

The Secret Garden

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In the children's classic, *The Secret Garden*, a little boy is described who may have been an anomaly in the early twentieth century, but is sadly reflective of various aspects of children in the kindergarten today. Colin Craven is a pale, peevish, demanding child whose restricted life has rendered him feeble and unable to move or play like other children. Regrettably, teachers of today are seeing more and more children who, like Colin, suffer from anxiety related issues.¹ Being fussy about clothing and picky about food, young children can display inflexibility around what parents once took for granted. Nationally, there is a rising concern about insomnia and depression in children under the age of six. Like Colin in the book, who was a fretful hypochondriac, children today are often beset with myriads of worries about health and safety. Parents and teachers notice a new alertness and verbal precociousness in young children. At the same time, these alert young children often have an irritable commanding presence with adults. Frances Hodgson Burnett refers to Colin as "the young "rajah." How many young rajahs do we teachers hear issuing orders to their parents each morning in the kindergarten cubby room! Today's parents are remarkably tolerant and chagrinned when the teacher speaks of "good manners" in the kindergarten.

In *The Secret Garden*, Colin is contrasted with the rosy-faced young Dickon who spends his days on the English moor taming wild animals and playing his flute. The climax in the story comes when Colin is persuaded to leave his sick bed and enter the mysterious Secret Garden. The vitalizing forces of nature and the wondrous pageantry of the changing seasons as experienced in the garden affect a cure. Everyone lives happily ever after.

Today kindergarten teachers find themselves striving to unravel the perplexities of highly individualistic young children who can be imperious, irritable and subject to anxiety. Teachers regularly report a notable reluctance or inability in children to engage in free, unencumbered movement. Research of Waldorf kindergarten teachers indicates a rise in the number

of children with sensory difficulties and related struggles with the four lower senses as described by Rudolf Steiner.² Tied to this are concerns about obesity in young children and the continuing rise in Asperger's, ADD and ADHD syndromes.

Since 1987, we have taught kindergarten at the Seattle Waldorf School. The beautiful yard at Kinderhaus in Seattle is no less than a Secret Garden. An old American chestnut tree shelters the chicken coop and supports a pendulous rope swing carrying three children at a time. Pear, plum and apple trees festoon the yard with garlands of blossoms in the spring and sweet fruit in the autumn. The outdoor space is rich with the forces of growth and the pulse of changing seasons. Over the years we have spent together, we have observed the sense-calming influence of the Kinderhaus play yard on the children. Those who were fractious and even aggressive indoors were often better able to play and find social equilibrium in the outdoor space. We came to see that outside time could be easier for some children, offering a diversity of movement possibilities such as running, jumping, skipping and digging. In our work as teachers, we posed two questions for ourselves: One, how could we in the kindergarten help the children incarnate into their physical bodies in as a harmonious way as possible? Two, how could the social life in the kindergarten be nurtured without forced social contrivances and rules of conduct to be imposed by the teacher? In an effort to answer these questions and to make the kindergarten day more joyful for all the children, we expanded the walls of the kindergarten by considering the outdoor space to be a part of the classroom. We hoped to allow the sense world in its natural harmonies to create a mood from which the children could move physically and socially together. The garden with its fruit trees and animal life offered a multitude of outdoor activities that were much more satisfying to the children. This was especially true for the six- year-olds who had grown somewhat restless with indoor playtime. We saw that the indoor play life in the kindergarten represents, in

some ways, the dreamy inward archetypal world of the young child. The healthy five-year-olds were supremely happy with a boat made out of a box and two branches for cannons. The six-year-old, who created an elaborate pirate ship with sails and anchors, looked out of a spyglass, longing to know more of the world outside. We observed that the six-year-olds often appeared especially gratified by a more expansive use of their developing limbs and by work and play in the outdoor environment. Every kindergarten teacher will recognize the characteristic refrain from the six-year-old who calls, "Look at me!" as he or she struggles to master large motor skills. The boys, in particular needed activities that made them sweat and move their eager little muscles. Tim's background in Spacial Dynamics® was particularly valuable in observing the movement of the child as he becomes part of the world and truly incarnates. We strove to find diverse movement possibilities for the children. More recently, in the AWSNA publication *Renewal*, Spring 2004, Jacquelyn Davis wrote, "The key desirable factor in a child's movement experience is variety. Different kinds of movement activities give more possibilities for soul and ego in childhood and later."³

After a visit to the Seattle Waldorf School, therapist Bonnie Rivers recommended a "sensory journey" each morning for several of the kindergarten children. This activity, she said, could be used both diagnostically and therapeutically.⁴ In our teaching, we had noticed that lightly aerobic, rhythmic activity was both physically settling and socially satisfying to the children in the kindergarten and that an early morning walk to a local park set the whole day off to a good start. We saw that a walk offered an expanded movement venue with hills to climb and mud puddles to splash in. We began to regard the walk time as an ideal opportunity to observe the children's movement as, one by one, each child met the many movement challenges afforded by this "sensory journey." Therapeutic exercises such as the "zoo exercises" were naturally integrated into this part of the morning.⁵ In addition, an overall calming influence from the morning walk was enjoyed as the children settled themselves and relaxed into a more harmonious social mood.

Today, in the three kindergartens at the Seattle Waldorf School, we start each morning with a walk.

Our destinations are one of the many local parks and green spaces near the school. It is our intention to have the children walk for much of the outing. We have experimented and found that if the walk is shortened, the positive effect of calming the children is noticeably lessened. When considering the young child, Rudolf Steiner often referred to the importance of supporting healthy breathing in children. He speaks of the breathing rhythms of life such as waking and sleeping as well as the steady flow of air into and out of the lungs.⁶ The rhythmic breathing elements of walking are, in themselves, beneficial to the children. Not surprisingly, there is a delightful range of sensory experiences open to the children when walking to and through nature spaces. A walk is a time of grace when the children seem to find their own stride. The walk is both a nature journey and a sensory expedition. The seasons and elements become the teachers. Very busy are the six-year-old "thing finders" whose curiosity about the wide world is so especially keen. The class inhales and exhales in deep satisfaction as the seasons come and go. The return to the kindergarten everyday is as pleasurable as is the exploration. Pale cheeks have become suffused with color. Hands and feet are warmed. Appetites are quickened and tempers calmed. The class returns, eager to take up life in the kindergarten.

Parents have long known that outdoor play and lively daily walks are healthy experiences for children. The fretful, inactive Colin was a curiosity in 1911 when *The Secret Garden* was written. However, today there exists in urban life an unintentional conspiracy to keep children sedentary and indoors. Parents and teachers find it increasingly necessary to contrive to have their children spend time outside. We look for opportunities for our children to breathe deeply and rhythmically. We seek to settle their nerves and bring them into a natural use of their limbs, providing for free, unencumbered large motor movement. The two questions we had asked ourselves seemed in some measure to be answered. It has been our experience that a morning walk is an essential part of a successful kindergarten experience. Over the years, student teachers have spent time in our kindergarten and have found this model to be valuable to their experiences with their own classes. The use of the play yard as part of the classroom and inclusion of the daily walk in the

rhythm of the day can make the kindergarten experience a satisfying one to many young children today. To Helle Heckman's exhortation to explore the urban green spaces and parks with our kindergarten classes, we would add the endorsement of a good walk.⁷ Call to mind the last scene in *The Secret Garden* in which the restored young Colin sets off with his father to enjoy at last the blessings of a long morning walk.

Endnotes:

1. Kohler, Henning, *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*.
2. Steiner, Rudolf, *The Twelve Senses*, Kolisko Conference, WECAN, 2001.
3. Davis, Jacquelin, *Renewal*, Spring 2004
4. Rivers, Bonnie; Gradalis seminars, Boulder, Colorado.
5. McCallum, Audrey, *Extra Lesson*.
6. Steiner, Rudolf; *Study of Man*.
7. Heckman, Helle; *Nokken: A Garden for Children*.

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