

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Overview of the International Kindergarten Conference

Jan Coles

Over 1,100 Kindergarten teachers from all around the world attended this event at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. The theme of the conference was “Playing, Learning, Encountering” and reflected the concern amongst the International Steiner Waldorf kindergarten movement that children’s play is being threatened by the trend to begin formal education increasingly early with emphasis on information technology skills and academic learning.

These quotes from Rudolf Steiner set the context for the conference:

“...(T)hus providing free space for the formation of human nature. This is play. That is also the way we can best occupy a child. We should not give children concepts with fixed boundaries, but rather ideas that allow thinking the free space to explore and even to err here and there.

Only in this way will we discover the course of thinking that arises from an inner predisposition...” 1911; in *The Education of the Child*, p. 96-97.

“Usually, when observing the play of the young child we do so from the perspective of an adult. If this were not so we would not hear again and again the trifling exhortation that children should learn through play. The worst thing you could do is teach children through mere play, because when they grow up, they would look at life as though it were only a game. . .”

1923; in *Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy*, p. 57.

“...The first step in this direction is to learn to understand the particular ways in which the child wants to be freely active in play. All the various types of stereotyped, thought up games with their inhibiting rules are alien to the young child’s nature, for they suppress what should be freely mobile within the child. Through such organised games the child’s own inner activity is gradually being dulled down and the child feels itself within the outer activity without any inner interest. . .” 1922; in *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, p. 276.

Here follows a short summary of each main lectures:

The Encounter

Dr. Heinz Zimmerman

Dr. Zimmerman quoted the German philosopher Schiller, “Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being and he is only fully a human being when he plays.” The art of education is a social art; it is the art of life. We have to find a balance within ourselves between two basic drives which are at odds with each other, the sensual versus

common sense. For example, if I fall in love with a despicable person, that could be described as a compulsion of nature. On the other hand, I could feel hostility, antipathy towards a person of quality, a compulsion of a higher sense. In both cases, I feel I am being untrue to myself. How do I overcome this dilemma? I begin to play, and by practicing this play, this breathing, then I am not dominated by feelings nor overcome with common sense. I become sovereign and free through play. These opposites live within all of us, neither one is good or bad. On the one hand is total sympathy with our surroundings, altruism, this is connected to the limbs. On the other hand antipathy and egotism, turning away from the other, this is connected to the head. So then if I try to develop a real interest in the other person, I can develop a liking and discover something really precious, I can learn to appreciate the other if I let go of this spontaneous antipathy and begin to play. Now we can begin to love the other person. Love is not enhanced altruism but exists in the interplay between altruism and egotism.

The Healing Power of Play

Joan Almon

Joan spoke about Rudolf Steiner's own early life. He didn't have a very playful childhood himself, even though it was full of warmth within his family. Most memorable though was his book with moving pictures, he often said that kindergartens should always have such books. In no other types of education comes the idea of "imitation." Imitation is richness, a fundamental aspect of our work. If as teachers we do real meaningful work in front of the children, the children will become involved in their work, engaged in play. Joan gave many examples of ways in which children use play to heal situations in which they find themselves, also how to recognize when play is moving through a process and when it has become stuck. She gave an example of two five-year-old boys who were wrapped up in setting mathematical problems for each other and had become socially separate from the rest of the group every day by tying play stands together and retreating inside. After a few days, it was as though they had forgotten how to do anything else, so she said the ropes must have a rest. The boys were relieved and gradually began to play with the rest of the group, and when the ropes reappeared a few days later, they had transformed into telephone wires linking all the "houses" together. So the teacher must develop an inner capacity for discernment. Is this child going through a natural process or stuck? The teacher must feel able to say this is not right and intervene.

Play is disappearing from children's lives. The question was asked whether in the USA there was more violence in children's play since 9/11. No, but there is less play since then! A survey was done to discover how many minutes per day the average six- to eight-year-old child was engaged in creative play, in 1997, twenty-five minutes. In 2002, this had gone down to sixteen minutes of creative play per day. Even amongst three- to six-year-olds in 1997 the average amount of time spent playing per day was only thirty-six minutes. In the United States, as many as one quarter of two-year-olds have televisions in their bedrooms! So we were urged as kindergarten teachers to find ways of spreading the word about the importance of play to the wider communities in which we live, for play is the doorway to growth. It is not surprising then that while play is diminishing there is an increase in mental illness amongst children.

Acceleration and Retardation in Development

Dr. Michaela Gloeckler

Michaela described health as a slow and gradual process that is in accord with the right education. A healthy adult is one who is fully present in mind and spirit, like the eurythmy

performers we had just been watching. Dr. Largo, a Swiss pediatrician showed in his studies an appreciation of the work done in anthroposophy in the realm of education for the present time in helping and healing in cases of accelerated and retarded development. Studies looking at adults who have made great achievements have found no similar patterns in childhood of optimum conditions for life. A strong individual will find his way, overcoming problems of course, not that we should torment our children! Development is a mystery. Why are siblings so different? It is not only genes and our environment that is important but that also human relationship. We may meet only one individual in our early years that has such an effect on us, so that we can overcome the difficulties in our path. As kindergarten teachers, we must firstly meet every child where he is, and out of the child's own goal or situation we can help him.

Michaela gave an example of a seven-year old boy with antisocial behavior and a developmental age level of three years. In one year with a kindergarten teacher, he had completely turned around and managed to go into Grade 1. He regressed at first, but had caught up with the other children by Grade 3. We need to teach parents that they, too, have a role as teachers. Not that they have to do anything special, but that life should be kept simple. In kindergarten, the child looks to the other children in the group, but the kindergarten teacher in her heart sees each child as individual even though outwardly working with the whole.

A child could behave horribly until we see him or her the way he or she really is. When the child feels accepted and not judged, she can enter into constructive development. If children are healthy, are fed adequately, have love and protection and are set boundaries their development should be normal. If at kindergarten there is a meaningful organization of the time, this is the only way despite all that is said about bright children. There are so many pressures on family life that many children grow up in far from ideal circumstances. Poor nutrition, healthcare, parents needing to work, poor language, poor accommodation, drug abuse, poor post natal care, perhaps a limited, one-sided upbringing either overprotected or neglected. Uncritical praise can also be damaging, the child remains infantile and narcissistic, demanding these are all dangers and are all the more reason why we need to understand play.

Where does acceleration come from? Nutritionally, a mother's milk has less protein than other mammals. Human development is slower. It takes a baby five months to double its birth weight. Being able to do something quickly means to do it more unconsciously, this makes it more un-free. If we have a conscious awareness of something, we are able to play with it. People who have developed too quickly cannot teach others because they weren't conscious of the process of learning themselves and so find others stupid.

Children are so quickly influenced by the way they are judged by adults. "I felt good in your eyes." Do we have love in our soul for the child even when we have to be strict? The child knows this. If, for example, a child has to overcome rage, the teacher must bring her own experience to the situation and, knowing her own anger, her own weakness can help the child also with his. We are all wonderful people in our potential. Every weakness in others is also in me.

Where does acceleration come from? If the protein in the diet is increased, is more animal like, then the more accelerated intellectual development does not keep pace with the maturing of the soul. Happiness depends on one feeling at home in one's soul. There needs to be a sense of coherence, a connectedness with the environment. Steiner set one main task for Waldorf education—to separate feeling from will and to connect feeling with thinking. Damaged children need to learn to cope with feelings of envy, boredom, etc., otherwise they develop negative feelings. They need to develop good feelings in their bodies by doing small tasks. They

must learn to handle their will well. Feeling can be connected with thinking in stories and songs. In a calm atmosphere, this connection is made in the world of images. This is the principle of emotional intelligence.

Memory is connected with feelings, the more strongly the teacher is feeling about that which he is doing, the more he is engaging the child. So we must encourage this identification with this middle sphere, this feeling realm that lies between thinking and doing by bringing in that which is artistic. We must cultivate a loving relationship with the child. We must trust in the concept of health and development. We must learn to live into the concept of love and friendliness. There is a point of weakness which is that it is too easy to judge the parents. We must help them observe their children, and if they say it is too quiet in kindergarten, that the children aren't doing enough, we must reassure them that the children are developing in a healthy way.

It has been found in research that children who watch a lot of television grow up to be overweight, have heart and lung problems, are more likely to be smokers and drug users. Waldorf educators were already saying this in the 1960's and 70's, and it is now seen to be true. We should use this to substantiate our own work today in our kindergartens. Thanks to anthroposophy and spiritual research we have a pattern for healthy development.

Through the power of the word;
In the etheric to heal,
In the astral to give,
In the "I" to comfort.

The way we speak cultivates the etheric and brings calm. By mastering difficult situations with calm understanding, we can bring healing. Children in their waking selves can sense from "I" to "I" we are friends.

The Heart Organ and Heart Forces

Dr. Peter Selg

Steiner said that Schiller's heart had burned up by the end of his life; he had given so much of it into his work. In his Aesthetic Education of Man, Schiller says that humans are un-free in their sense perceptions, they compel us. We are also un-free in our intellect, for instance: $2 \times 2 = 4$, there is no other possibility and is therefore fixed. Man is only really free in his middle realm; this is where they are able to play. This middle realm is also the realm of beauty, and our task is to educate the heart so one can freely choose for the good. Freedom does not mean to do what you like. Schiller anticipated Steiner education, which is to do with the mystery of the heart. We live in a world of struggle, freedom is under threat and we must fight for it, our mission must be to work for the freedom of the "I." The heart is the organ of empathy connecting the soul with the world. When the heart becomes hardened, it becomes unemotional, inert, slow.

Hearts can have, as well as feelings, thoughts; insight, recognition, understanding. How our own "I" connects with experiences, this is a truly Christian understanding of faith. When insight comes, we must trust it, the power of the heart. The heart is also the central organ of doubt.

Compassion is truth perceived in connection with the head. The thoughts of man which rise from the heart come from the source spring of the human being, we experience this true inner moral intuition as good and right. The inmost "I" lies hidden in this treasury of the heart, this is where good comes from. Language and speech are born out of the heart. True Christianity does not divide good from evil, every moment is a new moment, we can change, we can grow, be what we can be. In the heart, there can be spiritual and moral growth and

transformation, the heart dances! It is the organ for spiritual growth and also the treasury for preservation and protection inasmuch as it can be moved, in motion it can grow. Anthroposophy is the language of Christ in the Twentieth century. So the heart is the organ where this seed can germinate or not. When we betray our heart, this is a falling away of the “I” as in Judas Iscariot. We can struggle with evil in the heart, but it is also the organ of forgiveness.

We connect with the world through insights; we must trust this without doubt. We can help to shape the world and ourselves. Through being in the world, we prepare gifts for heaven, the eternal higher “I”. Where our treasure is, there is our heart. The heart begins to beat three weeks after conception. The heart is the organ of the beginning. Thinking comes late; it is mirrored and is old. In our limbs we are young—it is the world to come. The heart is present here, today, now balancing past and future. The young child is all head, one-third of the child’s body is head. All sensory being needs protection in the first seven years. Breathing and heart develops in the second seven-year period, thinking after. At nine or ten years the child has a belonging feeling to the world; children with heart disease only really feel it at this age of nine through ten. In the first seven years, we prepare the maturing breathing and heart for the second seven-year period. From youth onwards, all we do is inscribed in the heart and destiny is met; education and especially education of the heart is preparation for destiny on earth. Ahriman does not want the human “I” to live on earth. With the Christ presence in our schools, children live up to world destiny. If

Christ is in the human being, Lucifer and Ahriman are overcome. The statue (Representative of Mankind at the Goetheanum) is redemption for Lucifer and Ahriman, a way of peace, a Sun path.

The Spirit of Christ—Thinking, Feeling and Doing: The Formative Forces around the Seventh Year

Christof Wiechert

With these attacks on the young child, one feels helpless. How can we do things better? There are different layers of reality. The threshold of kindergarten to Grade 1, around six- to seven years-old, is a second birth, a moment of transition, this is also under attack. The child must find himself in the flow of time and in the structure of the group. In the child study, we work into the child’s soul, into the etheric body. The kindergarten teacher has to develop sensitivity of soul. We have to be more flexible than the parents; we are not educating them, but the children.

Formative forces radiate into the child, radiating back and resulting in the change of teeth. Also, formative forces already existing in the head create pictorial memory in children under seven, so they are able to create mental images; this part of the etheric body is already free. This etheric quality should be used for learning through play but can also be used for learning processes; even in kindergarten we can learn foreign languages, for instance. Anthroposophists also think that using etheric forces is most important to enliven thought using the imagination.

The kindergarten is the University of Playtime. Many children are not fully incarnated, yet, and the capacity for speech can be delayed. We should bring some elements of kindergarten to Grades 1 and 2 and maybe bring some elements of Grade 1 to kindergarten, perhaps a transition class.

Christof concluded his lecture with a verse by Steiner beginning:

*To bind oneself to matter,
To grind souls to dust. . .*

Encountering

Dr. Heinz Zimmerman (to close the conference). To encounter is to learn and to play. Begin to change things in the place where you are and do not be dogmatic. Be present in mind and spirit.

The heart mediates between the head and the limbs. We must trust the efficacy of our education. We must cultivate the seed which is this education. Have the courage to cultivate free play this is truly human. There will be opposition from people who would have children not develop. Where is the young child? If we can answer this question, then what is learning? To learn is nothing but to recall what you have learned before birth. Teachers are then to enable this, to find this treasure so the child can recall what his destiny is. Plato spoke about this. Spirit is movement eurythmy. Through the limbs and the heart, one must bring movement into thinking-living thought. Movement comes into children's play a message from pre-birth. We work through the senses to the spirit. How do we meet the child where he is? The three- to four-year- old is open and full of trust, the world is good and worthy of imitation this is basically a religious mood. The child always looks up, has an attitude, a mood of veneration, calm, of devotion, a relationship to the spirits in a mood of prayer. In a cultivation of this religious mood, this sacred sobriety we see God as a child at play. Through all religions, the spirit of our age, the sun from the future comes towards us. The Goetheanum is here to bring this common cause.

We begin with the child's prayer given by Rudolf Steiner:

*From my head to my feet
I am the image of God
From my heart to my hands
I feel the breath of God.
When I speak with my mouth
I will follow God's will
When I see God
In Father and Mother,
In Sister and Brother
In all dear people,
In animal and flower,
In tree and stone,
No fear shall I feel
But love will then fill me
For everything around me.*

We are human as individuals connected to our physical condition. We need strength for our work from our guardian angel, but we also need more. We live in a world full of fear and send a plea to the spirits in the realm of the archangels.

A school has its own spirit it may give us courage to work towards a common goal. We have to accept the world as it is and children as they are. Wherever there are big shadows, there is also light. We turn to this light in the sphere of spirit. Freedom and courage is the Spirit of Michael.

The Rest of the Conference

As well as lectures, there were many workshops, morning and afternoon to choose from, in addition to singing, eurythmy performances and more.

The whole conference was a truly wonderful experience; uplifting, inspiring, challenging at times, but with a tremendous feeling of common purpose around the world. In breaks between lectures and workshops, we heard about partnerships between countries where Steiner Waldorf education is well established and countries where it is in its infancy. Germany supports teacher training in many countries including Japan, Korea, Czech Republic, and Ukraine. Norway and Finland support training in South Africa, and there are several Steiner schools in townships there. As part of their presentation, the Scandinavian and South African teachers sang some songs from their own lands together. What a wonderful contrast there was between the Nordic and African styles of music! Sweden is supporting Russia, and the kindergartens in the United States are supporting Waldorf schools in China the first one has just begun! Australia and New Zealand are supporting initiatives in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Nepal. In some places, it is just the very beginnings, the first parent-toddler group in the Philippines, for instance. Even now, just remembering the joy on the faces of some of these teachers who were able to bring this education to the children of their country, brings tears to my eyes.

Jan Coles is a teacher at the Bristol Kindergarten in the United Kingdom. Her notes are from the International Kindergarten Conference in Dornach, March 29-April 2, 2005. This article was printed in Kindling, Journal for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education, October 2005, Issue 8 and is reprinted with their permission.