

The Philippine Waldorf Initiative on Early Childhood

Bella C. Tan

In 1992, a handful of caregivers in an orphanage in the mountain province north of Manila met for a three-day orientation on the principles of Waldorf education in early childhood. This initial meeting led to the forming of a playgroup for the children of the biodynamic vegetable farmers in Quezon City, Manila. In 1993, another orientation was conducted among families living on a sugar plantation on the island of Negros. Along with a series of public lectures, and short workshops, these small activities served as seeds for the currently expanding work in Waldorf early childhood education in the Philippines.

In July 1994, the first Waldorf kindergarten began in Quezon City, now part of the Manila Waldorf School, with ten children. By 1996 the number of children had grown to sixteen.

In 1997, the Manila Waldorf School opened a toddler-adult program to educate parents and caregivers. This program began with seven toddlers, each accompanied by a parent or a caregiver or both. Occasionally, both parents would attend. The adults make dolls and learn different crafts such as knitting, crocheting, and embroidery, while the toddlers engage in free play, drawing, and beeswax modeling. Both adults and children share a morning circle of songs, verses, and rhymes followed by a simple but health mid-morning snack. The morning ends with puppetry or storytelling.

To date, the Manila Waldorf School has two kindergarten groups with a total of forty-two children, and two toddler-adult groups with a total of twenty-four children and their parents or caregivers.

Interest in Waldorf early childhood education has spread to other areas in the Philippines. The Cebu Children's Garden, on an island south of Manila, now has thirteen children in kindergarten and has begun a toddler-adult program.

In the northern province of Isabela, the owner-teacher of a small private kindergarten enrolled in the three-year part-time training in early childhood in Manila, sponsored by the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens. She has decided to slowly transform her kindergarten into a Waldorf-inspired initiative. In the process, she has lost a few of her enrollees whose parents were seeking an early academic program for their preschoolers, but despite this setback, limited material resources, and the objection of her family, she continues to adopt more and more the Waldorf way of working with the twenty children currently in her group.

In southern Manila, two sisters discovered Waldorf education through their use of anthroposophic remedies for their families. They became students of anthroposophy, have enrolled in the three-year part-time training, and have begun a small playgroup at their home with eight children of relatives and friends.

One member of a prominent family who owns a leading national TV network has pursued Waldorf education for her own two sons. The company pre-school has now gotten rid of the computers, which had been for the children. The teachers who attended the first year of the three-year part-time training have become aware of the need to observe and know every pupil in their charge in order to work with them more effectively. They have also adopted regular faculty meetings and parent meetings.

This August, 2000, this same corporation requested assistance from the national Waldorf initiative group in the Philippines (RstEP) in setting up a nursery for employee children, infants and toddlers up to two years old. In this nursery, mothers can continue breastfeeding beyond their maternity leave and periodically spend some time with their children during the day. The nursery is meant to be an extension of home, providing the children with a gentle, loving environment, as well as caregivers who will relate to these children in a manner appropriate to their age and level of development.

A number of other private groups and organizations want to learn more about Waldorf Education. These include Catholic schools and day-care centers, helping to care for physically abused and abandoned children, and young mothers and pregnant women concerned with parenting and childcare. These need to be addressed soon.

Some Learnings from the Toddler-Parent/Caregiver Program at the Manila Waldorf School

After a few years of teaching four- to six-year old children in the Kindergarten of the Manila Waldorf School, it became clear that by this age children have often experienced inappropriate care and treatment. We found that their parents and caregivers were well-meaning but were often misinformed, so we began our toddler-adult program to begin to educate the children's parents and caregivers.

The group of children and adults meets two mornings a week for two hours. During the first hour, the children engage in free play while the adults learn crafts and make dolls and toys for the children. Experience has proven the importance of engaging the adults in meaningful work to set the mood for the children's imaginative and creative play. It has been very obvious that once the adults resort to merely sitting around watching and chatting, the children remain idle themselves, or become cranky.

In making the dolls and toys, the adults awaken to their own creative potential. Through observing their overly tight knitting or crochet stitches, they can recognize how tense and uptight they have been and can begin to loosen up and breathe properly. The caregivers feel empowered when they realize they can create beautiful dolls and toys that they originally thought could only be bought. They become patient, appreciative of what they can create, and tolerant of their mistakes. They learn how to use their time productively instead of just watching television or listening to loud music over the radio while taking care of the children.

A feature of Philippine family life is that full-time and live-in caregivers (yayas) are hired to look after the children at all times, whether the parents are home or not. The yayas significantly influence the life of the growing child. Thus it is important to properly orient and educate them as much as the parents. Discussions on childcare and parenting are also held as part of the program. The topics include: nutrition, childhood illnesses, managing fever, daily rhythm and play.

Through the experiences in the toddler-adult program, the parents become more informed about Waldorf education and can see whether or not they can harmonize their lifestyle and concept of education for their children with that of the Waldorf school community.

The toddler-adult program serves as a gentle stepping stone for the toddlers to move on to the regular kindergarten when they turn four years old. Familiarity with the school environment and the morning's rhythm helps reduce the children's separation anxiety once they are ripe for kindergarten.

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When I was a young teacher and attended my first Waldorf teachers' conference in North America in 1973, there were about 12 Waldorf schools on the whole continent. In those days each new initiative was welcomed warmly and treasured. Now that we number about 300 schools, early childhood programs and new initiatives, we sometimes feel like the Old Woman who lived in a shoe and had so many children she didn't know what to do. Reading Bella Tan's description of the step by step development in the Philippines during the past eight years reminded me so much of our own wonderful early years when each new growth felt like a miracle.

Just as working with young children enlivens our own youth forces, helping Waldorf education grow in "young countries" can rekindle our own spirit. I have worked with Bella and her colleagues in Manila three times, and each time I have come away deeply touched by their enthusiasm and dedication to Waldorf education and anthroposophy. - J.A.