

# **MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS**

## **PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF**

**Renee Owen and West Willmore**

**Rainbow Community School**

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Ba Luvmour:

Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at ***patreon.com/remarkableeducators***. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Today we have the special treat of two guests on the podcast—Renee Owen and West Wilmore of the Rainbow Community School. Rainbow, founded in 1977, has been a model for Holistic Education for 41 years. Renee has been the Executive Director since 2007. She embodies all the principles of holistic school administration—

- vision, as exemplified by Rainbow's commitment to professional development;
- inquiry as she facilitated renewed exploration into all aspects of whole child learning and community connections;
- inclusive leadership initiated through the emergent and evolutionary approach of Dynamic Systems Governance.

West Wilmore is Director of Operations for Rainbow Institute. I met West when she visited the school in Portland where I was Headmaster and her sparkling enthusiasm for holistic learning captivated me instantly. Perhaps that sparkle comes from her years as an environmental educator or perhaps from her Teacher of the Year awards, or from the excitement of coordinating the contributions and outreach programs that Rainbow sponsors, or, and this is my best guess, from the joy of participating in the world of holistic learning.

I wish we had two hours for this podcast as these remarkable women blaze new insights and opportunities for all holistic educators. But, alas, we don't. However, there is a surprise for you in this podcast when the dialogue turns to Rainbow's upcoming conference.

You can find out more about Renee and West by visiting the show notes at [Remarkable-Educators.com](https://www.remarkable-educators.com), and by joining us at <https://www.patreon.com/remarkableeducators> as they will be featured in an upcoming newsletter, one of the many rewards available for a small monthly contribution.

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Ba Luvmour: Hi, welcome. It's good to hear your voices. I wonder if we could just start by, I'd love to know just personally what attracted you to holistic approaches in general and to Rainbow and just in a personal sense, what drew you into the great work that you do?

Renee Owen: Oh gosh, I think we have two very different yet overlapping paths there. Do you want me to start?

Ba Luvmour: Well, let's start wherever.

Renee Owen: Well, my path in education was real untraditional. This is Renee. I did not get a degree in education. I was a working artist and living in a really remote place in Southwestern Colorado and ended up...

Ba Luvmour: What kind of art were doing Renee?

Renee Owen: Well, I was designing jewelry for my husband who was who was lapidary and a silversmith. I was painting signs and I was painting T-shirts and I was making beaded jewelry that I sold in front of my friend's organic natural foods restaurant in Moab, Utah in the summer.

Ba Luvmour: Sounds great. It sounds like a really free and easy life.

Renee Owen: If you're going to live out in the middle of nowhere, you have to find some way to make a living. It was an unusual lifestyle, and the closest school would have been about an hour and a half each way bus ride to a little uranium mining town in Colorado, real remote, real rural. My daughter, my oldest daughter was going to be in first grade and long story short, I ended up starting a charter school, a multi-age little tiny charter school, which served the 19 students at first that were in our little valley, our little valley of 250 people, but it was about 30 miles from anywhere else. That's how I got into education. So, that was kind of unusual.

So since I did not have a degree in education, and that school was out in the middle nowhere and the district just kind of let us do whatever we want, I just did some pretty unique stuff with that school. I got drawn in right away to some work with Harvard and the Annenberg Rural Challenge on project based learning and place based learning. And so, we were learning through projects. This school went preschool through eighth grade when we had all the grades built out. I came from a heavy arts background so we were doing a lot with the arts. And so it was just a holistic school because I just kind of did what came naturally honestly.

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Ba Luvmour: The draw is really from just your natural self, just who you are and having an opportunity to just express it and that's just the way it comes through. Is that a good way to say it?

Renee Owen: That's a good way to describe it. Just doing what comes naturally. When you just have 19 Kids spanning, at first it was kindergarten through sixth grade, you're kind of like a family and so you especially do what comes naturally when you don't have a traditional classroom so much.

When my daughter, my oldest daughter was going to be graduating out of that school, we went through eighth grade and she was going to be in ninth grade, I gave a year's notice and just started looking and found this incredible school that was called *Rainbow Mountain Children School* at the time, and they were looking for an executive director and I took one look at it and got that feeling, that shivers feeling of that is where I belong.

Ba Luvmour: How many students were at Rainbow when you first came on as executive director?

Renee Owen: At the time, I think it was 110 approximately. We're double that size now...

Ba Luvmour: So you went from 19 students in the rural Utah to 110 students?

Renee Owen: Well, we were up to about I think 35 or 40 students by the time I left *Paradox Valley School* because a lot of students started coming from nearby towns to go to our school. It became quite popular, so they were being bused in from 30, 40 miles away to go to our little school. But yeah, I went from a very-small school to a small school.

How West came along is interesting because I had gotten some training at a place called Teton Science School. And I'd never hired a first year teacher before, at least not at Rainbow. When I saw that she had Teton Science School experience, that's why I hired her and I'll let her pick up that story there.

West Willmore: Hey Ba, its West.

Ba Luvmour: I know West and great to hear your voice.

West Willmore: I grew up the child of a teacher who was very well loved and respected in my small town community in Tennessee. I grew up in a public school setting. So honestly, other than that setting, I've never really been involved in a traditional "educational setting." So, I

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really disliked school growing up because I did not connect with teachers and did not connect with the way of learning in the traditional sense. It wasn't until I found the geology and environmental science department in my undergrad that I realized that there are other ways of learning and I discovered at that point that hands-on place-based experiential learning was the way that I learned best.

My professor Dr. Potter, my geology professor at the time, he took us outside and I learned about the local geology, the natural history through seeing, touching and experiencing. It was really that experience that I would say guided me down the path of loving learning. As a result of that, every decision I made professionally around becoming an educator had a focus around the natural world first and learning through connecting with your place.

Ba Luvmour: West, did you like me have to go through a period of I just want to say cleansing, that's not really the word I'm looking for, purging perhaps of the earlier public school experience? Did it take any time for you to do that because it did for me?

West Willmore: You know, there were the nuggets of joy and happiness from my public school experience. I think I made a lot of really deep social friendships. But in terms of being recognized as a learner and recognized as an individual, I don't think I received any of that. So in a sense, yes, because I came into myself and was able to recognize how I learned and what drove me and what my passions were once I had connections with teachers who saw me and that wasn't until my undergrad. So, I think once I formed those bonds and those connections then I felt celebrated and I could reach my full potentials. So yes, in a sense, I didn't get what I needed from my public school experience.

Ba Luvmour: Wow, that's beautiful. Where did you go to undergrad?

West Willmore: A small liberal arts school in Tennessee called *Sewanee* or the *University of the South*. It's really known for its amazing 10,000 acre campus. And so that's really where I found my spiritual path too was through connection with the natural world.

Ba Luvmour: Wow. Okay, so how did it hook up to Rainbow then?

West Willmore: Yeah. I left *Sewanee* with an environmental science and geology degree and I ended up at the *Teton Science School* which allowed me to extend my learning about the natural world, and I was able to engage in some theory around education specifically environmental

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education and place based education. That deepened my understanding of the natural world but really intrigued me. It really intrigued me about human development and educational theory. And so I continued to dive deep into environmental education. So also very much an alternative approach.

But fortunately, the year of graduate work that I did at the science school transferred into *Montana State University*, and I was able to finish my master's degree out, and I ended up with a master's in education. So I started down an alternative path of environmental education and came out with an interdisciplinary or traditional master's in education.

Ba Luvmour: That's an unusual path. That's very interesting.

West Willmore: I moved back to the southeast at that point. I had a lot of connections and Asheville because I'd done some seasonal work doing natural science summer camps and environmental science, environmental education seasonal work. I moved back, did some of that work and discovered a position opening at Rainbow, and I actually experienced their May Day celebration. Between that and their philosophy, I thought this could be a place I could work. I applied for a second grade teaching position. And Renee and I realized that we had some deeper connections than just the science school connection. But actually, I lived in Moab, Utah on a commune that she worked on years before.

Ba Luvmour: There you go. That's a wonderful s....

West Willmore: It's an interesting commune. Not many people have ever been out there. So I would say you know, under 1000 people have ever crossed the path out there. It's a small world.

Ba Luvmour: It is. That's great. So West, what exactly do you do now at Rainbow? I know you're not teaching second grade anymore.

West Willmore: No, I taught second grade and then third grade for many years and then moved into various administrative roles. I was the Professional Development Coordinator for a while. Took a little bit of time off, and during that time off, I finished my administrative license through *Appalachian State University*. And now, I am working as the curriculum coordinator. I'm also raising money for our nonprofit. So I'm the annual campaign coordinator or the development director. I am also doing a little bit of naturalist work with the students.

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Ba Luvmour: That's quite a lot. And aren't you coordinating the conference?

West Willmore: Yes.

Ba Luvmour: Aren't you the coordinator, yes. So do you coordinate a lot of outreach programs like that?

West Willmore: A few years ago, we had the idea of sharing our model. We brainstormed many ways in which we could share our model. One of the first things that came out of our brainstorm was let's host a conference. And so, we started with a small piloted conference that we are calling *The More Than Mindfulness Conference*. The focus is education as a sacred art. And that first year, we capped the ticket sales at 50 and we sold out with a waiting list. Last year we doubled that and doubled the workshops. Now we're really pulling from the expertise in the community of Asheville, not just under the Rainbow umbrella, but the mindfulness and contemplative education movement, as well as restorative practices and mindfulness parenting through the mindful lens and other really social emotional well-being practices that are found in Asheville. So we've expanded our workshops to pull from those experts.

And then we also have some experts coming from the state of Washington and the state of Oregon. We have some folks coming from South Carolina as well. So we're just trying to pull through networks, oh, from Vermont. It's been really neat just to see the momentum behind the movement especially in Asheville. And the hope is that we'll continue to pull from our local experts but build into a national, be a national conference for years to come.

So at this point, we're hoping to triple, meaning we're hoping to sell about 150 tickets. We're crossing our fingers that we can reach out to multiple networks, not just our local network.

Ba Luvmour: Well, I know that I've put it out just once in terms of, "here's the event and here's what's happening" and I had over a dozen responses and I didn't put it out to my local mailing list or people I know yet. That was just kind of a general Facebook comment. I know many people who know of Rainbow and know of the conference. So I think the reputation and just the whole intentionality has been great. And just for full disclosure for our listeners, the keynote at this year's conference, the keynotes or the keynoters, which would it be? The key, what? The keynoters I guess.

Anyway, are Josette and myself, and we're really excited about it and we're putting lots of effort into really trying to bring an

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experiential opportunity in the keynote format. So we're pretty excited about that. And we're very, very grateful to you and to rainbow and to just the whole history of rainbow for keeping this alive.

So, let's talk about Rainbow a little bit. Your approach centers on what you call the seven domains. You want to just run through that a little bit? Either of you, please?

Renee Owen: Sure. Both of us. Those seven domains are:  
(1) the physical domain  
(2) creative  
(3) the natural domain, so how we relate and connect with nature, that's an inherent part of who we are  
(4) the emotional and  
(5) social domains - we now know that's of course deeply part of being human and learning  
(6) the mental domain, just more where traditional academics fall  
(7) and the spiritual domain, and it's that spiritual domain that probably especially sets Rainbow Community School apart from a lot of schools that we have just named that for what it is.  
[note: URL reference below]

Honestly, I was just doing some work, West and I both were over the last several days last week with Lisa Miller, who I hope we'll talk about here in a moment. She wrote a book called *The Spiritual Child* and we were meeting with several schools about spirituality and education and its importance. There was a question asked, which was, "well, there's a lot of schools that are doing things that have to do with well-being and they're called social emotional learning or restorative practices or there's creativity, there's working with your creative self, there's work in the natural world. What becomes different when spirituality is named?" And everybody's answer was, that's when everything really comes alive. And so, that spiritual domain is really a key to the other domains in our mind. But that's partly because of the way we were founded. You want to add to that, West?

Ba Luvmour: I'm really excited to hear that because I know, still, I'm working with a group now out of Austin, Texas, Josette and I are to try to develop an accreditation organization for non-traditional schools. Working with the term spirituality is still a kind of tender part of the approach and trying to talk about it and bringing it into focus. So when you say spirituality in education, how does that specifically translate into daily practice?

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West Willmore: That's interesting because I think about how that translates into daily practice from the teachers' perspective and the work that they do, their personal transformation, to show up positively every day for their students so that they can see their students and hear their students. That's very deeply personal but very much encouraged as part of our... people would call them professional development plans. But ultimately, encourage that highly, and we give space and time for that teacher work.

But in terms of what the students do every day or the learners do every day is really kind of a unique cultural experience. When you walk into the classroom each day, it doesn't matter if you're a preschooler or an eighth grader, we have 20 to 30 minutes of uninterrupted time and which we set aside at the beginning of each day that we call a centering time. And it's during that centering time that the community finds deep connection through ritual, through art, through music, through movement, through deep reflective questioning or journaling. It looks different depending on the needs of the group. But that centering practice is I would say one of our deeply spiritual approaches to engaging the inner life of the child.

Ba Luvmour: Great. Renee, I didn't want to take away, you said you were going to mention something about something you learned this weekend, you wanted to make sure that was included.

Renee Owen: Well, I just ended up mentioning Lisa Miller's name. Lisa Miller, Dr. Miller's the head of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University Teachers College. Her life's work has been dedicated, at least for the last couple decades to understanding spirituality within humans. She's uncovered so much research of her own from her own lab and also done a lot of Meta-research, longitudinal studies, cross-sectional studies, all sorts of studies that she's put together. And of course, all the technology we have these days to study the brains through MRI and neurology. It's just undeniable that spirituality is at the core of who we are as humans. It's located all throughout the brain, there are some specific areas that especially light up. We are intensely and naturally spiritual people. As Lisa would say, it is our birthright.

And so when we deny our spirituality or it's compartmentalized or it's only practiced in a certain, perhaps like a religious setting and that's kind of the only place that it comes out, we are really denying our humanity. And that's partly what makes Rainbow Community School so alive and the education here so alive. In fact, that's really what spirit means. It means breath, it means the life. That's the etymology of the word. And so, without breath, you don't have life. And that's why I said that the spiritual domain is the domain that

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really breathes life and brings everything else to life and it just makes everything else go so much easier.

Those seven domains, they're not, you know, for something to be truly holistic, whether you're talking about an educational practice such as ours or whether you're talking about medicine or any other holistic practice, they work together. We don't just focus on the creative domain and then another time of day only on the emotional domain, and then another time of day only on the mental domain. They work together very synergistically and they're layered together ideally all throughout the day. There are certain times that we focus on one domain more than the other like West described centering. This 20 to 30 minutes is set aside at the beginning of the day. But just because we're focusing on the spiritual domain at that time, she mentions several activities that can be done during that time that might be creative or natural or more in the mental domain.

It's that spirituality that helps that integration work together and come alive. Everything's very webbed together. It's not a linear style of education here.

Ba Luvmour:

**It's Teaching Story time.** Briefly, Teaching Story's invite us to see the world with a new perspective, often featuring a wise person, a wise fool, or a trickster animal. It can be humorous, and often have many shades of meaning, shining throughout the story. I have told Teaching Stories for the past 40 years, and I love them, and I have to tell you, each time I tell one I learn much more myself.

Today's Teaching Story is entitled, ***How the Wise Man Created Truth***

Laws as such do not make people better, said Mulla Nasrudin to the King; they must practice certain things, in order to become attuned to inner truth. This form of truth resembles apparent truth only slightly.

The King decided that he could, and would, make people observe the truth. He could make them practice truthfulness. His city was entered by a bridge. On this he built a gallows. The following day, when the gates were opened at dawn, the Captain of the Guard was stationed with a squad of troops to examine all who entered.

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An announcement was made:

“Everyone will be questioned. If he tells the truth, he will be allowed to enter. If he lies, he will be hanged.”

The wise fool, Nasrudin, stepped forward.

“Where are you going?”

“I am on my way,” the wise fool said slowly, “to be hanged.”

“We don’t believe you!”

“Very well, if I have told a lie, hang me!”

“But if we hang you for lying, we will have made what you said come true!”

“That’s right: now you know what truth is – YOUR truth!”

Ba Luvmour: Let's have some fun interpreting this Teaching Story. Become a Patreon Supporter at **[patreon.com/remarkableeducators](https://www.patreon.com/remarkableeducators)**, and you have access to our detailed comments on how this story applies to education and parenting. Of course, that's just our perspective. The fun comes with community dialogue, as the many shades of the Teaching Story come alive. See you there.

Ba Luvmour: I've had a particular interest in the relationship or the, I don't know if the relationship is even the right word, the actuality of the way relationship and spirituality mix. It's kind of hard to talk about them as separate for me, I mean, just as to the point you just made, it's all interconnected. I was looking specifically at interpersonal relationship and kind of going back to people like Buber and Bateson and others of course, and trying to understand how we organize or, not organized perhaps, but integrate or be in relationship in such a way that the spiritual aspects of ourselves are nurtured. Do either of you have any comment on that sort of thing?

West Willmore: The thing that came to mind when you mentioned that the importance of the interrelationship, we have our guiding principles and we have our mission statement, but I think at the heart of what we do are the deep connections, the four deep connections that are really emphasized in the relationships amongst the children, the relationships amongst the teachers, the relationships amongst the parents, the culture of our school. Those connections are first,

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connection to self, connection to others, connection to the natural world and connection to the Spirit. And those are nurtured through everything we do. And so, I think when you as a school hold in high regard connection, not just to the others around you or to yourself, but deeply to something that's greater than you, the natural world and the Spirit, then that's really where I think a deeper meaning and understanding emerges.

Renee Owen:

I think one of the most important things that happens in centering is that it develops such a closeness and a harmony between the students and the teacher together, they breathe together for instance, at least three breaths together, which creates this harmoniousness. They become like one organism. So after that hubbub of the day, of everybody scattered and coming to school through traffic or walking or however they get here, coming in and having the lights low, being in a circle, having a visual focus, candles generally lit, and auditory focus, a bell is rung, and you can just feel everybody's energy come together and calm down, become cohesive. And then taking those three breaths together that even in preschool, a child typically leads. As soon as those three breaths are taken, everybody has breath, like I said, it becomes like one organism and then whatever activity they do, brings them together.

But often those activities in terms of interpersonal relationships are something that has to do with reflecting back one another's feelings. The students get into a place where they become free and able to be vulnerable with one another. They're able to share some of their deepest questions; they're able to share what's going on within their psyches with one another. When somebody shares something like that, you can just feel the shift in the room. Everybody's paying attention. You can feel the compassion and the empathy and the tenderness. Those kind of moments, they don't just end when centering ends, they really permeate and inform the rest of the day, and of course throughout the year, these classes become so close.

When you really understand one another story, and especially like that at the beginning of the day, instead of rushing in the math, math is what we do right after centering by the way, everybody's so focused after centering, it's a great time to do mathematics. You've come together and you shared story together and that's what makes us human. So those interpersonal relationships, the I/thou relationship of we are a We, I am a We, really changes the classroom from the opposite of competition, you know, any competition here at Rainbow is for fun and it's explicitly stated that we're competing. There's not this underlying competition because people are so used to cooperating and being together as one.

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- Ba Luvmour: Sometimes I've been around children who share at that level and the things they share are so intimate and perhaps so challenging that it can be a little bit extreme for other kids to participate in. Parents with cancer or a loved one dies or I've even been around children who have spoken about abuse in the home or things like that. Do you ever get those kind of edgy comments and then how would you deal with it?
- Renee Owen: We do. Fortunately, our teachers, I think partly because of their own spiritual practices and their ability to be really present with the class are very skilled at handling those. Of course we refer to, we're lucky to have a really wonderful counseling department and counselor and we're able to refer to that. But in terms of just those things within the moment, I just recently had our sixth grade teacher for instance tell a story about a student, she had a different centering plan, but a student had come in in the morning and said that his little infant brother had just passed who had some serious medical issue and it wasn't a huge surprise. He really wanted to do a centering for this baby.
- She said, okay, it was something that he clearly needed. She allowed that to be shared with the class. She just was very good at, because of her mindfulness practice, being able to be fairly matter of fact about it and able to ask the student in front of the other students, so would you like us to treat this like any other day or, she had a much better way than I can think of right now of just saying, what you need from us? She kept it fairly simple with this death is part of life. She didn't say that, she didn't philosophize. She said she could feel the other students looking at her like, oh, what do we do now? And she just handled it with a lot of simplicity and empathy and compassion. That way the students just have, that way they're able to share when they have a personal story that they need to tell so they're not holding on to that sort of thing during the day when they really needed or wanted to share something.
- Ba Luvmour: That just touches my heart listening to you and I thank you so much both for the story and for creating that opportunity for everyone involved. How about parents? How do you how do you deal with parents? It's not a usual approach. I know Asheville is a progressive community in many ways, but how do you get the parents involved in the Rainbow community and in the education of their children?
- West Willmore: When you asked earlier how does spirituality or spiritual practice show up in the school, one of the things that came to my mind that kind of launches our school year is, I think, an incredibly powerful opportunity for parents to share about their child. We call this *listening conferences*. It's not unlike a parent conference, except

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that parents know that they have this uninterrupted time to share about their child, their child's story. Maybe it's their birth story, maybe it's the challenges that their child has dealt with or is going through. Maybe it's the gifts that their child has, maybe it's the hopes and the dreams that they have for the child. But to launch the school year with that deeply, that deep opportunity to connect, I think is one of the ways that parents feel seen and heard, and I think builds that relationship between parents and teachers. We call that listening conference.

Ba Luvmour: Who attends the listening conferences?

West Willmore: The teacher, the assistant teacher, and the parents.

Ba Luvmour: The parents of that classroom?

West Willmore: Each individual student's parents has an individual listening conference with the teacher.

Ba Luvmour: Oh, it's not other parents there.

West Willmore: No.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, I understand. I just needed to clarify. So, are there all parent events as well as ways to bring them into the Rainbow philosophy of learning?

West Willmore: Yes. We have song circle every Wednesday in which our amazing music teacher sings with the kids and that is open to parents. We celebrate seasonal cycles and celebrations, all of those celebrations are open to parents. Parents are involved in classroom meetings that happen monthly. Parents are involved as volunteers as I'm sure you know. The campus is open. It's also really important that parents recognize that they are always invited to our centering practices in each classroom and the door's open for them to join. It helps them transition to their work day as well while also connecting deeply to what's going on in their child's classroom.

Ba Luvmour: Do they take advantage of that?

West Willmore: In some cases, yes.

Renee Owen: Then sometimes that'll be used to call together parents for a specific issue or topic, whether it's something that's going on in the world. We had a class of upper elementary school kids that had an issue in recent years where somebody had more than once drawn a swastika

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actually in a couple different places in the classroom. The teacher was not able to identify exactly who was doing that. Instead of it in being a lecture and [saying] “who did this” and “we’re going to punish you or find out who you are”, “this is just so shameful”. She told all the parents about it and asked them to join for a centering that so many of them showed up for. I think it was a couple mornings later she was able to get a lot of parents to come. She had some themes laid out in the middle, words that were important. And then everybody got to share. Several of these parents shared stories of what the Holocaust was and what it meant for them, the symbol and they never had the problem again.

Ba Luvmour: That's great. When you do have conflicts, do you use restorative justice practices or do you specifically learn that or is it just an arising of the natural way of being with children having difficulties?

Renee Owen: It's funny, I've heard that term restorative practices and restorative justice for a few years without actually looking into it until recently. Recently, I learned a bit about it in and it was clear that's just already what we do naturally.

Ba Luvmour: Sure, absolutely.

West Willmore: Ba, I think it's worth noting that because our teachers are encouraged to take the time to work through the social dynamics or work through a societal issue through the lens of how it's affecting the classroom, or really kind of drop into being intuitive and what they can sense that their classroom needs, that time, that freedom really allows for opportunities like the restorative justice peace. I don't even think we realized we were doing it, it was just intuitive. We were just feeding off the needs of the kids. I think that the beauty of time and space and presence really is being able to identify those needs of the kids and to serve the needs of the kids.

Ba Luvmour: Well, when I hear about your teaching core, I mean, it's very exciting. Do you have a lot of turnover? Do you have people who are there for a while? How would you choose new teachers because it's really amazing for your teachers to have such a wide range of abilities.

Renee Owen: Yeah, it's true. We call on our teachers not only to do a lot but to be a lot. I once had somebody ask, what are you looking for in a teacher? And I said, well, they need to be really developed, highly developed in all seven domains. That's a tall order. Fortunately, the school is a bit self-selecting. A lot of the people who are attracted to work here are some extraordinary people. Really, it takes about two

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or three years I would say to really drop into being a full veteran rainbow teacher who really understands the model deeply and is comfortable with her curriculum or his curriculum. So they get a lot of support along the way. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of turnover because that would not work since it takes so long to really drop into the model. Most of our teachers, I need to figure it out, but I'd say our lead teachers have been here an average of about six or seven years on average.

**Ba Luvmour:** That's great. I taught in the graduate school at Portland State here. One of the courses I offered was on burnout or how to avoid burnout. Almost all of them wanted meaning and had lost meaning. These are obviously mostly public school teachers and guidance counselors. They just wanted meaning and relationship and they would have taken less pay and all sorts of things to have that. And without that, the other inducements started to lose their power. Providing meaning is just so, so important.

**Renee Owen:** It's so important. And that's of course one of the core aspects of honoring humans as spiritual beings is the meaning that's in our lives and behind what we do. In addition to that, our faculty have a lot of fellowship time with one another. We center at the beginning of all of our faculty meetings for instance. And often those are quite long. That time, it sounds so unusual in today's achievement culture but that 20 to 30 minutes of the day for centering where the teacher can do just about whatever they want as long as they follow some very basic centering practices, which is essentially just establishing a sacred space, it doesn't have to be productive so to speak, because the most productive thing for that time is to do what is needed and what is called upon and use that intuition.

Same with the faculty. There's open time that they get to be with one another and that we have to work with one another in a way that just honors one another for who we are and builds ourselves, enriches our well and our resource as humans.

**Ba Luvmour:** Well, West, you mentioned that you are curriculum, I don't know if the word is director or facilitator. Are you ever concerned that there's not enough time to get whatever you think the curriculum should be accomplished because of all the time spent in these other areas? I know that you don't see it as separate, but having been an administrator of a holistic school, I often heard, but are they up to grade level in math, are they up to all these academic achievement things. So, do you get that and what do you do with it and how do you reconcile that with the amount of time you need for all the other that you offer?

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West Willmore: Yes. I mean, I'm left and right brained and I think about both of those things. To be perfectly honest, it really comes down to experiencing so many of our graduates. Teaching them, experiencing them at a very young age. Maybe entering second grade and not being able to read for example, or entering third grade and struggling in math, for example. And then seeing them achieve and as well as come into their own identity by the time that they graduate eighth grade, I don't have any concerns. I hold space for parent concerns. I hold space for teachers support. I try to coordinate the curriculums in such a way that time can be saved. I try to really encourage overlap and integration as much as possible so that kids are exposed to the important outcomes and concepts.

But in the grand scheme of things, when we provide opportunity and space for the social, emotional and spiritual development for children, by the time they reach eighth grade, we have learned that they are ready for anything. The data that we have received from the high school is that our kids are over-performing, they're outperforming.

Renee Owen: Yeah, we were very lucky recently. The high school that over 50% of our students go to recently with a little bit of sweet talking, we talked them into sharing, actually pulling out, we went through the list of names, our alumni director did this. Gave them the list of names of our alumni that are there and they actually disaggregated the data and compared their GPAs for instance to the average GPA. In fact, a lot of them are in an honors program and they were specifically compared to the other students in the honors program and they're, on average, I can't remember their GPA was, weighted I think it 3.7 something and unweighted 3.5 something.

I have to say, our admissions process is not to pick just the cream of the crop academic students by any means. We intentionally admit a lot of students that have various differences, various demographics. We give out a lot of scholarships. So families who come from a legacy of poverty, a lot of students who have dyslexia or various learning differences. I have just been so amazed at the students who, I've done a little bit of personal work with, helped them with a writing assignment for instance, and knowing that, there were students that were not what would be in a gifted and talented program, I'll just say, at a public school and then have them go to the high school and be on the honors list and getting all A's. It's happened so many times, I've just been floored by how well these kids are able to produce once they follow the program all the way through eighth grade.

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A lot happens developmentally when they reach seventh and eighth grade. Really, that's the culmination of development the way our model works. We only go through eighth graders, more what happened after that but that's a really important time.

Ba Luvmour: Of course.

Renee Owen: Sort of when it all comes together.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, wow.

West Willmore: Ba, I just want to...

Ba Luvmour: Sure, go ahead, please.

West Willmore: I want to add...Just considering the time and energy that we put on the social, emotional and spiritual development, when the students leave Rainbow, what we've heard from their teachers is that number one, they ask the questions. They are curious learners. They wonder. They ask the big questions. Number two, they advocate for themselves. Number three, they're resilient and they persevere. And so I think those three gifts, if you can leave your eighth grade year with those three gifts then I only see success for you.

Ba Luvmour: It's so great. As a warrior in this field, it's just so great to listen to all of this. Do you have many students who are with you all the way through eighth grade? Do some come in say in fourth or fifth grade? Do you have admissions like that?

West Willmore: We do. It varies depending on what's going on in terms of the climate of the economy. We have a lot of really great public schools in Asheville and a lot of charter schools. So if parents can get on a waiting list or get into a charter school, sometimes they lose kids that way. It's just a lot of varied reasons why we either gain or lose students.

Renee Owen: We have a, I think a fairly typical matriculation and attrition rate for a private school which is about 10% a year, which doesn't sound like much but over the course of, if they start at three years old where our preschool starts through eighth grade, in a class of 20 kids, that's two kids a year changing. But still, by the time eighth grade, in a graduating class of 20 kids, there's usually about eight that have been there since at least like first grade and that's especially a special bond that those kids have. It's really neat when they've been there for a really long time.

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- Ba Luvmour: As a man who has as you know run holistic schools and spoken to many who do, one of the big challenges that's often faced is the financial challenge. Do you depend strictly on tuition? If you're willing to share, what are your income streams?
- Renee Owen: It's almost strictly tuition. We have an annual campaign. West shared that she's development director as well as her many other things that she does. That annual campaign is primarily parents, grandparents, and she's been very successful also in attaining business sponsors. Part of the reason she's able to do that is because we are really a community entity. We serve the whole community beyond our students. With Rainbow Institute, which is the part of our adult education arm that the conference that we give and we give a lot of advice to other schools in town and share best practices. The scholarships that we give and so many students that are able to come here. But also, we just host a whole bunch of things on campus for advocacy groups, activists, education...
- West Willmore: Parent workshops...
- Renee Owen: Yeah, all sorts of things.
- Ba Luvmour: That's great. I can see where that would really bring a lot of people in. Well, we've been at it for a while and I want to make sure that I, is there anything that you wish that I had asked or that you wanted to just say that I've left out in our conversation today?
- West Willmore: I'll just drop into for just a second about the importance of the natural domain and how we hold that in the development of that in high regard. We are a very lucky school in that we are, even though we're in the heart of West Asheville, we have five acres of green space and that's intentional. Additionally, our campus is, even though the office that we're sitting in now is part of a historic home that's on the historic registry, the rest of our campus that has been built in more recent years, it mimics organic shapes and the natural world as much as possible. Green space is really, really important and we invest a lot of time and energy into cultivating beautiful organic spaces. Stewardship and environmental sustainability is something on the forefront of our minds always.
- We've just put a huge solar array on our community building and that's one of the many practices that are environmentally friendly. But, at the heart of the natural domain is a deep connection to the natural world. So you would, if you observed any classroom, you would recognize that teachers hold a lot of space for number one, diving into the natural sciences and engaging in questioning and

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inquiry around the natural sciences. But number two, making time and space for kids to connect deeply with nature. Everything from preschool spending a large chunk of their day outside regardless of the elements, to eighth grade developing a relationship with the tree and learning about that tree through the seasons, through a phonology project.

I just want to emphasize that that's one of the connections that you would find in the heart of rainbow and I think given the state of the environment, when our kids leave this campus, if they can have a deep understanding of the natural world through the scientific lens, but more importantly, a deep connection so that they want to protect it and conserve it.

Ba Luvmour: Yes, it sounds that you understand that the natural place is one of connection of course to our great earth. And that it's really a perversion or a corruption of that natural energy to see it any other way. And so it sounds like you just nurture that just in every single way. In fact, every aspect if you will that we talk about just shows how interconnected all the aspects are. There's a deep spiritual comment of course in what you just said, West, as well.

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This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives, with respect for you and for children everywhere.  
See you next time.

Reference:

Rainbow Seven Domains defined

<http://rainbowcommunityschool.org/about/seven-domains/>

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