

The Children's Oasis
A kindergarten teacher finds new pathways
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This article was originally published in Erziehungskunst, a journal for Waldorf education published by the Verlag Freies Geistesleben. The author makes a strong argument in favor of small groups rather than large ones. This is an area we have not previously explored in this newsletter, and the editors would welcome your comments.

"Here! Here's where we live!" Lea broadly gestures to her father, whose professional career keeps him traveling quite a bit, that this is her small kindergarten. It is noon now. She is standing with him in the middle of the kitchen, which is beautifully outfitted with wooden furniture. If you go around to the left, you come back to the entrance. This is where the small street lies, and where her father had crossed the brick steps, climbed up through the wild garden, and proceeded through the ivy clad glass doors into the Children's Oasis.

The muted light of the entrance room welcomes the guests. Colorful children's chairs and two comfortable wooden benches encircle a festive wreath newly decorated to mark the season's bounty. The walls are decorated with art created by both young and experienced artists.

The outer and inner rooms are symbolically divided with a low, arched door, framed by wrought iron. The adults must duck down, and readjust themselves to the child-size dimensions. One passes by the play store and an old oak chest which has often played the part of stage to puppet plays, in order to reach the family dining table. The long narrow table is surrounded by a church bench and twelve brightly colored chairs. The room is bright and receives much sunlight, since large glass doors open to the garden's southern exposure. Directly turning the corner one finds the kitchen once again, which has entrances on two sides, and here we find Vivianne standing with her father.

They are peering into the so-called living room, which has already been tidied up after the afternoon play. "I love to work at tidying up", states four-year-old Helena. The front of the room houses the dollhouse; in the middle the large rocking horse uses the carpet as its pasture. Crouched in the half-round bay is the fairytale table encircled by little stools, behind which many toys on shelves stand waiting for the children to choose their favorite.

Lea takes her father by the hand and pulls him towards the rocking horse. She pulls herself up, rocking to and fro, first on one leg and then the other, then with no hands at all. All this before her father can reach for her, except that she's already hopped off, pulling her father with her into the adjoining bedroom. At this moment, the dolls are resting on the "rose sofa" and in the carved wooden farmer's bed. The dolls, very well cared for by their doll mothers and fathers, are serenaded and rocked to sleep with harp and xylophone. Already Lea has jumped back to take the hand of her mother, who has been closely following behind the two of them.

The other parents have begun to arrive to pick up their children. I now close the door after the last departing guests and stand alone in my small homemade kingdom. It's almost three o'clock. I arrange and organize what is left, and reflect over the day's events. More important than the daily worries is the thankfulness for all that has been achieved and the feeling that small children do not belong in kindergarten groups as large as 25 (as I previously believed). The small child must develop his sense of self in order to awaken as a human being, children are not as sheep part of a herd, nor are they schoolchildren, who can assert themselves in a group. They still need the intimate meeting of the "I" to another "I", thus groups should be no larger than ten as a maximum.

Exhausted from the day, I climb the stairs to our apartment above the kindergarten and sit down for a cup of coffee in my living room. This is where both parent evenings and the Advent garden take place. This is also where St. Nicholas is expected to arrive, followed by the Angel and his servant Ruprecht. They arrive from the heavens via our garden steps. This is also the place where the children put on the Christmas plays, when it isn't possible to hold them in the old church in the village.

This project, the "Children's Oasis," is a continuation of my ideas regarding the life of a childcare group. Previously I had held my work to the principles set forth by Pestalozzi: institutional care should resemble the home environment as closely as possible. A new possibility emerged in my mind: Why create a detour via the institution in order to create the semblance of a home? Why not bring the children directly into my home?! At this same time, the downstairs apartment in our house became available.

We began in the summer of 1991 with ten small children in our house at the outskirts of Dortmund. On advice from Youth services, our work would be denoted officially as "neighborhood after-care help". This would provisionally insure our ability to function. I never imagined that "smallness" would be met with so much approval.

It soon became necessary to file the appropriate state papers and fight for the approval that would become the basis for operating our Children's Oasis, and making it a permanent reality. It took two long years, before we could realize our dream of a Children's Oasis. During that time, we even closed and conducted our work in other quarters, in "exile", so to speak. We finally reached our goal, and the Children's Oasis, which had almost evaporated into a desert, met all the requirements to officially open and provide its water of life.

Parenting: There are No Recipes

The owner of a children's boutique is selling off her stock and closing shop. "I'd rather sell jewelry. I just don't have the nerves to deal with children!", she says. The manager of a bed and mattress shop complains: "I've had it up to here. Whenever a family comes into the store with their children I have to watch as they let their kids to jump on the beds with dirty shoes! The parents just stand by and say nothing. If I say anything to the parents, they are insulted and leave, and I'm left with no sale at all! "

It's no longer a secret that we have lost the instincts that prior generations possessed regarding the correct raising of children. Now we must consciously attempt the often difficult task of learning how to determine the right course of action in any circumstance. This does not apply solely to the parents; we as educators and anyone else who deals with children are included.

The most important task of child rearing is that of creating a new understanding of the human being. We need to develop a new pedagogical approach that is not based on preconceived "recipes" e.g. this action will produce that specific outcome. We must attain a new knowledge regarding the human being by looking inward spiritually. Then we will meet each situation presented to us with a creative solution.

The smallness of my kindergarten mean individuals cannot avoid each other. Everyone is not only personally responsible to the other, but is dependent on getting along with the other. In a world intent on maintaining distances, teachers and parents need to counter this distance by demonstrating responsibility and developing discipline; otherwise the endeavor won't work and our small enclave will succumb to disarray and destroy itself. Some parents will be unable or unwilling to undertake such a task, and will abruptly end their involvement. This can leave behind a bit of storm, which will rock this boat in which we are all sailing. A strong hand at the helm is necessary if we are not to lose our course.

For the most part, little time is spent discussing organizational topics during the parent-teacher class meetings. Instead of undertaking a pedagogical study course, we jump right into a specific theme. My hope is that this will stimulate the parents to become creative and grow to an understanding themselves,. The parents also hold their own study groups, where they strive to understand the content and implement it in their own lives. The priority for me lies in ensuring that parent education becomes more than a presentation of Waldorf pedagogy.

It is equally important to me that the teacher is consciously objective, yet deals with everything on a personal basis. Through her active involvement in life, even extending into the sphere of the family, capabilities should be awakened within the parents that bring them to new insights in child rearing. I would like to see both the soul and spirit become enlivened through various stimuli so that we reawaken the capacity for intuitive knowing and activity. To act appropriately according to the needs of each situation and not because of externally imposed rules or formulas: that is the goal!

The home visits I make as part of my work with the parents offer a much more intimate portrait of the family. These are not just scheduled as routine yearly visits. When problems occur, I might spend a longer period of time with a particular family, offering both advice and a plan of action. This develops a trust that permeates the atmosphere of our small kindergarten.

A New Karmic Relationship Begins

When parents make an application to the kindergarten for their child, we hold our admissions interview at the family's home. The most important aspect of this meeting is that it forms a new karmic relationship.

As the parents have already applied quite a bit earlier, I usually request that they drop by and visit us at the kindergarten. This way they will be able to judge the level of their own interest, as well as leaving enough time for everyone to get to know each other, and the child can gradually grow into our group. This method offers new parents the experience of our kindergarten life: how I guide the children and how we live with one another, the character of each day, the way in which each day gives birth to the next, how we live our days in preparation for our next festival, and the celebrations themselves. This flowing throughout the year is found in our activities, some of which are more inwardly focused, others of which create an outward gesture; some activities even take place beyond the confines of this house. New parents will surely receive much stimulation and encouragement from this, even before they formally enroll, and of course the children will, too.

When the time arrives to make a formalized admission (based on pedagogy, rights, and economics), I set up an evening appointment at the home of the parents. Usually we sit in the living room, with the child in question asleep in the next room. We go through the child's biography, although short for such a young human being, still quite symptomatic in detail: What sort of pregnancy did the mother have? How was the birth itself? Were there any complications or childhood diseases? When did the child first sit up, walk, talk? When did the child first refer to himself in the first person singular, if the parents took note of these things. Through the inner eyes of the parents and the teacher, these questions form a specific picture of the outer as well as the inner persona of this human being. Often for the first time since birth, a picture of the child emerges in this fashion.

The karmic situation of both parents is also called into focus, for example: "I was still teaching in school, my husband drove me each morning, I was not feeling at all well during my pregnancy" or, "When I was pregnant my boyfriend and I split up, this was truly a burden for me, although I was doing well physically, mentally I felt like I was undergoing a real test."

After delving into the parent's lives we must find a way to cross over into the subject of finances and practical details of the kindergarten. The last thing is to sign the agreement of admissions. I try to raise

the mood and create a festive evening. I am well aware of my responsibility here, and feel called upon in the same way a godparent is called upon at a baptism. I step aside for a moment, as helper of the child and family and reflect: "May this evening, where many private thoughts have been shared, remain as a shining star in our consciousness, even if in the future gray or black clouds stretch across the heavens."

Sometimes we see destiny quite clearly: We speak about the coming of this child to our kindergarten. Then, as in a dream, words call out from the child's bedroom that we cannot comprehend. What we do know this: Everything was heard, and there we are all in complete agreement!

Birthday Celebrations at Home

I do request, when at all possible, that we celebrate the birthday of a child at his or her own home. The other children are brought to the birthday child's house during the normal kindergarten hours, and then picked up again. The rhythm of the morning is similar to that of the normal kindergarten day, except in this case the birthday child's parents and the teacher have chosen the activities for the celebration. For example, we visit the common garden, or jump rope, or play ball. Perhaps we will make some candles in the backyard, or work with clay on the long kitchen table, or we could even have an Indian celebration and craft our own feather crowns followed by a Buffalo hunt in the woods.

The parents themselves prepare the birthday cake and lunch. The teacher guides the celebration from the background, showing how out of a few ingredients a meaningful celebration is born. She also shows that ten to twelve children are capable of behaving like considerate guests, playing cheerfully and with great amusement without wrecking the apartment.

For each season, each child, and each family the birthday celebration is unique. The rhythmic birthday games and later, the birthday story during circle time, retain the continuity of the event as does the congratulatory verse:

*Out of the light we are born,
Out of the light-filled heavens reach,
Coming down onto earth,
To stand steadfast.*

When both father and mother actively participate, rather than observe the birthday ritual, the festive circle becomes genuine.

Creating a Play Space that Stimulates Fantasy and Independence

I previously spoke about the work that we do with the parents, and that it should lead to their own experience of creativity. In terms of the child, such creativity is a given; unfortunately the behavior of the adults sometimes hinders rather than supports this.

A typical situation illustrates my point: I want to start with the circle play when a small, cheeky girl interrupts me and begins to perform a finger-play instead. I hold back, and allow the spontaneity of the child's activity. Or, during eurythmy, a child dives so deeply into the eurythmy movements and gestures that it seems to flow "through" him. This results in a spontaneous independent action that loses its context with the group. Apprehensively I look toward the eurythmist, watching for her reaction to this. Will she be angry and pull the child back into the line's order? Or is she as excited as I am, and can she build upon this by extending the activity to accommodate this behavior? Can she respond to this spontaneous expression of life within the child?

It is very important that the kindergarten is carried as an artistic work. That is what stimulates the children. You will then find them living in their element. Improvisation can be found everywhere as their

mode of expression: in their music, using instruments as well as their voices, in role play, as in the puppet play which takes on many forms, in circle games, and in the story circle.

Learning to Serve the Community

"I *will* sit where I want," a girl recently told me, while pushing another child from his seat so she could sit next to her little friend. Thus the fragile order present at the table was destroyed.

Children today are very willful. It is very important that one start early, to see that this will is cultivated, as you would any talent or virtue to see it come to fruition. If one proceeds from a false sense of freedom, and allows the will too much self-determination, then one will have spawned a wild growth. The will then becomes more and more used to pleasing the "ego", and the parents begin complaining that their child won't listen, is too hyperactive, etc.

Another child will call out, " You can all keep drawing; I will begin to clean up." Here we see evidence that his will has become oriented towards a goal that will also serve the community. Or take Simeon: He is at home standing by the street with a Michael crown and sword ready. People are walking by. The little knight stands up, threatening all with his sword and shouts, "I could do it, but I won't!" He is aware of his strength but uses it as a virtue, oriented inwardly instead!

These days we find communities threatened by the emergence of the individuals' assertion of their own personality and will desires. In a small family-like group, a milieu is present that is grounded in community. This milieu provides an antidote to the anonymity of the large group,; individuality in the small group forms the basis of togetherness. This is true for the family, yet the fact is that many parents do not seem to have the time or the inclination for this sense of togetherness.

We must also consciously work against the trend of signing up for additional aftercare or activities for the children when the kindergarten day is over, particularly if they are not directed to the particular child. Too many activities leads to activity stress: afternoons are spent taking the children to ballet, early music education, gymnastics, swimming, riding, the circus, child art classes etc., not to mention group or one-on-one psychotherapy sessions designed to deal with the results of rhythmic disorders such as stress and fear. The usual answer is a radical dismissal of all after school activities. As Janna exclaimed to us, "Oh, too bad, we have to go to gymnastics again! We never get to really play!"

Another therapy to combat egotism is the celebration of festivals for both young and old. The preparation and the celebration unite the community under a common goal. Those with stronger personality traits often exhibit the tendency to become antisocial, thereby threatening to split community. Instead they will find creative outlets for their energies in the festival. Above all, one must offer enough stimulation, so that those that express the greatest anticipation for the festival find nourishment for their strengths and are given assignments that tap into this enthusiasm. If the festival is successful, everyone happily enjoys this feeling of community. What we remember is: Together we have all experienced something special. This is what binds us and shines forth into our daily routine. The ability to transform our daily life to the level of a celebration is truly an art form; a community spirit emerges and a group of diverse people unites.

As an example, let us look at this year's summer festival. The theme was "The departure flight of the birds". I begin the festival by asking the children, "Would all of the birds like to fly away and search for the Bird King?" "Yes", they all cheered, and with this our festival and adventurous trip to the Bird King began. In a large garden field near the woods all of our little "birds" received a feather dress made from brightly colored silk scarves and a beak (this was the concern of the mother and father birds, so that we actually formed a few bird families.) We taught the birds how to fly, peck corn, and to swallow water. This was followed by the Bird's Wedding, and afterwards the nest building and egg laying, which was again followed with the hatching, slipping out of the egg, and the final flight from the nest, over the broad

fields. Exhausted, the birds finally reached the castle of the Bird King; now they all landed together. The King of the Birds came out wearing his large feather crown, and sporting enormously long wings. He carried a golden book in his hands, greeted his flock, praised them and began to tell them a story, the fairy tale of Jorinde and Joringel. Finally he presented each of the birds with a single white Swan feather, and then the festival transformed itself into a feast.

Everything that was part of this festival - the colored scarves, the beaks, the feathers and everything in between - had been created in the preceding days and weeks under the watchful eyes and by the very hands of the children.

The Forest Kindergarten

We actually have a second kindergarten. It is a house on the edge of town, whose land crosses over into part of the woods. The owners have been very generous. They allow me complete access, as they do not come home until noon or sometime in the afternoon.

Little by little the house becomes filled this morning. More children are being brought here by their parents than usually come to our kindergarten. On arrival most of the children spend their time drawing or playing. I am baking bread with them. Some of the children also would rather go outside and play first thing in the morning. To accommodate this, we set the table outside under the tall trees, or in the valley barn. After everyone has cheerfully tidied up, made his or her trip to the bathroom, and breakfast is ready, we find ourselves well ordered and together once again. We gather together small log stumps for stools, using the largest one as a table, and serve everything from the picnic basket. We hold hands and sing, competing with a forest full of singing birds. The children always have large appetites, and because the mood is so cozy; we are never in any hurry!

Afterwards we follow a particular path into the woods. First we meet our neighbor's geese and chickens. The song, *Fox, you have stolen the Goose* comes to mind, - are they all still there, are they alright? We look in the coop, searching for feathers, take a quick peek into their nests; - are any eggs to be found? We never forget to close the gate, and always bring a stick, because geese sometimes bite! We count them all; not one is missing.

Now it's time to go into the forest. We dip into the stillness of the green. A toppled tree becomes a train, plane, car, motorcycle and tractor. We run uphill a bit. The forest is tall and dark once again. There is a steep embankment next to the path, where we will find our dwarf houses. They have been ruined by the long winter, and the dwarves have not yet returned. They have spent the winter living deep within the mountain, tending their gemstone caves. They always return during the spring, which means that it is time to rebuild their houses with sticks, leaves and moss, not to mention sweeping the path, caring for the garden, and removing all the leaves from the water basin formed by the tree roots.

Then we go back down, straight across the forest, towards the nymph named "Rushfoot". She is combing her long hair in the glittering sun. We are standing at the fishpond, observing her from a proper distance. The sun plays on the water while we listen to the rushing sounds. We walk along the stream; here and there bridges and harbors are being built. These are activities that children love.

It is time to return for lunch. A few of the mothers and fathers are walking towards us through the woods. They heard our singing. Through the Dragon's gorge we go, where at Michaelmas the dragons are slain with self-made swords! We climb over the toppled tree trunks and see the spot where the Easter fairy races through the wood to awaken all the plants and animals. Here is where we pressed our Easter nests against the roots and searched under the leaves for acorns and beechnuts. Those that had begun to sprout we took home to transplant. Already they have grown into real trees, leaves and all. Oh, and there's the hollow, where we rode our sleds last winter.

Our cook is standing on the porch, waving her wooden spoon at the children, admonishing them that lunch has long been ready. Shoes are placed neatly in the entrance hall, the children take off their outer wear and wash their hands, and soon the happy group is sitting - a few school children more, a few less kindergartners - all around a large dining table. When lunch is finally over we improvise to accommodate the afternoon nap. I read a brief story while the children snuggle up on sofas and clean carpets, in the playroom, the doll house, or in the beds. One hour later, the children are picked up by their parents. I clean up whatever has fallen into disorder during our stay.

It is important to me that the idea of the forest kindergarten does not detach itself from the life of our Kindergarten, but embed itself within the normal flow of our domestic life. In the field of sense experiences, I find that the woods, the garden, or the meadow offer far more stimulation than any well equipped playground. Where else does one have the chance to experience such things?

I don't use the forest kindergarten as a place where the children can romp around to excess. They are already quite settled and harmonious whenever we go into the woods. The forest offers them impressions in a very different way than we would find for them here in the house. There, everything is imprinted with an artistic intention. Here, through their play, the children develop a feeling of understanding for the natural world. The perceptions, stimulations of nature, and whispering of the elemental forces, may be used in their later life, as a gift of vitality and knowledge. This will only occur if next to the child the adult stands as a guide and mediator. As Rudolf Steiner says, "Nature is round the young child, too. . . But in its life of soul-and-spirit the little child derives nothing from Nature. The little child has to get something from Nature by coming into relation with human beings with whom it can experience Nature in common." (Rudolf Steiner, *The Younger Generation*, Lecture 2, pg. 15. Anthroposophic Press: 1967)

Conclusion

"Who are you, you little being? Oh, so *that's* what's inside of you? That's who you are, and this is what I have to uncover about you." The child answers silently to the best of her ability. She reflects her talents and abilities as well as her weaknesses: "I am *that*. *That* is what is inside of me. You want to draw it out of me. . .you want to tidy me up!" One can hardly do this in a large group, but the child will love you, just for the effort.

The smallness of our kindergarten makes it possible for a child to feel he can "lead." The educator stimulates everything from the background, continually surveying as they sort things out externally. In groups of 20, 25 or 30, I must remain the teacher who feeds their impulses, and "guides their way."

The nursery school child is not yet equipped to handle groups. Without help and organization from the outside, this child is not yet able to play and create within a large group. In terms of socialization, little children are still solitary beings. They mature with every human encounter, in time becoming beings that can assert themselves within a group. The important life affirming encounters within the smaller group work to deepen and hold this relationship. In this way, the small group serves the child, and the future, best.