Thoughts on My Visit to North America

• Helle Heckmann

First, I would like to thank all the early childhood teachers and the families I stayed with on my two month trip to North America. It was a fantastic experience for me to visit so many different early childhood centers that are as varied as the environment and community where they exist. Children of today have such different needs and that is why it is important that Waldorf education provide a range of choices. Our Waldorf early childhood centers have to meet the needs of the children that come to us. We are not a defined program, but must remain flexible in our options so that the needs of our children are met as our highest priority. This can include early childhood centers connected to grade schools, off-site early childhood centers, and in-home centers.

The loss of the world of childhood is a real danger today, especially with the onset of early academics in kindergartens and even with younger children. Instead of seeing the young children as something quite special in their own right, they are viewed and taught as little adults. Even in our Waldorf early childhood centers, it is common to observe a form of this "teaching" with a focus on the role of the teachers, schedules, and activities. The clearest example is the trend in Waldorf early childhood centers to separate the children into different age groups during the first seven years. The benefits of keeping children aged three to six together have been lost.

We must examine closely whether the needs of these children can be met when an early childhood center is in the same location as a grade school. Does the close proximity offer enough protection to the young children from the energy and needs of the older student? Do we make unfair allowances when we are part of a larger school? Are early childhood pedagogical decisions made by those who have really penetrated the issues of the young child or by a larger group of colleagues who may not have these questions as a focus? Is there a way to work together when we don't work side by side?

I would like to expand on these thoughts and others from my experience in America. I hope that these ideas will not be viewed as judgmental, but rather as observations to provoke further conversations. I know I am a foreigner and see with my foreign eyes, but my hope is that it will be insightful to my American colleagues to see what is observed by an outsider. I want to share the importance of the following:

- Continuity of Care for the Young Child
- Creating a Weekly Rhythm for Children and Not Just a Beat
- Providing a Daily Rhythm That Allows For Consistency and Enough Time
- Movement Opportunities
- Adult Models Worthy of Imitation
- Trusting the Child to Learn on His Own
- Providing Clear Expectations and Descriptions of What We Offer to Parents

Continuity of Care for the Young Child

What explains the trend to separate children by age in early childhood instead of designing a program that meets the needs of all of these children together? I see the first seven years as a whole and believe that the children in this age group should be cared for together. It allows the very young children to see where they are heading and the older child to see where they have come from. However, it is becoming more and more of a tendency in the Waldorf movement to split up this age group. There are parent/child classes, daycares, nursery classes, preschools, kindergartens, and extended care, all subject to sub-grouping children in the first seven years by age. This means that at an age when a child is most vulnerable, we force him to make attachments to many different caregivers. This is a form of violence towards the child because in reality

the young child needs as little change as possible, especially when considering care outside the home. It is also a big concern that some classes for the very young child are created out of need for enrollment in kindergarten and grade school classes without first considering the needs of the young child and how to create continuity of care for his whole early childhood.

Creating a Weekly Rhythm for Children and Not Just a Beat

Some schools offer one, two, three, four, and five days per week options plus the option of morning or afternoon care, and sometimes even "after afternoon" care. This is often out of trying to meet the need of the parents, more than it is out of our understanding of the needs of the child. When we offer less than three consecutive days a week, we provide children with just a "beat" instead of a rhythm. And when we offer different options to children in the same class, we create a situation where there is a lack of consistency in the children's social relationships. How can a child develop play and social skills in a classroom community if they do not know who to expect to be in their circle of friends the next day?

Providing a Daily Rhythm That Allows For Consistency and Enough Time

It was very common in my visit to North America to see early childhood classes that consisted of short morning hours (three to four hours) followed by an optional afternoon program. All of the pedagogical offerings are put in the morning care for the children. It is as if the afternoon care is not considered part of the pedagogical day or valued in the same way as the morning program. The afternoon care provider is not always a trained teacher and is often not even part of the morning program, which creates an unnecessary transition for the children. Despite these issues, more and more children are enrolling in the afternoon care programs.

The morning time of three to four hours usually includes an artistic activity, indoor free play, circle time, snack, outdoor play, storytelling, and sometimes lunch. Moving from indoors to outdoors (or outdoors to indoors) requires time to take shoes and clothes on or off. All of these activities pressed into just a few hours means that the children and teachers are often stressed to complete all the assigned tasks. Many times the lack of time causes teachers to rush through the real work of the kindergarten (cleaning, cooking, doing the dishes, etc.), which is something of great importance to the children.

Most of the children of today are lacking movement in their daily lives. They often experience great difficulty when entering fully into free play and can take up to an hour before they actually begin to really "play." It is challenging for them to dress themselves and they have trouble sitting at a table and showing manners during eating. Movement, free play, and life skills—these important tasks take up at least four hours a day in the kindergarten. Then there are our other activities such as circle time, storytelling, household work, and artistic activities.

The morning ends and some of the children leave and some stay. What is the experience like for those children who see their friends going home, but they have to stay? Those children staying often have to change rooms and the person who is caring for them. They are sometimes mixed with children from other classes. In just one day, they have to suffer through a great lack of consistency. Kindergartens with structures like this need to reconsider these issues.

Movement Opportunities

Children of today are "up in their head" and need to move back down into their physical bodies. Even though they are provided with time outdoors, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are "moving," This lack of movement makes it crucial for teachers to research how they can bring appropriate movement to the children in their care.

Adult Models Worthy of Imitation

Adult role models of the home arts (cooking, cleaning, building, gardening, etc.) provide real work that can stream out into the play of children and are more than ever needed because of the lack of housework in the home. Children are in great need of caregivers who consciously examine how to be worthy models of imitation.

Caregivers must penetrate the questions:

- What do the children in our care need?
- What do they get from their home life?
- How can we support the child in becoming a human being through daily life?

From these questions, we have to find a way to provide experiences for the child so they get what they really need—an understanding of the world around them.

The family structure has changed dramatically in recent years. The home is no longer the center of

the family, but a jumping-off point to the multitude of errands, responsibilities, and activities where family members must go. Children used to be brought up with many siblings and family members of various ages offering countless opportunities to care for others, be cared for, and smooth out the "sharp corners" of their own temperaments. Now most children come from smaller families, often with only one or no siblings. Waldorf early childhood centers are quickly becoming a substitute for the traditional home—offering a place where time can slow down, housework can be accomplished with cooperation from the children, and they can be truly cared for and nourished and learn how to take care of others. Providing a "home life" environment for children gives them the space to be able to do things out of intrinsic motivation, instead of learning how to do things because they are told how.

Trusting the Child to Learn on His Own

Care providers must be able to hold back their own desires and expectations for the child and understand how important it is for the child to learn how to meet life's challenges on his own and in his own time. Children of today are over-watched, over-loved and over-protected. They have very few chances to feel on their own how they are. It is necessary for the caregiver to provide the opportunity for the child to learn on his own. For example, a young child falls on the ground. The caregiver remains neutral in her response. After just a moment, the child looks up at the sky and notices the clouds. Then, he rolls over and see a little worm. He has fallen, and perhaps been a little hurt, but the sky is still here, the worm is still here, the world is still here. He experiences the unspoken message, "Even though I fall, the world is not falling apart." But, what if, instead, the child looks up upon falling and sees fear on his caregiver's face. The caregiver is worried: *What if he is really hurt? Maybe he has a concussion. What will I tell his parents?* The child responds to the fear by screaming. Then, the caregiver rushes over to comfort the child, but in reality is really comforting herself and her own fears. She has robbed the child of an important learning opportunity—to overcome pain and survive.

Providing Clear Expectations and Descriptions of What We Offer to Parents

Early childhood teachers spend a lot of time working with parents. It is true that this is a very important aspect of our work.

The important questions to ask are:

- Do we clearly state to parents what we expect from them and what they can expect from us?
- Are we clear about what we offer the children in our care and why?
- Do we, as teachers, have a deep understanding of the life of childhood and how it is shaped today with changing family structures, the current societal pressures put on parents, and the individual needs of the children in our care?
- Do we allow for our early childhood centers to evolve based on these needs?
- Do we share our specific offerings with parents so they can, out of freedom, decide if our early childhood center will meet the needs of their family?

We also must remember the important role parents play in the lives of their children— mainly, that of giving true love. This love germinates the seeds lying deep within the young child. And while we may lament for what children have lost because of our modern times, this is the time when they have come and we can look forward to knowing the fruits of their work here.

So, my dear colleagues, these are my inner thoughts of the two beautiful months I spent in North America, visiting so many different centers, meeting many wise women (and some men) and enjoying lovely conversations with friends, old and new. It is not important that we agree on all the specific points, but rather that we create the possibility to talk about these issues. It is out of this dialogue that we can each find the best solutions for the children in our care, wherever we are in the world. It is so crucial to repeatedly ask ourselves: "Why do I do what I do?" We all have the goal to work on our own individual spiritual paths, but we also meet together in our shared study of anthroposophy. It is through this community that we can continue to explore our ideas and grow as individuals, teachers, and early childhood centers.

I also want to thank you all for advocating for young children because it is something that they cannot do for themselves. They are often overlooked in our society. But, the truth is, a society is ultimately judged by how it treats its children, its old people, and those who are ill. If these groups of people are treated well, then it shows a society that is healthy and functional. Let us hope that all our global societies will get there one day.

Helle Heckmann *founded the influential Nøkken child care center in Copenhagen, Denmark. She has written several books about her work, most recently* Childhood's Garden *with companion DVD,* A Summer Day in Nøkken *(available from WECAN).*