

Reflections on the NAEYC Conference

Cynthia Aldinger

Cynthia Aldinger of the WECAN Board and Rosario Villasana-Ruiz, a WECAN member, attended the 2002 National Association for the Education of the Young Child (NAEYC) conference in New York City as representatives of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association, offering a workshop on early childhood environments.

Attending the annual conference of the largest early childhood organization in the world is an amazing experience. NAEYC always chooses an interesting place to meet, and the conference attracts thousands of participants. Over 30,000 people were registered, but one could tell by the lower attendance at many workshops that people had come mainly to see the Big Apple. This conference had a different feel from the one I had attended in Toronto a few years ago. One positive change is that there were several vendors who were selling items (both toys and furniture) that one would be happy to have in a Waldorf early childhood setting. In the past, this was not the case. It was all plastic toys, strange puppets, videos and tapes. Those materials were still there, but, this year, natural products were more visible.

No Childhood Left Behind

A common workshop theme this year was early literacy. This report, based on the workshops I attended, is to share information about President Bush's early literacy agenda, and how we, as Waldorf early childhood educators, can address it. Perhaps we could coin a new phrase to stand against the one being touted by the Bush Administration. Instead of No Child Left Behind we could say No Childhood Left Behind. Better yet, I recently read a suggested proposal called the *Leave Children Alone Act*. It seems that childhood itself is at risk.

Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund and a renowned advocate for under-served children, gave a very moving talk, attended by several thousand people. She noted that the original intention behind the term "no child

left behind" had to do with meeting basic, fundamental needs of children—food, clothing, shelter, health care. Apparently, her organization had first coined the phrase. Edelman indicated that Bush had usurped the term and changed the focus to literacy. "If he is going to use our words," she said, "then let's make an honest man out of him." In other words, we need to hold him to its original intention.

I also attended a symposium featuring speakers who were currently serving the Bush Administration: Susan Neuman, Assistant Secretary of Education, Wendy Hill of Head Start and Shannon Christian, Associate Commissioner for the Child Care Bureau. As they presented the platform for the No Child Left Behind Act, they acknowledged that, while the fundamental needs mentioned above are of vital importance, there is a need to prioritize. The starting point, they think, is "early literacy." I had already read some of Susan Neuman's statements regarding the No Child Left Behind Act. The following is from a Stockton, California newspaper published October 25, 2002:

Susan Neuman said the new federal No Child Left Behind Act, if implemented the right way, will put an end to creative and experimental teaching methods in the nation's classrooms. "It will stifle, and hopefully, kill (them)," said Neuman. "Our children are not laboratory rats."

As Waldorf early childhood educators, we need to pay attention to such statements. Are our methods among the creative and experimental teaching methods she would like to see killed? In the Southern Early Childhood Association magazine *Dimensions*, in reference to early literacy, she is quoted as saying, "If we are just doing senseless rhymes, that's not going to get us anywhere." In that same magazine, she lists several key priorities of the Bush Administration:

1. All children will be provided the education that they deserve—no matter what the circumstances of their birth.
2. Instruction is based on the scientific evidence that tells us how reading develops and how it is best taught.
3. There must be a clear and direct call for accountability to determine if instruction works toward achievement.

It is rather frightening to believe that they are actually talking about early childhood. It is hard enough to adjust to the idea of two- and three-year-olds being referred to as “students” in programs throughout the U.S. Now we are talking about the need for scientifically based instruction, accountability, and achievement.

At the conference, I listened intently as Susan Neuman described five things she feels are good about our nation’s early childhood movement:

1. Early childhood educators focus on the whole child.
2. Efficiency, or what is called developmentally appropriate practices, and appropriate teaching materials when the child is developmentally ready. [She feels that efficiency is a better term than developmentally appropriate practice.]
3. Parental involvement.
4. Recognition of individual differences—not all children learn the same way.
5. The use of multiple modalities.

She went on to say that it is essential to remember that pushing the elementary approach down into Pre-K will not work. This all sounded reasonable. Could it be that she had changed her mind since making her earlier statements? Unfortunately, she then elucidated several current issues that must be addressed to properly serve the educational needs of the young child. These included:

- * A need to focus on learning—focus on the disposition of conceptual knowledge and skills.
- * A need to focus on curriculum—research (100,000 studies she said) has been conducted indicating that we need to focus on children’s coherence (how they sequence and understand content), on content that is mindful and meaningful to the children, and on levels of intensity—varied attention is needed by various children.
- * Multiple methods of teaching—not always child-centered learning.
- * Assessment—develop appropriate practices for screening, diagnostic and progress-monitoring of children.

I was certainly feeling confused at this point and wondered if the same person who had said that it is good that we focus on the “whole” child also just said that we need to focus on “conceptual knowledge, curriculum, intensity, and assessment.”

After the presentations, we were allowed to make comments or ask questions. Several people were concerned about what this was all going to mean for Head Start in the long run. Others were concerned about how this was going to affect program funding. No one directly addressed the question of whether or not early literacy is a valid priority, although one could sense that the mood in the room was tense. When time was up, I was the last one left in the line for questions or comments. The microphone was handed to me, and by then, about the only question I could utter was, “Am I from another planet?” I spoke about how the young child learns through play and how, if we don’t stand against this presidential agenda, we will find ourselves jumping through the hoops of restricted funding and literacy-focused curriculums. Some people responded enthusiastically when I mentioned that numerous brilliant people were not early readers.

I do wish I had attempted to have a personal dialogue with Susan Neuman at the time. [Note: One of the officers of NAEYC told me that Susan Neuman has resigned her post and returned to work at a university. We should pay attention to who is assigned as the next Assistant Secretary of Education and write letters encouraging them to stand for healthy early childhood practices.]

A Breath of Fresh Air

Two workshops renewed my capacity to take a deep breath. One was presented by Ronald Lally of the WestEd organization in California and the other by Ellen Galinsky and Nina Sazer-O’Donnell of the Families and Work Institute in Washington, D.C. Lally quoted from the book entitled *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* by J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips. “Quality of care ultimately boils down to the quality of the relationship between the child care provider or teacher and the child.” [The terms *care provider* and *caregiver* refer to the adult who is caring for the child. This may be the parent or it may be a non-parental caregiver.] He mentioned three dimensions of quality care that contribute to secure attachments:

- * Sensitivity/responsiveness of caregiver.

- * Group size and caregiver to child ratio.
- * Stability of care, especially for infants who are emotionally insecure.

Consider the list of individuals whom he feels need intimacy: very young infants, cautious children, feisty children, children from diverse cultures and languages, children with special needs, children with disrupted home lives, all infants and toddlers and their families, and infant/toddler caregivers. Who among us does not need a certain level of intimacy? In the workshop from the Families and Work Institute, what I found most interesting was their list of ten principles:

1. Be with the child in a way that makes them feel known and understood.
2. Be with the child in a way that accepts their emotions.
3. Be with the child in a way that makes them feel safe.
4. Be with the child in a way that elaborates their learning and promotes the joy in learning.
5. Be with the child in a way that involves you in their lives and learning.
6. Be with the child in a way that provides productive discipline.
7. Be with the child in a way that creates rituals and routines.
8. Be with the child in a way where you are focused on them and have hang-around, non-structured time.
9. Be with the child in a way to stop violence. Stop the small things, e.g., teasing, bullying.
10. Be a learner yourself.

As I read these again, I can't help but wish that every early childhood educator, both Waldorf and traditional, would read Freya Jaffke's book, *Work and Play in Early Childhood*, which offers clear examples of how to apply all of these principles. The chapter entitled, *The Mantles*, provides a wonderful template for where to begin.

Crazy Again

The final workshop I attended was presented by a HeadStart group from Pennsylvania. They opened with a quote by long-time, highly respected early childhood educator, Lillian Katz: "When we teach skills to children too early, too formally and out of context, they will learn them without the desire to ever use them again." This is similar to the words of

Rudolf Steiner.

With this as the backdrop of their workshop, they presented a curriculum that seemed to be totally out of context for the young child. It appeared to be just about right for traditional second grade but was, however, for pre-school. They suggested implementing word walls and pervading the environment with print materials, among other techniques. One can understand how they have come to such legislated curriculums when considering the populations they typically serve. These children may not have a lap to sit upon while having a book read to them or a story told. In many cases, television fills their days. The problem is that such curriculums as the one Head Start presented inevitably become the mainstream approach for all young children. Certainly, the legislation being proposed in the No Child Left Behind Act is meant to be pervasive, not just for a particular population. Returning to Katz's quote above, I realized how confused our culture has become in determining what is and is not "too early" or "out of context."

Finding Our Voice

I suggest that each of us takes time to contact the local early childhood affiliate. There is always something to be learned from others. When fellow teachers sense your interest in them, it opens the door for them to take interest in your work. It was through making relationships with traditional early childhood colleagues that I had the opportunity to make presentations at local colleges and universities.

Most importantly, children need us to speak out for them. We need to be aware of what is happening in early childhood legislation. It is a serious matter. We often hear the phrase, "The children are our future." But it is not our future with which I feel concerned. It is theirs. Rudolf Steiner admonishes us repeatedly to be "awake." Right now it is crucial.

Epilogue

We attended the Broadway show *Les Miserables*. The last words of the last song are a wonderful affirmation of life, "To love another person is to see the face of God." And nowhere is this more apparent than when I gaze at the countenance of a young child.

Cynthia Aldinger is a member of the WECAN Board and the Director of LifeWays North America.