

Mother Centers – Creating Caring Communities

The Mother Center movement is an amazing story of how research can spark off a self-help movement. It all began with a research project commissioned in 1976 by the Department for Family Policies of the German Federal Government, which funds an institute in Munich to carry out research on youth, children, gender issues and the family. The research project was to address the issue, why parent education programs were only reaching a small segment of the population: middle class, education oriented families.

I was a young sociologist, had just gotten my degree at the Frankfurt Johann Wolfgang Goethe University and was looking for a job. Coming from the '68 student and subsequent feminist movement, I was looking for a way to make a difference. This research project held special interest for me and I moved from Frankfurt to Munich for it.

What was my motivation? As a leading lesbian feminist activist I had keenly felt that something was lacking in the women's movement. We were basically all the same type of women: educated, career oriented, independent. We represented only a section of the spectrum of women's lives, and yet we claimed to be speaking in the name of (all) women. I instinctively knew that a women's movement that was based on such a small window of the reality of women's lives, was bound to be limited in its effect. I was interested in the lives and viewpoints of the women who had made the opposite choices to mine: who were married, had children and were housewives. The research project seemed to me a perfect opportunity to get into dialog with these "other women".

I stood pretty much alone in this interest and orientation and indeed was attacked quite heavily by my feminist peer group for my resulting engagement in the Mother Center movement. To this day I often encounter puzzlement why I as someone who does not have children of her own am so keenly involved in mother's issues. On a personal level I think it has been a way to widen, balance and enrich my life experience, and politically I am convinced that it is the maternal voice the world needs.

Our research team took an action research approach. We let the respondents define the issues in their own words and we mirrored back to them their own potential for taking action towards solutions. We did not ask the families we interviewed what they thought about parent education. We asked them what they would consider support in their situation as young families. Parent education was not on their list of priorities. My colleague, Greta Tüllmann, and I put together the Mother Center concept out of the results of this study. The concept developed from listening to young low income mothers. Our feminist background of claiming public space for women (I was one of the founders of the first women's center in Frankfurt) as well as our activist background in the student movement, where we believed that research needed to lead to practical action, definitely also played a role in this process.

We convinced the Family Policy Department to fund 3 model Mother Centers for 3 years and we found and coached the initiators of the first centers in 3 different locations in Germany. During this time Greta and I and other colleagues accompanied the centers and documented their experiences. Next to the scientific report we put together (which landed on the shelves of bureaucracy like many research reports do), we initiated and supported a process that turned out to be pivotal to the grassroots spreading of the centers and to the creation of an international Mother Centers movement: We supported the women of the first centers to record their experiences in their own words and we found a popular publisher to publish this Mother Center Story book. This created the movement. Women all across Germany and beyond read the book, were inspired and initiated their own Mother Centers in their own communities. There were two basic responses: "This is it!" and: "We can do this too!"

In this section you will find many texts that describe the concept and the process of the development of the Mother Centers into an international movement with over 850 centers in 20 countries world wide.

The Mother Center movement and magic is the result of the work of countless inspired pioneers who believe in and put their life's work into recreating community under contemporary conditions. It has only been able to come about because of these collective efforts and because there is a kind of archetype resonating in souls across the planet for community parenting and for caring communities.

My own international background has surely played a role in the spreading of the Mother Center movement beyond Germany. I simply feel at home in international settings and was very active in linking the Mother Center movement to international events, groups, movements and networks. When we originated the Mother Center concept, we were not thinking beyond the situation of German housewives. Over the years, however, it turned out that the concept resonated with community women in many different situations around the world, that it was a kind of global historic grassroots response to the deterioration of community, which is happening world wide. The creation of the Mother Centers International Network, mine, (www.mine.cc) was a logical response and reflects this development.

The Mother Center movement is alive and growing and developing in many directions. In Germany many Mother Centers grew into Intergenerational Houses and are at the heart of the Federal program and network "Mehrgenerationenhäuser". In Slovakia they are developing into "Academies of Parenthood". The Mother Centers are still spreading, the movement is still growing. The potential of the Mother Centers is huge and will further unfold and be carried forward by future generations.

<http://monikajaeckel.com/wordpress/2009/08/17/mother-centers-creating-caring-communities/>