

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **“You Are the Coyote”: Notes From My Visit to Alternative Schools on the East Coast of the U.S. January—March 2013**

Alys Mendus  
Independent Scholar

“You are the coyote,” she remarked as we said goodbye after a three week dance course in Western Massachusetts, “fun, playful, curious, dangerous...always searching for something.” An insightful perspective into my character and my journey within education. I was searching for a best fit with my constructionist, democratic ethics—as formulated over the past eight years within the UK education system—and was now on a three month exploration through progressive and alternative schools in the eastern U.S.

Somehow my inner “coyote” and ideals had hindered traditional career progression but I was still a determined educationalist; labelled as a “free spirit” by my first Head and “radical” by others. I felt that what drove me was similar to many other teachers wanting young children to play and not be under the pressure of exams and grading; to learn by doing and being outside as much as possible. It was just that I stuck my neck out a bit further or was less able to compromise with the system.

The education culture is very different in the U.S. from England, where I have been working. For all U.S. children the

compulsory school starting age is a year later and no one wears uniform. In the alternative school settings I visited all, except some Steiner Waldorf schools, used first name terms or Miss Alys, rather than formal role titles. The schools I visited were open and interested in a U.K. visitor: keen to hear about my background, views on education, understand comparisons to the English system and they were also open to my critique of their setting.

#### **Rural Vermont**

After a long drive through tree covered rural Vermont my lift dropped me on top of a hill, outside an extensive grand looking school house with a large modern sports hall and several smaller one-story classrooms, surrounded by forest. Across the field, covered in a foot of fresh snow, stood a traditional red timbered barn.

Having got over the initial impression of the austere nature of the buildings and atmosphere, I was introduced to a very grounded and down to earth school community. A strong ethos and vision of service and practical crafts alongside excellent academic achievement seemed to

Alys Mendus  
Independent Scholar  
alysme@gmail.com

me tricky to manage. However, as this was a boarding school, service tasks such as the 5.30am milking shift or 7am making-breakfast responsibility was easily made a part of the curricula experience.

This High school—incredibly expensive to attend—seemed to allow for and encourage self-regulation of its students. Perhaps on account of this attitude, every person, staff or student, appeared to see it as a real privilege to be at the school. For new staff and recent graduates, training in “progressive education” was available to gain a more in-depth understanding of the approaches in cooperation at the school; distinct from three other progressive schools in New England.

Students at the school were involved in the way the school ran by doing daily chores; they also took advantage of the range of opportunities and choice they had in their extra-curricula options: from cross country skiing to pottery to ballet to blacksmithing... Every academic lesson I observed engaged students in a variety of ways from a cross-curricular project based approach: to the environment and farming in Grade 9 (Y10), to controversial debates around the U.S. Constitution, to creative use of computers to check students’ work as they compose essays in English. What really made this school special in my eyes was the inclusive nature of its community. Students come from all over the U.S. and the world for 1-4 years. Every Thursday morning the whole school meets for half an hour and sings. Sings at the top of their voices. Everyone joining in; everyone smiling.

### **Cherokee Welcome**

The early spring sunshine shone down on the yurt platform. The children stamped and spun, playing an ancient Cherokee welcome game, their faces wide with delight. This was a usual morning at the democratic Steiner Waldorf and “Art of Mentoring” (see Young, 2010) inspired outdoor school in the mountains and woods of North Carolina.

A family with a vision had bought the land and were developing an eco-community on one side of the hill and on the other, alternative education practices; mostly working with home educating families with teenagers, offering a three-day program of enrichment. During the morning I saw Waldorf elements of spirituality and reverence, recall of the story from the day before, revisiting written work and expanding on the text, and the creativity of students and staff inventing a maths game similar to twister to help with times-tables. The few students there were very quiet, but showed how deeply engaged they were in the curriculum from their one-to-one chats with me. From Art of Mentoring I saw the use of the quiet daily sit spot in nature, the singing of traditional songs and the grounding exercise of Tai Chi. On my tour of the woods I was shown a magical wooden shelter with an old chimney and hand cut table where the weekly parent and child woodland group takes place.

Forest Schools as they have developed from the Scandinavian model in the U.K. are only just beginning to increase in popularity in the U.S. It was exciting to see how the Art of Mentoring approach had influenced this forest session with families completing their own woodland observation journals, as well as the making,

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cooking and sharing of soup on the outdoor fire and explorations of the local environment.

### **Charter School**

One grey, damp morning saw me at a newly built school on the edge of town. A school I had been keen to visit: my first charter school. I knew from chatting to local families how difficult and frustrating was the lottery system for places and the high expectation (10 days) of volunteering within the school, but that they felt it was worth the stress and upheaval.

The ethos of this school was incredibly progressive in its whole curriculum: it was an outward bound Expeditionary Learning school, writing the curriculum with project based learning—which is very different from the UK creative curriculum’s approach as it includes some project work but not as the entire approach (see e.g. Burgess, 2007).

The idea is for real practical, relevant-to-self learning with outcomes and presentations to the public, with the children involved in the planning and direction of a project rather than the whole curriculum loosely linked to a topic. As a charter elementary school, with 5-14 year olds, it teaches all subjects through projects—mostly with an initial science or environmental focus and linked to the state curriculum. It did seem to be more limited to the same topics for each year group than other EL schools I have investigated. However, it was very creative and the students seemed friendly, keen to talk about their work and engaged.

The kindergarten children were exploring dog sleds and had their teacher sitting on a mat attached to a rope with many handles and were dragging her

through the main corridor of the school as I was shown round! Grade 1 were in the process of taking apart everyday machines, so their room was full of computer and old TV parts. The science lab had a large rabbit hopping around and several “pet monitors” in there checking on its well-being at break time. This was the only school I observed which actively used rewards with “star of the lesson” given out in a music class. This seemed to me not only unnecessary but not in keeping with the method of cooperation and intrinsic motivation of EL schools, especially after such an engaging and creative music lesson. I wondered—was this linked to state expectations, or was it just down to the fact it was a less experienced teacher in charge?

### **Manhattan**

The rain is so heavy it is bouncing off the Manhattan pavement as I dodge the big puddles and heaving traffic to enter the safety of an inner city school. It is squished into the small footprint of a multi-story building. Teaching spaces are open plan to make the most of space, enabling a harmonious free flow from class to class and teachers are without offices, working at desks. In some ways this isn’t that radical: many schools are open plan. But here each class did not have an area to hide—they just flowed from working group to working group around an art space in the centre.

This High school had glass partitions and calm music playing. It seemed also to be mostly small groups working with an individual teacher, rather than chalk and talk approaches. It was how they utilised the small amount of space to create a homely, yet working atmosphere—and not too claustrophobic—that impressed me. As I followed the Principal around the school he engaged staff and students, and they

smiled and chatted back. One floor has a full sized basketball court and on the top floor a tiny patch of solace in a rooftop garden, with views towards the Hudson River and Central Park. Homework still happens but the two hours the teenagers receive is about half as much as other independent schools in NY, I am told.

The early years department really fascinated me, led by a lady who, in the 1970's had run a Summerhillian (Neill, 1960) style freeschool for home educating families. She brings a wealth of experience from a democratic perspective and research to support her singing based approach to learning to read. The children write songs and then take apart the words to the initial sounds and scribe the patterns. Being in New York City, in the midst of the pressure to be successful, the school prioritises not pushing children into formal learning too young; and seeks to avoid the overuse of technology in the early years.

### **Simple Beauty**

It's a bitterly cold morning in Rhode Island and I enter the warmth and simple beauty of a state-funded Waldorf inspired Pre-K (4/5year olds) program. This is the first truly multicultural setting I've visited on my trip and the teacher sings transition songs to the children in Spanish and English. I join the children for a snack. We sit around a big table, sing a nonreligious song of thanks and then share the bread the children made earlier in the morning whilst chatting about their lives.

Although school does not officially begin until a child is 5 or 6, to gain funding

for this project the teachers had to agree to meet the state guidelines for 4 to 5 year olds, which seemed to be similar in many ways to Foundation 2 in England. This was a challenge, as the Steiner Waldorf ethos does not include formal literacy and numeracy until a child is six years old.

The staff had been very imaginative and looked at approaches to include the curriculum within their own rhythm and philosophy. For example: having shapes marked out on the carpet with tape and asking children to throw a beanbag into a named shape or walking the letter of the day.

I also saw Reggio Emilia inspired approaches, with children's work on the wall and labels underneath written by an adult inscribing the child's description of the drawing. Before I left I watched a puppet show of spring coming and observed all 25 children totally spell bound and entranced. However, sustainability of this project is complicated. Many families attend as it is their local setting, rather than because they support the approach, so it can lead to tricky questions and differing expectations by parents.

These are just brief glimpses into five of the fifteen schools that I visited—highlighting different approaches to progressive education, with differently aged students and different socio-economic groups. Showing the diversity of alternative schools raises the issue of what defines 21<sup>st</sup> century progressive education in the U.S. Can it open discussion of what we can learn from this for other countries?

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### References

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- Young, J. (2010). *Coyote’s guide to connecting with nature*. USA: Owl Link Media.

### Organisations

Steiner Waldorf Fellowship: [www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk](http://www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk)  
Expeditionary Learning Schools: [www.elschools.org](http://www.elschools.org)  
Sightlines Initiative: [www.sightlines-initiative.com](http://www.sightlines-initiative.com)  
Forest Schools: [www.forestschoolassociation.org](http://www.forestschoolassociation.org)  
Art of Mentoring: [www.artofmentoring.co.uk](http://www.artofmentoring.co.uk)

### Author details

Alys Mendus is a QTS, Steiner Waldorf, Early years and Forest schools qualified educator fascinated by how and where we teach. She has an MA in Teaching and Learning with a special focus on alternatives to rewards and punishments. Her passion for learning more about education has taken her to India, Nepal, China, Siberia, Sweden, Norway, Austria and most recently to the East Coast of the U.S. Since her return she is exploring further what is happening in the U.K. and hopes to work towards a PhD.



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