
Affirming the Essential Tasks of the First Seven Years

~ Nancy Blanning

Celebrating one hundred years of Waldorf early childhood education is as daunting as it is exciting. These years have seen countless children nurtured and nourished through Waldorf early education. Our classrooms have provided time and protection to allow the wise developmental plan children carry within themselves to unfold.

One hundred years is a long time. Is the way we understand children still valid? The world has changed enormously during that time. Today, the fast pace of life, technological orientation, stress, and concerns over how we will keep up and be prepared for the future are pressing. Are we negligent in not introducing elements of academic study in the kindergarten? Mainstream kindergartens are emphasizing more and more academic instruction, eliminating play to give time for this academic push. How will Waldorf-educated children catch up? How will they keep pace with others in this competitive world? These are questions we must consider and respond to by looking deeply into what we understand as essentials of childhood.

Rudolf Steiner was not a theorist. He did not create theories of how he thought children *should* develop. He was an observer. He deeply and devotedly observed children (see Peter Selg, *The Therapeutic Eye*). His intention was to see and understand how children enter from the spiritual world into the earthly domain to find their way as strangers in an unfamiliar land. How is it that the incarnating child learns to become a fully developed human being in body, soul, and spirit?

What do we understand “education” to be? This English word comes from Latin. The prefix *ed-* means “out”; the verb *ducere* means “to lead, to draw, to bring.” Joined together, “educate” means to lead or draw out what is already inside the human being. Steiner observed that there are inclinations and capacities—both gifts and challenges—already present within each human being. Our task as educators is to support the unfolding and out-flowing development of what the child has brought from the spiritual world to realize pre-birth intentions.

Steiner describes that children accomplish this task through three particular activities. They **take in experience through their senses**—the physical

senses of touch, life/well-being, self-movement, balance, smell, taste, vision, warmth, and hearing. They digest and integrate these experiences through **imitation** and **play**. Steiner emphasizes in all of his pedagogical lecture series that the bedrock of early child development in the first seven years is imitation and play. These are the child’s primary modes of learning until the **birth of the growth forces** (also called etheric forces), which have been dedicated to healthy growth of the physical body thus far, of which the change of teeth is one sign.

The 1907 lecture *Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science* gives a representative description of the important development in the first seven years, which Steiner emphasizes in other pedagogical lectures as well.

“With the physical birth, the physical human body is exposed to the physical environment of the external world. Before birth it was surrounded by the protecting envelope of the mother’s body. What the forces and fluids of the enveloping mother-body have done for it thus far must from now on be done by forces and benevolence of the external physical world. Before the change of teeth in the seventh year the human body has to accomplish a task on itself that is essentially different from the tasks of any other period of life. In this period the physical organs must form themselves into definite shapes; their whole structural nature must receive particular tendencies and directions. Growth takes place in later periods as well; but throughout the whole succeeding life growth is based on the forces developed in this first life-period. If true forms were developed, true forces would grow; if misshapen forms were developed, misshapen forms would grow. We can never repair what we have neglected as educators in the first seven years; just as nature causes the proper environment for the physical human body before birth, so after birth the educator must provide for the proper physical environment. The right physical environment alone works on the child in such a way that the physical organs correctly shape themselves.

“Two ‘magic’ words indicate how children enter into relationship with their environment. These words are **imitation** and **example**... Children imitate what

happens in their physical environment, and in this process of imitation their physical organs are cast in the forms that thus become permanent... Physical environment... includes ... everything that can be perceived by their senses.”

The profound understanding presented here is that the impressions coming into the child through the senses are imitated not only outwardly, in ways we can see, but also inwardly. The outer experiences resonate inwardly and affect the formation of the body’s organs. Hence, we want to provide children with the most health-providing experiences possible.

“If we place ourselves in the soul of a child relative to the environment and realize how every spiritual impulse is absorbed into the whole being—how [in] every movement of the hand, every expression, every look in the eyes of another, the child senses the spirit in the adult and allows it to flow in—then we will also perceive how, during the first seven years, another being is building itself on the foundation of the model provided by heredity.” (*Essentials of Education*, lecture of 4/19/1924)

With the release of the etheric forces from inner physical growth and maturation, signaled in part by the change of teeth, things change; and the child becomes ready and open for the academic expectations of the school years. But until this time, “the child does not really form solid, contoured concepts; to be sure, the child remembers a lot but does not retain its memories in concepts; actually, intelligence does not yet appear.” (*Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms*, lecture of 9/18/1920)

Steiner related that these growth forces are released in stages, first from the head region by about age two and a half.

“This change can be recognized externally by the emergence of an exceptionally vivid memory and wonderful imagination. However,... children continue to live by imitation, and therefore we should not attempt to make them remember things we choose. At this stage, it is best to leave the evolving forces of memory alone, allowing children to remember whatever they please. We should never give them memory exercises of any kind, otherwise, through ignorance, we might be responsible for consequences we can see only when viewing the entire course of human life.” (*Soul Economy*, lecture of 12/29/1923)

What consequences are being referred to? To call upon these growth-forces for memory pulls them away

from organ building. The degree to which the inner organs grow and mature in the first seven years is what we carry into the rest of life. This organ-forming is only accomplished in the first seven years and cannot be changed or “made up for” in later years.

“We must also realize, however, that despite the preoccupation of children with their processes of growth, everything we do around them nevertheless makes deep and distinct impressions on them... we must not forget that everything at work within the child’s soul [in thinking, feeling, and willing] after the seventh year was directly involved in the process of building organs up to that age. This means that until the seventh year, the impressions coming from the outer world directly affect their physical constitution—the lungs, stomach, liver, and other organs. In children at this age, the soul has not yet become free of the physical organization, where it is still actively engaged. Because of this, all of the impressions they receive from us through our general conduct have decisive effect on their future constitution of health or illness.” (*Soul Economy*)

We are urged to take these statements deeply to heart. For the child to receive health-building sensory impressions and to have the growth forces protected from being prematurely directed to memory and academically-designed activities is a mandate given to Waldorf early childhood educators.

Now to consider play. If imitation and example interact so deeply with one another, this is also true of **play** and **imitation**. **Play** uses imitation as the gift through which children digest, express, and make sense of their life impressions. Along with imitation, play stands as an essential in the Waldorf early childhood classroom.

Rudolf Steiner describes that there is “a larger, higher self” within each human being.

“When we reflect upon this we find something that is exercising a special kind of formative influence on the child [from within] ... Where do we find that which acts upon the child as a higher self, as a higher entity that is part of the child, yet never enters into [the child’s] consciousness? Strange as it may seem, it is nonetheless a fact that this begins to be manifested in purposeful, well-organized play. In the child’s play activity, we can only furnish the conditions for education. What is gained through play activity stems fundamentally from the self-activity of the child, through everything that cannot be determined by

fixed rules. The real educational value of play lies in the fact that we ignore our rules and regulations, our educational theories, and allow the child free rein.

“What does the child do when left to their own devices? In play, the child experiments with external objects in order to find out whether or not they respond to his own activity: [the child] generates an act of will. Through the way in which the external objects respond to the operation of the will, the child learns from life, if only through play, in a totally different way than normally follows from the influence of another personality and his pedagogical principles. Therefore, it is of primary importance that we introduce a minimum of the rational into the child’s play—the less rational and the more imaginative element in the play, the better... To a certain extent, play activity is an important factor in education for our whole life.” (*Self-Education*, lecture of 03/14/1912)

Further observations about supporting soul-nourishing, capacity-forming play encourage open-endedness with no fixed rules or expected outcome. Play wants to be allowed flexibility and spontaneity. Children are constrained by being given fixed concepts and artificially created materials or toys that have conceptual or academic intention behind them. The child comes into earthly life to learn how to be a human being—how does one live life? What does one do?

“In reality, we should not allow the children to do anything, even in play, that is not an imitation of life itself... We must make it a rule only to let the children do what is an imitation of life, even in play. This is extremely important.” (*The Kingdom of Childhood*, lecture of 12/29/1920)

The benefit of play opportunities as described above come to fruition and observation in later life.

“... we also know that the child imitates when playing. Basically, the urge to play is not totally original; things that the child perceives in the environment are imitated. The unprejudiced observer will observe soon enough that imitation lies at the basis of play. But every child plays differently. . . The way a child plays, especially at ages four, five and six, goes down in a certain way into the depths of the soul as a force. . . what constituted the special character of the child’s play goes down, as it were, into the hidden recesses of the soul. But later it reemerges in a particular way. It comes back between age twenty-five and thirty, which is the time of life in which we must find our way into the world; it is also the time of meeting the outer world

and learning from experience and destiny. Some will fit in readily, others less readily. . . It is necessary to gain an overview of the totality of human life to see how the sense of play reemerges between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. In that way one will get a picture that is artistic in nature, and one will know how to guide and direct the impulse to play in such a way that it will make a difference. It will give the child something for much later in life.” (Unpublished lecture given in Utrecht, 02/24/1921)

Numerous times in these quotations, “the birth of the etheric” is mentioned. We understand that when the etheric/growth forces have accomplished the forming and maturation of the internal organs (which includes not only the metabolic organs but also the brain), these forces are released to take the next educational step. This stage, usually called “school readiness,” is signaled by many changes. One sign is the replacement of baby teeth with the permanent ones. Other signs are maturation of facial features, a lengthening and stretching of the body, change in posture, gross and fine motor dexterity, emotional and social maturity, and so on. The confirmation of school readiness relies on a whole picture of these factors, not one alone. Do these various aspects of the child come together to offer a collective picture of readiness? (Please refer to WECAN publications *From Kindergarten to the Grades and First Grade Readiness* for more detailed discussion.)

Here we are challenged with making a sensitive discernment. It is such a happy situation when a child shows mature development in body, emotional and social life, and eagerness to move on because their early childhood tasks have been completed. Sometimes the collection of readiness indicators is uneven or inconsistent. What to do then?

Observations made by Audrey McAllen, creator of the Extra Lesson therapeutic support for children, can help to guide us. She directs our attention to **consolidation** of readiness indicators. She explains that important consolidations occur from age five to seven.

“It is of the greatest importance for the future of our pupils that the five-to-seven-year stage of development is consolidated. At this stage, the capacity of creative play begins to wane because the formative forces have changed their activity and are now engaged in the overall growth of the body, bringing its threefold harmonious structure to completion. The children now want to exercise their limbs in work and in gaining

bodily skills. They need activities which absorb and direct their energy into their bodies. They should not have this stage of their development arrested by entry into school and by being faced with learning, however ideal and artistic it may be. This puts a heavy responsibility on our Waldorf kindergartens to provide the older age group with the right facilities, as without them the children become rambunctious, a sign that has often been mistakenly attributed to 'school readiness'... Brain growth at age seven is one of the biggest [growth] spurts. Remember that the child's matrix is shifting from environment to knowledge of the world. This is the time when child development specialists who base their theories on Piaget's work, such as Pearce, Hymes, and Elkind, believe that it is appropriate to introduce formal academic instruction, and not before." (McAllen, "School Entry and the Consolidation of Developmental Processes," in *First Grade Readiness*)

Abundant time for experiencing the world through sensory impressions that do not overwhelm, for imitation, and play are essential to give children a strong footing for entering into life. Each of these aspects is more vast than a single article can describe. These thoughts fortify our appreciation of the importance of imitation and play and of allowing children time to satisfy the developmental mandate of their kindergarten years. ♦

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