
Focus—*The Foundations of Literacy*

Planting Seeds of Learning in Early Childhood

~ Michelle Gullage

In the Waldorf early childhood classroom, the seeds of what comes later in academic learning are planted long before formal instruction begins. These years are devoted to play, movement, imitation, and relationship—with nature, with one another, and with the world itself. Language development emerges not through direct teaching, but through rich experiences that shape the child's body, imagination, and sense of belonging.

The young child experiences the world with openness and trust. Rudolf Steiner identifies this as the natural orientation of the young child, describing how until about the age of seven, children live in a receptive state where they perceive the world as fundamentally good. This state is temporary; the doorway gradually closes as the child approaches nine years old. In this precious window of time, early childhood teachers work primarily with the will, modeling gestures, speech, and qualities of being that children naturally imitate. To introduce academic instruction too early risks cutting short this formative period, depriving children of the chance to root themselves in the love of language, in their bodies, and in their relationship with the world.

Play in these years is not a diversion but a foundation. Through play—and even through the necessary experiences of boredom as they approach six and seven—children deepen their capacities for observation, perspective, and wonder. What a critical juncture this is in their development!

The importance of holding off formal academics until around age seven is supported not only by Steiner's pedagogical insights but also by contemporary research. A Stanford-led study reported in *The Washington Post* found that delaying kindergarten by one year led to “a reduction in inattention and hyperactivity by 73 percent for an average child

at age 11, and virtually eliminated the probability that an average child would have an ‘abnormal,’ or higher-than-normal rating” for such behaviors. This underscores the developmental value of allowing children the time and space for play, wonder, and gradual awakening to the world.

Steiner emphasizes that imagination and creativity, awakened through play, are essential forces for later intellectual life. Likewise, time in nature provides lessons of immeasurable value: patience, rhythm, curiosity, and a sense of interconnection. In the early childhood years, what children need most is not academic content, but the freedom to gradually awaken to the world around them.

This becomes even more crucial when we consider children who face developmental obstacles. For children with anxiety, sensory processing differences, ADHD, or autism, early childhood offers a vital opportunity to strengthen their sense of self and belonging in their own bodies. To press such children prematurely into abstract academics can be counterproductive, even harmful. Too often, remedial work later becomes necessary for those who were hurried past this stage before they were ready. Steiner himself warned of the dangers of over-intellectualization too early in life, noting that education must unfold in harmony with the child's physical and soul development.

In my own experience of working in mixed-age kindergarten up through third grade, I have noticed this: children who arrive from conventional early schooling or lower grades often lack the bodily awareness and confidence of their Waldorf-educated peers, and often lack the ability to easily access their imaginations in free play with peers. This raises an urgent question for us as educators: how do we help parents truly understand the importance of providing

this foundation for the children? What does readiness for first grade really look like, and how are we effectively communicating this? How do we preserve the integrity of childhood in a culture that increasingly seeks to accelerate it?

The answer surely does not lie in earlier academics, but rather in slowing down the acceleration and holding space for childhood itself—an antithesis to the pressures of our age. By honoring play, nurturing imagination, and cultivating a child's deep relationship with language and the natural world, we provide the truest foundation for intellectual and academic growth.

This is what first pulled me to the Waldorf early childhood classroom some sixteen years ago—being able to provide a foundation from which a child can continuously harvest in the years ahead—and what has brought me back again after three years in the lower grades. The tender holding of this stage of development is too precious to let slip past us. Attempting to give a set form to something not yet ready is very much like stamping down soil over a just-planted seed, which needs air to circulate in order to germinate.

Early childhood is a time to plant seeds of curiosity and wonder, so that when the intellect does awaken,

it can unfold upon ground that is steady, confident, and whole.

We have to find ways to continue to remember this and hope that all of us become passionately enlivened in the work that we have before us. ♦

Recommended Resources

- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*
- Steiner, Rudolf. *Practical Advice to Teachers*
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Kingdom of Childhood*

The study referred to was reported in an article by Valerie Strauss, “Delaying kindergarten until age 7 offers key benefits to kids: study.” *The Washington Post*. October 7, 2015.

Michelle Gullage is in her twenty-fourth year of teaching, with fifteen of those years in Waldorf kindergartens. Since 2017, she has been part of the Orchard Valley Waldorf School community in East Montpelier, Vermont, where she brings warmth, flexibility, and a deep love of the outdoors to her work with children.