

Helping Children Where Research And Social Action Meet

Joan Almon

As anthroposophy approaches the new millennium, the same thought is taking hold in many quarters: if we want to be effective in helping with contemporary world problems, we need to work more intensively with other individuals and groups who carry common concerns with us.

In this spirit I recently had the opportunity to meet with about 20 people working for large organizations with a deep concern for young children around the world. The meeting was called by the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C. (web site: www.aed.org). With a staff of 500 and an annual budget of \$101,000,000, it works in dozens of countries on a wide array of programs such as focusing on breast feeding and nutrition of children, biodiversity in El Salvador, HIV/AIDS among minority teens in the United States, and democracy in Eastern Europe.

The meeting was called by the director of AED's Ready to Learn program. She and I had met at the State of the World Forum and shared the fact that we were both very interested in building alliances among groups concerned with young children. She had taken a chance by calling together a group which never normally meet or work together - large funders such as the World Bank, USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF along with groups such as Zero to Three, Families and Work Institute, Save the Children, High/Scope, and the Benton Foundation. The scope of the problems they address is enormous, but so is the depth of their concern. Most of these individuals have devoted decades to working on behalf of children, and their passion and compassion were palpable.

In the morning the large banks and UN agencies spoke. Most of their efforts are directed towards the very poor, where helping children physically survive and thrive are primary concerns. They spoke of the need to convince governments to invest in young children. They apologized for their economic approach to childhood, but they have found that countries invest in young children only if they are convinced the investment will pay off later. High/Scope, for instance, has shown through its research in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which has followed children over 27 years, that for every one dollar spent on early childhood services, there is a later savings of seven dollars in services not needed. Children in High/Scope programs are more apt to complete high school, get jobs, and buy houses than children in comparable test samples. The High/Scope participants are less likely than others in control samples to be arrested or incarcerated.

The World Bank also assesses long-term benefits of childhood development and educational programs. They have found that every extra year of primary education will increase someone's future productivity. This is measured in part by their hourly wage rate. The increase in wages is between 10 and 30 percent for each additional year of elementary school.

Collectively these groups have budgets worth billions of dollars, yet they expressed considerable frustration in achieving their goals of changing the conditions which afflict children today. There is progress being made in some areas, but they point out that nowhere is it as hard to bring about social change as in programs that affect young children. One presenter pointed out that once the changes begin they are very likely to be influenced by current fads. He put in a strong appeal for good research, good science, that would provide a strong basis for new social policy.

In the afternoon we heard from groups which focus more directly on children and families through research, consultations and program development. The Families and Work Institute (FWI), for instance, has been reviewing the new brain research and looking at its implications in rearing and educating infants and young children. A conference in June 1996 at the University of Chicago resulted in a very interesting book, *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development* by Rima Shore.

What was equally interesting in FWI's report was the way they are building coalitions and working with such dissimilar professionals as pediatricians, police men and women, sports coaches and youth theater groups. With a small staff they get a great deal done by partnering with others. They shared their guiding principles which are as follows:

All work is research-based.

Work is inclusive, aiming to reach diverse sectors and communities

Work should result in increased capacity

Efforts should build alliances and use unlikely messengers

Campaign leaders and participants should share credit

Efforts should use repetition and multisensory approaches; print, video, radio, the arts and other media to communicate messages

Zero to Three (www.zerotothree.org) is an organization putting a strong spotlight on the youngest children. They will soon be working with PBS on television programs about the first three years. They, too, spoke of cost factors and of how most spending on children occurs between ages 5 and 18, while most brain growth happens in the first few years. Overall, the report from Zero to Three seemed most similar to the Waldorf perspective, perhaps because the presenter was a Waldorf graduate. She had found the Rudolf Steiner School in New York when she was entering twelfth grade, and had insisted on going there, despite opposition from her parents.. "It saved my life," she said with enthusiasm.

High/Scope is a very well known program in the United States, which also works internationally. Its report showed some strong similarities with Waldorf's approach to early education, but also some significant differences, which highlighted some of the basic issues in early childhood education today. Some of the points made were:

Yes, community involvement and parent involvement are very important, but we must not sacrifice what we know about healthy child development in order to please parents or community. (For example, just because parents and the community are pushing for early academics does not mean it is appropriate for young children.)

Although going to pre-school and kindergarten is generally helpful for a child's long term development, this is not always the case. If a program is not well suited to the needs of the child it can do significant harm. An example was given of a program whose approach was described as, "sit them down, shut them up and teach them." When the emotional impairment of children in this rather popular program was compared with that of children in High/Scope programs and also traditional nurseries, the following was found: Ten percent of the children in High/Scope showed some emotional impairment, 17% in traditional nurseries and 47% in the 'sit down and be quiet' program.

Children do not need to learn to read before age six or seven. In Scandinavia children begin at age 7 and studies show that they're the best readers in the world.

Although High/ Scope puts emphasis on play rather than academics at the nursery level, it seems to view play as primarily an activity for fostering cognitive development, rather than a fundamental activity that supports the total development of the child. They have drawn three basic conclusions from their work, which are:

Give children control and let them decide what they want to do in play.

Children need to clarify their intentions for play. Some kind of planning is needed.

After the play situation the children need some process of reviewing what they have done.

Regarding the first conclusion, it seems that Waldorf education and High/Scope have much in common, for Waldorf education has a deep respect for the child's freedom in play. Within bounds of safety we want the children to choose their play situations. Children have an innate wisdom as to what they need to play, and this needs to be developed in a free and open atmosphere.

Even the second point seems similar, although Waldorf takes into account the development of a child's intention to play. The three year old enters the room without a clear idea of what he or she wants to play. Something grabs the child's attention and he picks it up and begins to play with it. It may then go through a series of transformations, such as when a bowl of nuts starts out as play food but soon becomes a car with passengers and is pushed along the floor. One thing leads to the next, and the degree of conscious intention beforehand seems minimal. The four years old are somewhat more conscious about what they intend to play, but their play is still marked by high degree of spontaneity and flexibility.

By age five conscious intention is much clearer. The child will often enter the kindergarten and announce what she plans to play. She gathers her friends around her and they discuss the play and then set out to create the "buildings" needed. They equip the house or castle with furnishings, dress themselves up in suitable costumes and enter fully into the spirit of play.

By age six, a new dimension in intentionality has entered. The children know what they want to play, but now the talking stage is even stronger. They will not only plan their play, but often they will sit together and "talk out" the play. They may build a simple structure but not furnish it. They sit inside and talk it all through. It may go like this: "Let's pretend I'm the king and live in a castle by the sea. Sometimes we go out in our boat." "Right" says the second six year old, "and we see a whale and harpoon it." With small body gestures and keen conversation they live into their play. They are able to do this because they are now at the stage where they can see the situation clearly inside their mind's eye. Their imagination has been born and they put it to use in play just as the younger child put their limbs to use in acting out their play situations. This is not to say that six year olds never act out their play situations, for they also do that, but sometimes they simply talk them out.

In each stage just described, intentionality about play has a role, but it is not something the adult needs to enter into. It is sufficient to watch and listen, and if a child is consistently stuck over what to play as sometimes happens with children, some intervention can take place. Usually the most effective intervention occurs when the child enters into physical work with the teacher, such as sewing, woodworking, cooking or the like. The intention of the teacher engaged in real work communicates itself to the child and awakens a similar intention for play. There are also times when the teacher may choose to enter directly into play with the child. This too helps to awaken a sense of intention for play in the child, but the teacher needs to be careful that the child does not become dependent on the adult to set the scenario for play. In general, I found that to stimulate children's play it was more effective to involve the child in adult work rather than to enter into the child's play.

It is High/Scope's third intention that shows the greatest difference between it (and many other related programs) and Waldorf education. It also helped me to see what role we might play in collaborating with other organizations on behalf of children. On the third point High/Scope's director was adamant. It was essential that children consciously review their play situations. Otherwise, nothing would be learned from the play. Research had shown this to be the case.

I tried to suggest that play lived in a deep place in the child and fulfilled many needs in addition to cognitive ones. At least at that moment, there was no openness to explore such a thought. This, however, is the central difference between Waldorf early childhood education and most other educations today. We recognize that play lives at a very deep level within the child's emerging self. It serves multiple needs, of which a cognitive grasp of life is only one. Research by Israeli professor, Sara Smilansky¹ edited by Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, Teachers College Press (New York: 1990), has shown that children who play well also show gains in language usage, social skills and an ability to understand what another person means. They tend to be more imaginative and to be less aggressive. In addition, creative play strengthens the development of fantasy which later evolves into imagination and later again into creative thinking.² Reported on in *Der Spiegel*, a German news magazine, No 20, 1977, pp 89-90. Translated copies of the report are available from the Waldorf Early Childhood Assoc. above. Considering that children have a narrow window in which creative, fantasy-filled play lives, essentially between the years of three and six, it seems especially important to allow this capacity to ripen into a pathway towards creative thinking, rather than diverting it prematurely into cognitive learning.

Make believe play lives very deeply in young children, and in order for it to express itself it needs to dwell in a kind of dream state. If children are too conscious and awake, deep play does not occur. This is a primary reason why one would not want to awaken the child to his intentions in play and especially not to what he has done in play. Such awakening may help the child learn from that particular moment in play, but it will interfere with future moments. Every Waldorf kindergarten teacher has experienced the truth of this over and over. The more awake the child is cognitively, the less able she usually is to play creatively. Yet finding research to support this view is not easy. I have heard, however, that there is new research taking place at NIH and at Stanford University which may support this deeper view of play.

One of the last questions asked during the closing session of the meeting was from the representative of Inter-American Development Bank. He asked whether we knew of any research about early childhood that had changed social policy in a country. Several answers were given, but they did not seem conclusive to me. I had been trying to find a way to speak about Waldorf education during this closing session, but it was clear to me that we had little to say since we ourselves have done so little research on how our education impacts children. We have hundreds of wonderful anecdotes but very little solid research. I spoke not about Waldorf education but about a German study done in the 1970's which showed the importance of play oriented kindergartens in comparison with academic oriented ones. By age nine the children from the play oriented kindergartens had excelled over those from the academic kindergartens in every area studied - physical development, emotional, social and cognitive development. The results had been so impressive that the German educators converted all their kindergartens back to being play oriented.³

Unfortunately a similar study was not done in the United States at that time. Instead we moved strongly forward with academic kindergartens and let play disappear from kindergartens. In recent years play has begun to reappear as educators came to realize that the paper and pencil approach to kindergarten was not successful. At first Waldorf educators rejoiced that play was returning until it became clear that it is play with a purpose, and the purpose is to enhance cognitive learning. Play for its own deep sake has not yet been appreciated by contemporary educators. This seems to be the next threshold to cross in early childhood education, and through this meeting I sensed both the traditionally closed doors but also the new doors opening to our insights and way of thinking.

It was interesting to see that although the meeting began by looking at the vast needs of children on a global scale, it ended on a much simpler theme: the role of play in the lives of young children. For me personally it was affirming that Waldorf education should be sitting at the table with the organizations invited to such a meeting. Our view of the human being and the importance of play in the development of

the child might otherwise be missing. Others at the table were sensitive to this view but have not necessarily entered into the realm of play in the way we have. We have an important message to bring, but we need to develop the supporting research so that the message can be brought more effectively.

¹ Sara Smilansky, Chapter two: “Sociodramatic Play” in *Children’s Play and Learning* edited by Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, Teachers College Press (New York: 1990).

² This theme is developed in an article by Joan Almon entitled “Education for Thinking: The Waldorf Approach) which first appeared in *ReVision Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 2. Reprints are available from the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of N.A., 1359 Alderton Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20906.

³ Reported on in *Der Spiegel*, a German news magazine, No. 20, 1977, pp. 89-90. Translated copies of the report are available from the Waldorf Early Childhood Assoc. above.

Joan Almon is Co-Chair of WECAN, the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America. A former Waldorf kindergarten teacher, she now travels, lectures and consults throughout the international Waldorf movement. She is currently active in building alliances between Waldorf education and other organizations towards the protection of childhood.