathered from our students through their memories of their Seed teachers, who were role models of creativity, kindness, and independent thinking. It is clear from each student we interviewed that their teachers at the Seed were human beings who influenced them in ways that continue to affect their lives today.

# 14 Easier to Learn from A Friend: Calling the Teachers by Their First Names

*“The teachers aren’t Mr. This and Mrs. This. You can call them by their first names. That is one really base thing. It makes you feel like you can be my friend instead of just my teacher. They can be both. It is a lot easier to learn from a friend than from someone else that you don’t know as well. The teachers treated us as friends. They didn’t treat us like, ‘Oh, I’m the authority. I say what’s right, even if it’s not right. I say it’s right and everything that I say goes.’ They had reasons behind what they said and explained it really well.”*

--Kate

There were two aspects of their relationships with teachers at the Seed that numerous students mentioned: calling teachers by first names and the ease of being taught by someone who felt like a friend. We were surprised by how many of them brought up this issue of being able to call a teacher by his/her first name, and how different it was for them once they left. Interestingly, many visitors to the school are taken aback when they hear the children addressing the teachers by their first names, thinking it diminishes respect for the teacher. However, in our students’ eyes, being allowed to call teachers by their first names opened up and promoted respectfulness toward their teachers unlike what they found in many of their other school settings.

Our students had much to say about this issue of respect. They clearly felt more respected by their teachers at the Seed, and in turn were more respectful of teachers because they themselves felt so respected. In one

young man’s words: “We always called our teachers by their first names. They would speak to us as if we were a person. And if we did something wrong, of course we would get reprimanded but it wasn’t so severe that you disliked them. You understood. So I guess that is what makes a good teacher. Making it so comfortable that you didn’t have to work at learning, it was just something that came naturally.” Another student addressed the comfort level by saying, “You lose the Mr. or the Mrs. and the kids feel really familiar with the teachers and sense that they are comfortable in the learning environment. The teachers make you feel like they are there for you if you need anything. If they are in any kind of trouble they can come back and talk to the teacher about it instead of not talking to them because you are scared of what they might think.”

They said that the respect they felt for their Seed teachers inspired them to be better

listeners and to pay attention to what the teachers were saying. One boy described it as an ability to “come in and get a feel for what their students are interested in, how their learning styles are and have a feel for the atmosphere of the classroom, as it pertains to the kids. A good teacher can make it appeal to that and then it really doesn't matter what they are teaching. If they can somehow bring together everyone in the classroom and find points of interest, they engage the students.”

Feeling respected and being engaged in learning strengthened the bond between teacher and student. Additionally, a couple of students expressed their gratitude for being able to ask their teachers questions, which was due, in large part, to the comfortable, close feelings they had for their teachers: “Calling the teachers by their first names, let you know the teachers better and allowed you not to be afraid to answer and ask questions because you knew who you were talking to.” The friendliness between students and teachers was seen as a real strength of their educational experience.

Being spoken to as a person was important, and at the same time there was an understanding that teachers were in charge. Although there was a familiarity, the boundaries were clear as far as who would make the final decisions regarding school rules, policies, and practices. One boy said his relationship with Seed teachers helped him feel more at ease with figures of authority. Another student commented that not using teachers' last names made them seem “more like teaching peers, yet they kept the discipline.” One young woman even mentioned how she carried this idea of being a teaching peer with her as she grew up and started babysitting: “I babysit a lot and I always just take myself down to their level and I actually get a lot of response. The kids like me when I treat them as if they are equals, and I learned that here.”

One of the girls even went so far as to say that the first name basis with teachers put them into a whole different category than other teachers they had later on who were addressed as Mr. or Ms. “Calling the teachers by their first names was very significant. I think it was easier and I liked it better because it didn't put them in a whole different category from where you are, because you are being called by your first name and so are they. So you are kind of in the same category. With teachers that you call by your last names, they are only there to teach you. They are not really there to do other things than to teach you. If you call them by their first names, they are also your friend, and not only your teacher, but also your friend. That puts them in the category of not just teachers.”

The category of which most spoke was that of a friend. It was a unique friendship, based on an unusual kind of equality. One student said, “It was like an older friend giving me helpful advice more than a teacher grading me.” A sense of fairness was definitely one aspect of the teacher/student relationship at the Seed. “A good teacher is somebody who is very unbiased. Even if your teachers have favorite students in class, they don't show it. If they make all the students equal then everybody participates on the same level. They treat all the kids kindly and they make sure that everybody understands the highest level that they can. And they get things done! The same student added later, “The teachers weren't up above you, they were with you and we could talk to them as a friend.”

Being able to talk to a teacher as a friend created a personal connection. As one boy stated it, “You could say, ‘How's it going?’ like they were your friend, instead of your teacher. It was not as strict; you were not there with a number, you were there with your name. It was just a really personal kind of environment where everybody knew

everybody really well. And it was just a lot of fun.”

The personal connection the students felt with their teachers at the Seed was, in part, due to the teachers’ dedication to their work and their willingness to see children as individuals: “It didn't feel like it was a job to the teachers that I had here. It was something that came from their heart and they wanted to do. It wasn't like a 9 to 5 kind of ‘Okay, I'm out of here.’ If you needed extra help they would stay. If you were having a bad day they would come and find

out why. And they were really adamant about looking deeply into us and finding out why you couldn't get a math problem or if you weren't being challenged enough. It wasn't like, ‘Oh, sorry this is the second grade and this is not what we do in second grade, tough luck.’ They would try to find other things for us to do at our own level.”

In our next chapter about the teachers, we will examine this interaction more fully, and look at what it was about the teachers and their ways with students that made such a lasting impression.



# 15 Toward the Places We Needed to Go: Teacher As Guide

*“Chemistry with students is what makes a good teacher. A good teacher is one who will get on the floor and play with the kids and help them feel everything they are learning and help them to learn how to trust and how to love. It is someone who can be there to be a guide, and to provide structure if children are not getting it elsewhere.”*

--Emily

There were several other qualities of a good teacher that our students mentioned besides respect and a comfortable relationship with students as discussed in the previous chapter. In their interviews, former students explained how their Seed teachers

- individualized the curriculum to meet students’ needs
- were receptive to students’ ideas
- functioned more as a guide or facilitator than as a teacher in the traditional sense
- gave students a great deal of attention
- made school a fun experience because the teachers enjoyed it themselves

Individualization of the curriculum to meet students’ needs was described frequently. This had to do with how teachers talked to students: “Instead of talking down to you, they talked on your level and were able to explain something in a way that you got it.” Some said their Seed teachers “could get down to the kids’ level and see how they reacted towards things before they pushed a bunch of stuff on them.”

The teachers’ awareness of each child’s level of understanding and the time given to individuals was apparent to many students. One student said, “They knew my background and what I needed.” Another girl commented, “The teachers knew how to reach every child on their own level. They found different ways to actually get kids to learn and instill things that were important to the child him/herself.” They noticed that at times teachers “didn’t grade necessarily on their work but instead would grade on whether or not students were putting a lot of effort into it.” One student remembered his teachers at the Seed making “a special time to work with someone who had a harder time.” Furthermore, the teacher’s ability to work at the children’s level was significant to some students and made a difference in how they responded to the teacher: “The teachers were someone you got to know enough that you trusted them and they knew you enough to trust you. They knew how to work at your level instead of you having to work at their level.”

The ability to identify learning styles, as well as levels, was observed by some students: “The teachers could recognize students’ learning styles and set up the atmosphere of the classroom as it applied to

the kids. Then it didn't really matter what they were teaching." Additionally, one said, "It was very important that you were learning and keeping it, absorbing it. Not just memorizing so you could do the test." Establishing learning experiences that were based on experience rather than just memorizing were part of the individualization that occurred in Seed classrooms.

One last aspect of individualization that came up was the teachers' knowledge base. In one young man's words: "The teachers' knowledge of the subject gave them the ability to facilitate the students' learning. This promoted class discussions to explore how students felt about an issue that may have been current or even historical." Delving into what students thought and felt about issues allowed them to personalize the information and make it their own. In one student's words, "It was important how I learned, and how to take that information to use it later on."

The second quality that set Seed teachers apart from others was their receptivity. As one student put it, "They took personal interest in what your problem was, how you were having a problem, and discouraged everything that was negative. They didn't want people to put other people down for asking questions. In lots of other schools, when you get up higher you become sometimes a little bit embarrassed about asking questions you feel like everyone else knows the answer to. That never happened at the Seed. You could ask any questions, and no one would ever say anything about it."

Listening to problems came up more than once and being easy to talk to went with the listening. Students described their Seed teachers as wanting to be helpful and having a "friendly aura" about them. Teachers at the Seed were "always really nice and they got to know what you could do and what was best

about you." "They were encouraging and understanding, and able to talk with kids and have them understand each other." "They were open-minded and objective." "Seed teachers were definitely more open. If you found something you liked, then you were pointed in that direction."

Patience, understanding, and flexibility were also qualities that contributed to Seed teachers' receptivity. The willingness to be patient and understanding, rather than just be an authoritative figure was recognized as important. Flexibility, "going with the flow," was something that one student remembered. She gave an example of a time she was visiting the school and the teacher set aside the regularly planned lesson to do an activity that drew one student in and made her feel more connected. "It wasn't instructional or structural stuff, she needed bonding time and from time to time it is just what the kids need. You have to scrap the lesson plan and say, 'hey, we'll make it up, no big deal.'"

Along with individualization and receptivity, students consistently described their Seed teachers as serving as a guide, rather than a typical teacher who stands at the front of the class and disseminates information. "They don't really tell people what to do, they just show the kids what to do or what not to do. They teach by example." Another student put it this way: "In going back to the Seed, I think we have been very lucky in that here we combine people who have a great deal of respect for the perspectives of the children they teach, who are also very good at explaining and teaching those children, but go beyond just transmitting basic information. They are capable of encouraging the children to integrate what they are taught into their own ideas and to use information, not just to absorb, but to take it and make it their own and master it. Being able to do that, to my mind, is the mark of a great teacher."

One aspect of viewing the teacher as guide is the willingness to let children ask questions, explore problems, and find their own solutions. "We were able to explore a problem and solve it by mixing and matching possible solutions. We were held accountable in the end through whatever presentation we did for our solutions. Today things at the Seed are still done in this way." She went on to say that she had wanted her learning to be more explorative before, but didn't find it so in other schools. In another student's words: "At the Seed we had more freedom in that we could figure things out for ourselves. We had opinions of what worked. We could think for ourselves and be creative. The teachers made sure that we had the opportunity to learn and the time to figure things out, find our own ways to solve problems, and do things our own way."

In the eyes of several students, the teacher who serves as a guide is "somebody who in some respects fades into the woodwork, and is not the main thing, the center of attention. They move into the background and you don't even realize what they are doing. They are guiding you to be able to learn things or pull things out that are already inside you from the sidelines." They found that the most effective teachers were those who were willing to step back and let children's interests and needs inform the direction of learning. "I think a good teacher is guided by the students and guided by the students' interests. A good teacher doesn't expect us to know everything but to be able to guide the student to the places they need to be so that they can learn more about what they are interested in." They valued having a teacher who was there to assist but not limit learning by having expectations that didn't match the child's.

The word "facilitator" came up in several interviews when describing the role of Seed teachers. As one student put it, "My teachers were willing to let me go about what I was

doing, and was there to simply facilitate our learning, not there to teach us. They didn't force us to understand things. They guided our beliefs because it could be messy without guidance. Guidance led to understanding and we learned with the teacher." Furthermore, "a good teacher is someone who can facilitate finishing a project and closing of things, and learning to do those kinds of things which are difficult for children. The teacher allows creativity, sets guidelines, but holds students accountable at the end."

Personal attention given to students by Seed teachers was frequently mentioned in the interviews. Because classes were smaller, teachers knew their students better. The smaller classes allowed teachers to care for their students more and help them work through issues that arose. "Here they helped us work out our problems with each other. At the other school it was much more like 'If you can't get along then stay away from each other.'" Being available to help students work through challenges that arose and "deal with things" was valued by our students. As one girl expressed, "You weren't scolded here, as far as being put in time out; you were told if you were being inappropriate. They just dealt with everything and explained things. They always explained. That was very important, that you were an equal with them. You knew your limitations but you didn't feel like the teacher was on a power trip with you. That is really important because since I have left the Seed, I have had many teachers who just loved that they had that control over you. I don't think this is necessary in the classroom environment."

Finally, there were numerous students who said their Seed teachers knew how to make school fun and they seemed to enjoy their jobs. "Everything we did was educational but it was fun. We didn't realize we were learning. The teachers did it in a way where we enjoyed ourselves. It didn't

feel like they were pressuring us.” They said their teachers knew how to have fun with the children, and had “some balance between being really strict and just letting the class run wild.” A few commented that they were always doing something fun but were working all the time, and the teachers seemed to be having fun also. “I don’t think there was a single teacher at the Seed who didn’t enjoy their job. They taught us. They didn’t make us regurgitate information. They sat down and helped us learn it. There was nothing that we had to do on our own; it was something that they helped us through. So from that, I learned a lot that I probably wouldn’t have if someone was just making me write down a whole bunch of stuff.”

The enthusiasm for teaching was evident to many students and inspired them as learners. “A good teacher is somebody who is enthusiastic and has a love for what they are doing and a love for whatever they are teaching. And the enthusiasm for what they are teaching will carry forth to the kids.” “The teachers knew their stuff because they loved it and it was like it was good for them to teach us, too. They seemed much more excited about what they were teaching than other teachers I have had. The teachers had their own thing that they loved and they taught it with depth.” The depth at which students were taught made a lasting impression.

Many of our students said that they had good teachers after they left the Seed, although they also said they had some teachers who didn’t seem to be as passionate about their work as their Seed teachers. Their experience with teachers at the Seed, in a sense, set a standard by which to measure good teaching. One girl said, “I had to seek out good teachers and because of what the Seed instilled in me, I kind of made teachers teach me like that.” In another student’s words: “Only a few teachers reached me in

the same way as the teachers here did.”

Their comments about their teachers after the Seed ranged from feeling like their teachers didn’t seem to like their jobs and “were there just to make money” to understanding that because of the difference in structure, teachers were tied to focusing mainly on academics. “The teachers lived under the standards and kids didn’t have much say about how and what to do. There was a greater focus on doing things for the norm.”

One girl shared this insight: “At the Seed the teachers were popular and taught in a positive manner. I didn’t see teachers treating each other with as much respect in other schools.” Her thoughts extended the notion of respect beyond respect for students to respect of other colleagues. The matter of respect (see Chapter 1) came up over and over in our students’ responses to our questions. It included respect for students, respect for each other, as in this student’s words, and also a respect for the learning process in general. One of the students we interviewed put it so beautifully: “In my next schools, I felt as though there was a class and there was a teacher and the teacher was trying to do things with us because there wasn’t that individual pursuit of learning and the respect of the child. So I just had to adjust and become more teacher oriented, like look for what the teacher wants to see, what the scale is in the class. I learned to compare myself to all those factors rather than pursuing knowledge for me.”

The pursuit of knowledge as a deeply meaningful process was something that came up a lot in the interviews. In our final chapter on teachers, we will examine exactly what it was about the Seed teachers that inspired such depth of learning, and what qualities contributed to the learning at the Seed that made such a long lasting impression.

# 16 It Came from Their Heart: Teaching As A Humanistic Value

*“It didn’t feel like it was a job to them. It was something that came from their heart and they wanted to do it. It wasn’t like a 9-5 kind of ‘I’m out of here.’ If you needed extra help they would stay. If you were having a bad day they would come and find out why. They were really adamant about looking deeply into us.”*

*--Andie*

Although caring has been discussed in previous chapters, we believe there is another layer of caring that is worthy of mention, which for clarity’s sake we will refer to as deep caring. Deep caring is akin to unconditional love, and many students felt it from their teachers.

Throughout our students’ comments there were descriptions of how much they felt cared for by their Seed teachers in an unconditional way. “On the first day of school when I was dropped off here and I was two years old, I bit the director because she was holding me and I didn’t want my mom to leave. So I bit her. I know I was two, but it’s kind of cool that you can bite someone and they will still care about you... It is just kind of unconditional trust and caring.” This student’s account of her two-year-old experience serves as a slightly humorous, but nevertheless honest, example of how far a student could go and still be accepted as part of the Seed community. Similarly, other students shared these insights: “No matter what you did, whether you stumbled or messed up or whatever, the teachers were going to love us just the same as they had before. I felt that I was able to fail, in a sense, from time to time because I always knew that those teachers were going

to be there for me. I always felt so loved by all the teachers.” “The biggest difference is that the teachers here care, and it is a loving atmosphere. It is really different from other schools and they help you become what you want to be and should be.”

The sense of caring students felt seemed to reach beyond being concerned about schoolwork on the surface level. As one student expressed it, “They care about your family life, what was going on at home. It didn’t feel like it was a job to them. It was something that came from their heart and they wanted to do.” Deep caring seemed to be present in part because the teachers were compassionate and concerned for their students’ well being, much like a parent would be. As one student said, “They were almost like parents. They cared for me, they loved me, they fed me.” Another student added, “They were someone who made you feel cared about. You knew that what you did, learned, and said was important.”

In addition to the level of compassion students felt from their Seed teachers, there was one other factor that contributed to deep caring, and that was the teachers’ love and dedication to the work itself. Our students mentioned how devoted their teachers were to their work and how dedicated they were

to the process of helping children learn. "It always helped if the teachers were right into their job. If the teacher is not into teaching, then the student won't be learning very well. But all the teachers here really love teaching. You knew they didn't do it for anything else except to help kids learn."

The love of teaching was apparent in several ways. A few students noted that their Seed teachers were constant learners themselves. This included both learning new content, but also learning new ways to motivate and inspire their students. As one student put it, "Everybody is a good teacher here. A good teacher is someone who is dedicated, who constantly wants to learn herself, who is always looking for something new that they can teach the kids and new ways to encourage a child to expand their own knowledge. A good teacher is always looking for new interests and new ways to interact with other kids."

Another way in which Seed teachers' love of teaching and dedication to their work was evident was their enthusiasm, "their love for what they are doing and a love for whatever they are teaching." One student commented that this enthusiasm was demonstrated through the teachers being "energetic about the class and every kid." Another student described their teachers as interacting in a way "that was rewarding so that you wanted to learn more."

Finally, the Seed teachers' devotion to teaching as a their life work came through in their desire to help children integrate their lessons into their very being, to their lives as a whole. Beyond the creative approach to learning, the kindness and caring, and the enthusiasm for the learning process was a deep underlying desire to help make the world a better place by teaching individual children how to just be themselves in the truest sense. As one young man describes it so well, "I have seen many people who are articulate and clear who can explain things very well but would not necessarily be considered great teachers. A great teacher is somebody who can not only get information across but who can help somebody else use that information to become more, to perceive their own goals and become more themselves."

This ability to help others become more themselves is at the heart of the teachers' work, the adults' and children's interactions with each other, and the Awakening Seed vision itself. It comes through in every aspect of the school, as we have seen throughout this study. In the final chapter we will examine implications of this work, for the individual lives of those who have been direct participants in the Seed community, as well as others whose lives have been and will be touched by the words, actions, and ideas of the Seed community.

# 17 Becoming More Ourselves: The Gift of Life in A Community

*“The most important thing I learned was actually something I didn’t learn until much later when I began reading philosophy, and that is the basic humanism we were taught. Everyone in a sense is connected. The most important thing in our lives is to make sure that we act responsibly and help others as much as possible while helping ourselves. We are all in this together. The Seed instilled that mentality.”*

--Aaron

Toward the end of the previous chapter, which was an examination of the study’s final emergent theme, teaching as a humanistic value, a phrase used by one of the students caught our attention. He said the Seed teachers helped the students “become more themselves.” As we thought about it, the data revealed something entirely new that summarized more than anything what Awakening Seed School is all about.

In thinking back over the themes--the community and its members, the way in which each student was honored as a true learner, the internal and external environment, the physical and emotional dynamics, and the dedication with which teachers stepped into their role as mentors--we realized that this idea of helping others become more of themselves was a thread that ran through every section of our study. Every aspect of the Seed program supports the journey for each child, parent, and teacher who becomes part of the community.

Young children become more of themselves as they learn how to play and share with their peers in a supportive

classroom community. As they acquire language and gain confidence in their expressive abilities, their personalities unfold right before their teachers’ and parents’ eyes. Through their teachers’ modeling of how to use phrases such as “It’s my turn,” new worlds of self-assuredness and possibility open up for them. They learn early on that their voice can make a qualitative difference in their own lives and the lives of those around them.

Older students continue to develop their uniqueness and learn how to express it toward others throughout their Seed experience. They find their place as community members and come to understand that they have an important responsibility to help sustain the community. As Aaron states, they realize that “we’re all in this together.” The kindness and compassion they learn to show toward their peers, younger buddies in other classes, and teachers give them practice for the time when they will be more independent, away from the protected Seed environment.

While their children attend the Seed,

parents also experience a deeper awareness of themselves as parents. Through work with the staff they see their child in new ways, appreciating the guidance and support offered by other caring adults who are also invested in the child's well being. Many parents put forth hours and hours of volunteer work for the school with an attitude of service and gratitude. They give to the Seed community through running the annual Halloween carnival, selling t-shirts, creating a stunning yearbook, and organizing various classroom activities. Parents learn new ways to be kinder, more patient and effective stewards of their child's future. They realize that they are not alone in the process of raising a child, and the support will continue as their child grows up.

Teachers, too, are affected by their involvement in the Seed community, especially those who are present for several years. They are given the freedom and support to teach in ways that mean something to the children in their classrooms as well as to themselves as educators. They find satisfaction knowing that they are placing the well being of children first, making a difference in their lives, rather than spending their days preparing them for mandated tests in an uninspired way. The teachers feel happiness and a sense of personal fulfillment, knowing that teaching is their life work, work that has a rippling effect on children's lives as well as the global community of which we are all a part. Teaching together at the Seed helps the teachers remember the value of their place in the world and offers a way to feel that daily they are adding a little more light to the brightness of our future.

In addition to the Seed affecting each of its participants while at the school, we have found that Aaron's idea of being "in this all together" definitely carries over into children's lives once they leave the school. For years we have heard stories of Seed

children who stood up for the rights of others, led campaigns to upgrade cafeteria conditions at their public schools, and organized high school peers to assist with human rights issues in Darfur. Just as they became more of themselves at the Seed, they've realized the process continues and that becoming more of ourselves is a life long commitment. So what exactly does this mean, becoming more of ourselves?

Based on what we have learned from the students who participated in this study, we believe it means learning to listen more deeply to what our hearts are saying to us. It means paying attention to how we feel when we see something troubling, and instead of looking away or ignoring it, choosing to respond. Becoming more of ourselves is caring deeply about the hard issues that others see as unimportant. It is a process of willingness to take risks, to try things a little differently, or go out of our way to put extra energy into a situation that could be altered significantly just through our added presence.

The deep inner work that happens at the Seed influences children and their parents in ways that sometimes go undetected until a few years after they've moved on from the Seed. As we described in Chapter 7 on the Sense of Self, Seed children often grow up with confidence and courage. They frequently exhibit a keener, more focused attention on what is important, both educationally and morally. As their exposure to life's varied offerings expands, they begin to display the fruits of their Seed work. A mother, who was not particularly impressed with her son's behavior throughout most of his elementary school career after the Seed, relayed a story about him. She said how surprised she was recently when his teacher commented that he stood out among his peers for his kindness and patience with a special needs classmate. "Maybe all that Seed stuff rubbed off on him after all," the

mother added. As time passes, parents can see the more subtle positive influences of the Seed, such as showing spontaneous kindness toward those less fortunate or being motivated to help out without being asked.

More and more of our former students, now young parents themselves, call to place their children's names on the waiting list and recommend that their friends do the same. They reflect on their experiences as Seed students and want that for their own children as well. In the words of one of our Seed graduates: "We believe that if our son is led early on to draw his own conclusions, he will be less likely to be limited by the conclusions of others later on in life. We want our son to make decisions in life from a place of empowerment and possibility; a private, decidedly 'organic' education is likely to help lay the foundation for this, and will eclectically blend with the experiences he has later in life. Further, in a more intimate setting, his early education can be nurturing and consultative, which we hope will help him think on a broad spectrum and see greater possibilities in life. We want the world to be full of opportunity for our son; we think that the Seed is the right way to cognitively support such a concept."

Our former students know that something more is happening at the Seed than often meets the eye, and they remember with great love how they felt during their Seed years. They also express how much the Seed has enabled them to be the individuals they are today and how their Seed years helped them not only feel more connected to themselves, but to the global and universal community.

It is understandable why our former students would choose the Seed for their own children, having had direct experience as a child. We were interested, however, in hearing from some of the families referred to the school, who had not attended the school previously as children. When asked what it

was our graduates said about the Seed that convinced them to enroll their daughter, one family had this to say about their experience with the adult version of our Seed students: "It is not so much what the former Seeds said. It is instead what the former Seeds are and what they have become. We admire both the former Seed parents for finding another path to educate and care for their children and the Seeds themselves for the people they are today. The common thread in the three families we know is that they have produced children who are well rounded, well educated, balanced, forward thinking and fun to be around. They credit much of that learned behavior to the Seed and its unique approach. Is it nature or is it nurture? For our little experiment (our daughter) we will not know for many years. But if our children at some point emulate the successes of the other Seeds, we will have done our job and you will have helped us. We are both Midwesterners at heart, actually from the Great Lakes states, and maybe we are looking for something that we both had, a real community of friends, family and people who care. It may not take a village to raise a kid, but we want our children to experience the village in a meaningful way. While the former Seeds have raved about their experience at the school, we hope mostly that the school's contribution will be one that we can say produced the best citizen we could make in today's world."

Our former students' return to the Seed through their children's lives, as well as the friends they are bringing with them, is a growing phenomenon, and one we will observe closely in the coming years. Of all their commentaries made about the Seed, this one is the most meaningful. They value the Seed enough to entrust their most precious asset, their children, in the Seed's care. This speaks louder than all of their commentaries combined.

It is encouraging to know that there are

people in the world, many of them our graduates, who realize there are far more important things going on than high test scores, getting good grades, getting into the best colleges, and amassing material possessions. It is gratifying to see young parents who understand that helping their children be happy, acquire healthy life skills and learning to be okay with themselves in the ever-demanding world must be a priority. Finally, it gives us great hope for our planet's

future that a growing number of parents recognize that the way our school defines the spirit of a child is successful and necessary, not because it's small and private, but because what happens here is a beautiful reflection of how the world can be. It is our hope in telling this story that other schools, both large and small, will find similar ways to honor and educate children, thus deepening and augmenting the work of those who are quietly changing the planet.

# About the Authors

Mary Glover is the Director and Co-founder of Awakening Seed School. Dr. Penelope Denton is a psychologist and an emeritus Awakening Seed Board member. Penelope conducted all of the interviews. Mary and Penelope worked collaboratively on the data analysis and writing.



# About the Participants

Number of girls	27
Number of boys	14
Sets of siblings	7
Attended the Seed for preschool only	3
Attended the Seed through Kindergarten	3
Attended the Seed during elementary years	37
Attending or graduated from college	37
Still in high school or not yet attending college	4

RACIAL COMPOSITION	
Caucasian	29
African American	5
Native American	1
Asian	5
Hispanic	1
TOTAL	41

COLLEGES ATTENDED
Arizona State University
University of Arizona
Notre Dame
Mesa Community College
Hampshire College
Mt. Holyoke College
University of Advancing Technology
Thunderbird School of Global Management
San Diego State University
Stanford
Ohio State
McNally Smith College of Music
Tulane University
University of Oregon
Northern Arizona University
University of Virginia
Dartmouth
University of San Diego
Wesleyan University
Johns Hopkins University
Lewis and Clark College
Pace University
University of Georgia
University of Texas-Austin
University of Colorado