

The Education of Early Childhood Educators

Report from a Retreat for Colleagues in Early Childhood Teacher Education

Susan Howard

"Remember, you are the preparers of the path for those young souls who wish to form their lives in these difficult times." Thus spoke Herbert Hahn to Waldorf teachers and kindergarten teachers in Germany many years ago. These words continue to inspire our work in Waldorf early childhood education throughout the world in today's "difficult times".

In this light, those of us who train teachers can be seen as the "preparers of the preparers". How can we support those who wish to take up the work with children in today's world? What qualities and capacities do they need to develop? What are the essential experiences and elements of an anthroposophical training? What do we actually mean by "training" in the context of lifelong self-education?

Fourteen Waldorf early childhood educators offering training courses in North America came together for a four-day retreat at Sunbridge College in mid-June to explore such questions. This was the first time such a meeting has taken place, made possible through grant support the Waldorf Early Childhood Association received from the Waldorf School Association's Teacher Education Committee and from an individual donor. The resulting study, discussions, practical sharing, and joint exploration were profoundly nourishing and stimulating for all of us.

Looking toward the future of early childhood teacher education in this new millenium in North America, we asked, "What are we experiencing in today's children? In today's kindergartens? In the teachers? In the parents? What are they asking of us as early childhood educators?" A few impressions:

- In the midst of fear and social upheaval, that we help the young child experience that the world is GOOD, worthy of trust. How can early childhood educators help children experience goodness, the work of the Divine, in the world of nature and in the human world? How can we provide children with a true ground of inner and outer security?
- That we offer our loving attention, interest, and understanding for who they truly are and are becoming. The attention deficit disorder many children suffer from may actually be the lack of appropriate loving attention, interest and recognition from the adult world around them. How can we deepen our capacity to perceive and understand the child?
- That we offer continuity of care as the basis for forming strong human relationships, a protective sheath, a kind of extended family in a culture where community and family forms are breaking down. How can we provide such continuity? Waldorf education offers the school-aged child one class teacher for eight years, but in the early formative years, the child has many different caregivers. Is there another way to approach this?
- That we honor, respect and support their parents, becoming true partners with them in a new way. Are the boundaries between home and kindergarten too impenetrable? What do parents need in order to meet the needs of their children? How do we create new forms of community?
- That we are willing to actively change ourselves to meet the needs of today's children. In our efforts to overcome our own weaknesses and to develop new capacities, we provide a climate for the child's imitation. Children today are often contending with great obstacles to the incarnation process. How can our own self-education provide the context and ground for their development and self-education?
- That we provide a warm, joyful, active, life-filled environment. How can we become more conscious of how each activity in the kindergarten is supporting the attunement of the child's soul and spirit with its physical body? If early childhood

education is essentially a bodily education, do we need to focus more on the lower senses of touch, life, movement and balance? How?

Responding to these questions involves deepening our capacity to perceive the child, to perceive and work on ourselves, and to collaborate with others to create an environment worthy of the deeply religious attitude of imitation of the child. What kinds of early childhood training could best prepare us for this work? Our early childhood training programs currently offer anthroposophical study of the developing human being, artistic activities, and practical methods courses. We discussed new approaches, including the following:

- **Greater emphasis on practical, domestic work or “home making,” and on the archetypal forms of handwork:** farming and gardening; house building; wood working and carpentry; textiles—sewing, knitting, and weaving; leather work; clay modeling and pottery, and metal work—from blacksmithing to jewelry making. Such experiences involve the schooling of the will consciously and artistically. They also allow the early childhood educator to engage authentically in “real, practical life in forms worthy of the imitation of the child,” the task of the Waldorf kindergarten, according to Rudolf Steiner in the *Kingdom of Childhood*.
- **Deepened artistic practice as a basis for schooling capacities and for self-transformation.** Learning to perceive and work with objective qualities of color and form, for example, help to develop the capacity to observe and perceive the developing child. Opportunities to practice, cultivate and deepen an artistic discipline can ripen capacities in the soul of the teacher far beyond what is possible through experiencing many arts on an introductory level.
- **Meditative practice.** More and more we see that the inner schooling of the adult is the basis for the outer work with the children, with colleagues, and with parents. The inner life of the teacher must be absolutely free and independent, yet benefits from support and practice during training.

- **Mentored practice working with young children.** A practitioner-based training allows the student’s learning to be constantly imbedded in real life experience. Mentoring can stimulate the self-reflection of the developing teacher and provide direct support for the work with the children. The role of the “trainer” becomes one of accompanying and supporting the teacher’s own self-educational process.

The implications of such considerations are far-reaching. Not only new approaches to childhood training, but also new approaches to Waldorf early childhood education itself need to be explored if we are to meet the needs of today’s children. As we expand our work beyond the traditional nursery/kindergarten to toddler programs, parent/child classes, center-based childcare and pre-natal classes, the vocation of early childhood educator is undergoing a deepening and a metamorphosis. The importance of this work with the youngest members of human culture cannot be overstated; nothing less than the human soul is at stake.

A Call for Research

Is there a way for us to engage in a collaborative research project around the future of Waldorf early childhood education, working with the kinds of questions expressed in the training retreat? The practice of early childhood education in these times is an ongoing research in itself if taken on in this way. If working research groups could meet with one another on some kind of regular basis to discuss their perceptions, questions, insights and explorations, this could support the deepening and renewal of Waldorf early childhood education.

If you have research questions or impulses and would be interested in making a commitment to participate in some aspect of such a collaborative research project, please contact Susan Howard at showard@sunbridge.edu or at 845-425-0055 ext 22.

Susan Howard is the director of Early Child Teacher Training at Sunbridge College and is co-chair of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.