

Temba school includes meditation,

By Sibyl Walski

Imagine a school with no two days alike, one in which the weather, or a student or a spontaneous interpersonal situation can be the nucleus of the learning for the day.

Catherine Cadden, lead teacher for the Temba School and 10 sets of local parents imagine it into existence every day for 11 children between ages five and 12.

The children and their teachers gather in the loft of an A-frame on a secluded lot in Mount Shasta. The day starts with a meditation circle with the eleven students and the staff members.

The meditation is not just a centering exercise, but a kind of Vipassana meditation, in which they observe what is available to their senses.

This particular day, a train goes by as the children sit in their circle. When it is time to speak, meditation flows into a lesson in deduction.

Cadden asks them what they observed about the train: what direction was it headed, was it loaded or empty, and how do they know?

"It is important," she says later, "that in observation we be clear about the difference between our personal perception and what is the objective reality."

After a few minutes, they break into groups for various other activities.

Some are working on stories, which they will rewrite until anyone can pick them up, start reading and follow the story line with ease, says Cadden. Others are working on art projects.

"They have individual math books because they are all at different levels," says Cadden. But math tends to be integrated with other interests, as well.

A snowstorm last winter presented the opportunity for a physics lesson, in the form of a seven-foot snowman built using snow ramps, and for another lesson in sacred geometry, e.g. the patterns of the universe, in the examination of snowflakes.

A student's interest in insects led to a day of nature study, and another occasion for observing divine symmetry in the patterns of nature.

One day a week is "Wild Day," and is spent outside all day, "learning leadership skills, interdependence and their relationship with the earth."

Later this day, a drumming class turns into a sensitivity session when two or three of the boys chose to play on the stairs instead of participating in the class. How everyone involved experienced the situation is honestly shared without blaming.

Later on, the class will drive over to the Flying Lotus dance studio for a "dance lodge." This concept is based on Hopi and Lakota philosophy, in which humans are an integral part of the cosmos.

Cadden also has background

in ballet, hip-hop, African and other modes of dance. "Dance was my first language," she said earlier. It is clear she is still fluent as she steps onto the dance floor alone.

She greets the four directions and gracefully sets an energy space for what will follow. Then she skips over to the head of the stairs, bows low in greeting to each individual and dances with him/her onto the floor.

The ritual goes through four phases: dancing alone (self), then with a partner (other), then a group (community), then the universe (all that is). The kids really get into it, most of them seeming unselfconsciously at home with their bodies.

Teacher as travel agent

As the lead teacher and so much more, Cadden sees her role as "a travel agent. An educator guides and assists the trip, but doesn't take it" with the student, she says. "I need to contribute to their learning with encouragement and assistance," but the education is their own.

Part of the education this day – and every day the situation arises – is to listen to each other undefensively and to examine honestly one's own needs and "strategies for getting those needs met."

"This is a 'power with' paradigm, not 'power over.' There is

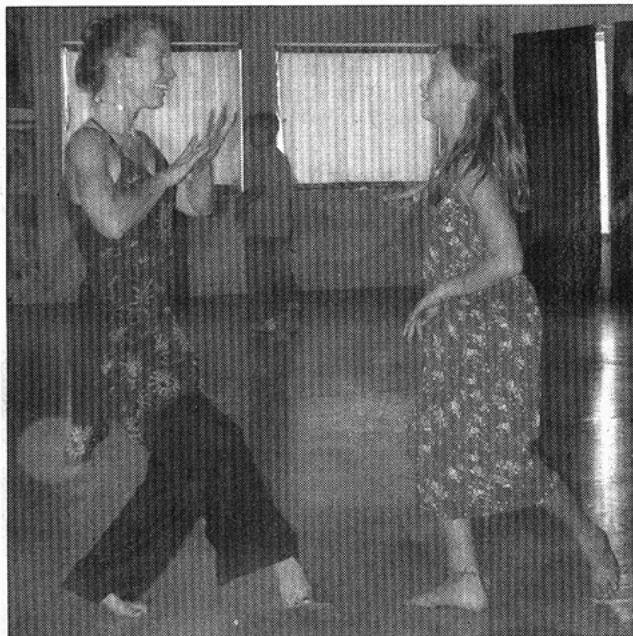


Photo by Sibyl Walski

Catherine Cadden dances individually with each child during the "dance lodge," a weekly event based on Native American ceremony.

dance, spontaneous learning

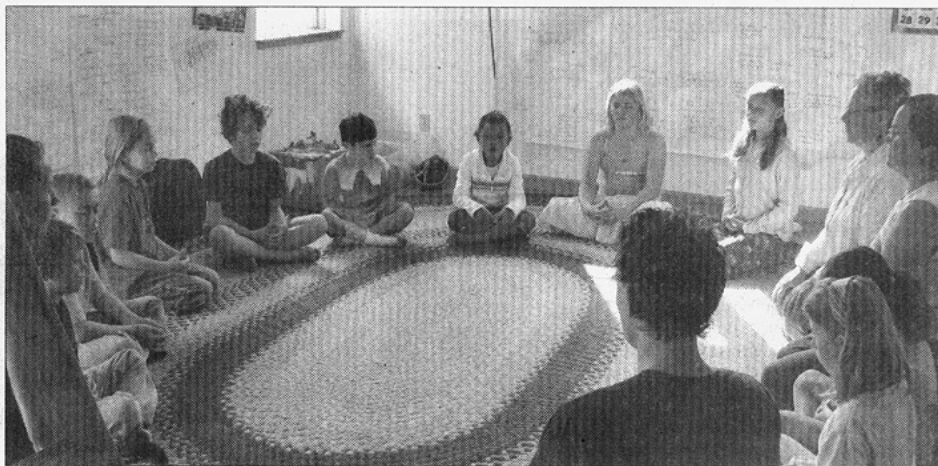


Photo by Sibyl Walski

Temba School starts its day with a morning meditation.

never punishment this way. When we are aware of the level of our own needs we can work synergistically with a group," she explains. "It is always free choice."

What if someone chooses antisocial behavior?

"There is no such thing as antisocial behavior. There are only strategies that do not work, that do not get us what we want."

There is also no standardized testing – "that's really about funding for the schools," she says. Related to it is "the constant analysis, labeling and judgment of children in conventional practice."

At Temba, the students evaluate themselves. "The younger ones see what the older ones are doing and want to do it, too. The older ones see the freshness the younger ones bring to a task and remember to see with the eyes of a child."

"We stay with the intrinsic motivator - the students tell us where they want to go and what they want to learn and their readiness for the next thing". Or resistance.

Cadden tells the story of one student who was finally able to identify his fear at learning more advanced arithmetic skills.

"To him, it meant he was getting smarter and therefore moving away from his mother.

"In other words, he recognized that learning is an individuation process. Once he identified the problem, he was able to proceed."

The other side of the equation is that teachers offer the new material they think the students

are ready for and the students choose to receive it or not.

How does this approach work for them when they have to go on in a traditional school system?

"Students that go on to public schools have excellent communication skills and are 3.5 to 4.0 students, because they know how to use innate skills to take in information and use what is in front of them," she says.

Getting from there to here

Cadden is a woman with a mission - to change the way humans relate - to self, to one another and the universe around them from a young age.

She has been an educator for 22 years. While teaching in the California public school system "I noticed in the micro-society of the schools that they were learning violent modes of communication.

"One day I had an epiphany. What if a school existed where students had a daily practice of nonviolence?"

In 1992, she met a woman who became a mentor, Gloria Cooper, who founded a "sister school" called the New Age Academy in Berkeley.

"It was through my training with Gloria Cooper that the Temba School moved from vision to reality," she wrote later. By 1996, she was developing her own vision.

Today's Temba School is the third incarnation and is evolving with time.

"About the same time, I became involved in Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication philosophy, took a train-

ing and incorporated his principles into the model for the school." She took ten years worth of training and is now a master trainer herself.

That her approach has wider value outside her immediate sphere of influence was confirmed in a phone call she once received from a school attended by a former student.

The teachers watched the boy approach two others who were well known to be in long term conflict. A long conversation among the three ensued, after which the two were no longer at odds. The teachers simply wanted to know what happened.

Part of a larger picture

Cadden actually came up here to write a book, but a former student whose family had moved here first asked her to start up the school again. She is doing both.

The parents support the school financially. Cadden conducts nonviolent communication workshops to make a personal income.

In the last 10 years, she has carried the concept to South Africa, Argentina and Canada.

This summer, she will carry it to five Inuit villages near the Canadian Arctic Circle. A nonviolent wilderness camp for 12-17 year olds is scheduled in Quebec in July, and in November she will go to Afghanistan.

A documentary has been filmed which she hopes will be released in the spring, concurrently with her book, "Peaceable Revolution Through Education." The book's Forward will be written by an 18 year old former student.