

Psychology and Early Years Learning: Affirming the Wisdom of Waldorf

by

Richard House

Steiner Education, Vol. 34, No. 2

Waldorf Journal Project #2

We should take care not to make the intellect our god. It has, of course, powerful muscles but no personality.

— Albert Einstein

The neglect of the emotional

Emotions are at the center of children's relationships, well-being, sense of self, and moral sensitivity and are centrally linked to their increasing understanding of the world in which they grow up. Yet we have only recently begun to pay serious attention to the significance of children's emotions.

— Dr. Judy Dunn

In this article I will explore a vital area of early years learning wherein experientially informed theoretical thinking and empirical research, in the broad field of psychology (including psychoanalysis), cohere with Waldorf educational philosophy. It seems to me that the ever-escalating malaise within public education and parents' and professionals' ever-increasing disquiet with those trends offer the Waldorf movement an opportunity not to be missed. It is a chance to take our work and values out into the public

sphere, which is crying out for a humane and demonstrably effective alternative to the assessment-obsessed, anxiety-driven fare on offer through public education. One way of doing this is to write to the press whenever we see an opportunity, to challenge current conventional wisdom and set out the Waldorf alternative.¹ Another valuable approach is to draw upon the wealth of substantive literature in a range of fields broadly centered in the psychology discipline in order to vindicate the assumptions that underpin Waldorf praxis. It is this latter approach that I will pursue in this article.

I write as a professional counselor and psychotherapist with over ten years' standing, and as a trained Waldorf teacher with several years' experience leading a Waldorf Parent and Toddler group. As a counselor I am particularly interested in the emotional aspects of human experience and learning. My attention is here because, as Dan Goleman puts it in his important book *Emotional Intelligence*, our "fundamental ethical stances in life stem from underlying emotional capacities,"² and "emotional [competence] goes hand in hand with education for character, for moral development, and for citizenship"³ Certainly, the emotional level of experience is being criminally neglected in the current British government's single-minded obsession with unbalanced and developmentally inappropriate cognitive-intellectual learning at ever-earlier ages. Yet as Susanne Denham has written, young children "are more emotionally sophisticated than we ever previously imagined" and "if emotional competence is so very important, it behooves educators . . . to understand what is really going on in the young child's emotional world"⁴

Let us consider several interrelated issues.

- First, the proper role of play in early learning and the dangers of distorting or subverting its natural expression through adult-centric intrusion;
- Second, the distorting effects of anxiety on healthy learning;
- and

- Third, the developmental dangers entailed in premature or “precocious” intellectual or ego development.

In future writings I wish to explore a range of other emotion-related issues. These include the nature and quality of “relationship” in early years environments, and its longer-term consequences for healthy learning and relational intersubjectivity; and the centrality of “emotional intelligence” in healthy child development.

The place of play in early development

Play cannot be pinned down, and turned into a product of measurable learning. This is because play is a process, [that] enables a holistic kind of learning, rather than fragmented learning.

— Professor Tina Bruce

If we try to cramp and control him by our own notions of what he ought to be, we may close up the very channels that will bring him value and safety.

— Susan Isaacs,
*Social Development
in Young Children*

The issue of play and its place in early years learning environments has had a particular prominence in recent times. Early years professionals were truly horrified when, in 1999, the British government’s initial draft proposals for early learning goals failed to mention the role of play. Following a public outcry at this omission, the government’s revised guidelines invented the notion of so-called “structured play,” being an attempt to preserve the intrusively prescriptive approach to early years education while paying lip service to those championing the central role of play (such as the Waldorf movement and the interest group called “Let the Children Play”). While invoking the notion of structured play, the government glaringly revealed its limited understanding of the place of

play in early child development. Nonetheless, its proposals were welcomed in the *Times Educational Supplement*.⁵ Below are excerpts from a rejected letter I submitted in response.

The *Times Educational Supplement's* unreservedly positive reporting of the government's revised guidelines for early years learning . . . wholly embraced the assumed beneficence of the new guidelines; and anyone uninitiated in these debates would gain the strong impression from your report that the government has shifted considerably on the issue of play in early learning, and that its revised proposals are universally welcomed in the early years sphere. If anything, however, the new proposals are even more dangerous than the original ones, in that at least the latter didn't pretend to be what they weren't . . . You state quite rightly that the "key concept [of the new guidelines] seems to be the idea of structured and focused play." Yet the notion of structured play is a fundamentally incoherent, self-contradictory concept. My dictionary defines play as "freedom of movement, space for this . . . , especially as spontaneous activity of children." As soon as an assessment-obsessed, objectifying educational gaze oversees and intrudes into the young child's world, the child's activity necessarily and by definition ceases to constitute play. The government's terminological sleight of hand could easily distract attention from its unchanged prescriptive agenda, and must not be allowed to slip through without challenge.

It is . . . difficult to overestimate the damage that will result from the premature intellectualization of the child's early years—as Rudolf Steiner pointed out some 80 years ago. These fundamentally misguided early years policies are likely to keep an army of counselors and psychotherapists in work for decades to come!

What follows are citations from some literature on play from authoritative non-Waldorf sources in the broad field of psychology that thoroughly support the approach to play advocated by Waldorf educational philosophy.

The distinguished early child psychologist and psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs has penetrating things to say about the crucial foundational importance of play. For Isaac, the child's imaginative play is a starting point for building a necessary foundation, not only for cognitive development but also for the adaptive and creative intention that, when fully developed, marks out the artist, the novelist, the poet. In his make-believe, Isaacs continues, the child takes the first steps towards that emancipation of meanings from the *here* and *now* of a concrete situation. This makes possible hypotheses and the "as if" consciousness, "*It is exceedingly difficult to imagine how anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of the young child's archetypally momentous yet infinitely delicate developmental process could seek to impose a distorting, agenda upon it—a highly complex process in which the child is freely and imaginatively re-creating selectively those elements in past situations that can embody his emotional or intellectual need of the present, [as] he adapts the details moment by moment to the present situation*"⁶ (Susan Isaacs' emphasis).

Several years later, Isaacs wrote that the lessening of inner tension and anxiety resulting from free dramatic play "makes it easier for the child to control his real behavior . . . , helps to *free* the child from his first personal schemas, and to enhance his readiness to understand the objective physical world for its own sake."⁷ And in a magnificent section in her *Social Development of Young Children*, Isaacs offers us a perspective on play in the early years that should be compulsory reading for all professionals and education policy-makers. I quote selectively from it to give the reader a flavor of the Waldorf-affirming wisdom it contains.

Play . . . is supremely the activity that brings [the child] psychic equilibrium in the early years. In his play activities, the child externalizes and works out to some measure of harmony all the different trends of his internal psychic life . . . through his own wishes and impulses . . .

Play is indeed the breath of life to the child, since it is through play activities that he . . . can work upon his wishes, fears, and fantasies, so as to integrate them into a living personality. . . . [The] passive work of the educator in leaving the child free to make-believe is as valuable a part of his function as his more active services—a point sometimes lost sight of in the modern nursery school [The child's] indirect expression of unconscious fantasy . . . can never appear at the behest of the super-ego [i.e. via external didactic instruction—RH]. *It is always the fruit of the child's own creative wishes. If we attempt to control and contain it, we simply make it lifeless and formal.* [H]ere . . . the educator . . . must be passive and merely supporting. . . . The inner flux of forces within [the child's] own mind . . . is beyond our power to affect and control by any deliberate act. . . . [We cannot] determine the lines upon which his individuality shall develop, and what his actual solution of conflict shall be. The more clearly we ourselves recognize this, the greater support we are likely to be to him.⁸

And finally, here is the psychiatrist and phenomenologist John Heaton on play.

[P]lay is the performance of the movement as such. It is nothing to do with the attitude of a subject who must take up a playful attitude to an object “play” in order that playing can occur. . . . *If this is not realized, then play becomes distorted, as is commonly done in . . . educational . . . circles. . . .* In play there is a suspension of belief and nonbelief . . . to [the child] there is no conceptual distinction between being and playing. . . . The game absorbs the player into itself and thus takes from him the burden of [self-aware] initiative. . . . Play does not allow the player to behave towards it like an object. . . . [It] *does not point to purposes beyond itself, it celebrates itself.* It creates a structure in which the identity of the player is lost. . . . *Its nature is completely distorted* if it is considered psychologically as a known thing about which assertions can be made and which people then set forth to cultivate.⁹

In this light, the British government's championing of structured play is comprehensively exposed for what it is—a self-contradictory and incoherent notion rooted in quite fundamental and materialistic misunderstandings about the nature of human existence and coming-into-being.

Anxiety and the Adult-Centric Disruption of Healthy Early Learning

How serious a mistake it would be to try to *make* little children grow along the lines, which these records show, they can follow. They must be given a large measure of freedom to imagine or to think as the need and occasion arises. If we tried to *teach* them these things formally, or to *exert pressure upon them in these directions*, we should simply waste our time, and *might even do positive damage*.

— Susan Isaacs,

Intellectual Growth in Young Children

While Rudolf Steiner was still alive, Susan Isaacs took part in some detailed qualitative research into young children's behavior at the Malting House School in Cambridge, England (1924–1927), part of which is exhaustively detailed in her book *Intellectual Growth of Young Children*. The book offers recurrent vindication to Waldorf educational philosophy. Not only was Isaacs deeply aware of the need to respect and to not intrude upon children's early development, but, as a psychoanalyst, she was also highly attuned to the deleterious effects of anxiety upon learning. According to Isaacs, "Mental alertness and an active interest in objects are very dependent upon freedom from anxiety and inner tension."¹⁰ For her, make-believe play (which I would argue must be freely chosen, if it is to fulfill the following purpose) brings "indirect aid to the intellectual life . . . by giving external body and form to the fantasized wishes and guilts of infancy, *and thus allaying anxiety*."¹¹ In other words, rather than having an inappropriate over-intellectualized and prematurely objective concreteness eternally

foisted upon her, the young child needs an *unintruded-upon* space in which to play with, elaborate, and work through her deepest wishes, anxieties, and unconscious fantasies, in order to gain competence in healthily managing *with her own freely developed will* her curiosities and anxieties about relational being and human existence.

Couple this with the psychoanalytic insight that *emotional* states are unconsciously transferred between people—with young children being particularly susceptible to picking up and being affected by others' emotions *long before they are remotely able consciously to understand process and integrate such intersubjective influences*—and we have a lethally poisonous cocktail. Imagine, for example, the inner tensions and resultant anxieties and developmental distortions that are being set up within young children through their being preoccupied by, and having somehow to manage, the irresolvable conflict between their own nascent inner will forces, on the one hand, and an externally imposed adult-centric agenda on the other. It is little wonder that, within a few years of these imposed regimes of early formal learning, children suffer a malaise in their healthy capacity to learn. This is then responded to by *ratcheting up* that same poisonous world-view rather than dropping rampant control-freakery for long enough to allow insight into what might be going wrong.

Imagine, further, the effects upon young children of being force-fed Early Learning Goals by adults trying to pretend that they are not so doing (and hence, incidentally, offering children quite appalling models of inauthenticity to imitate). And these adults typically carry with them all the anxieties associated with OFSTED,¹² such as learning targets, impending inspections, and so forth.

Young children unconsciously pick up all such anxiety and perhaps unwittingly make it their own (given that they are developmentally not yet able to differentiate between their own autonomous feelings and those they are absorbing from the adults and the environment around them). And all

this before we even begin to consider the likely effects on young children of adults relating to them with an adult-centric *preoccupying agenda* of learning goals. Relating in this manner cannot but compromise the extent to which those adults are capable of a full emotional and relational engagement with the young child—and again, with the child learning through modeling and imitation that human relationship entails being preoccupied with one’s own agenda, rather than respecting and trusting the will and freedom of children to find their own developmental path.¹³ No wonder our culture displays increasing signs of difficulties in relationship, and a pathological narcissism and its associated character disorders.

Seen in this light, what is happening in public early years education is nothing short of the criminal violation of early childhood; and the long-term psychosomatic and psychological price our children are likely to pay for this violation is quite incalculable.

The Pernicious Deforming Effects of Premature

Cognitive-Intellectual Development

Children who are pushed too hard academically, and who consequently advance temporarily beyond their peers, may ultimately pay a price in terms of lost opportunities for development.

—Professor Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin

There is substantial psychotherapeutic literature on the dangers of premature intellectual/ego development, which strongly supports Steiner’s insightful cautions in this area. Psychotherapist Robert Royston, for example, describes how “intellectual inhibition and dysfunction” in adult life can be traced back to “a dominating autocratic object” who, in the patient’s childhood, established a relationship of domination in which the child’s own natural integrated development was disrupted. Thus, “the

child's developmental agenda and establishment of an independent self are impaired in service to the [intense narcissistic] needs of the object."¹⁴ Intellectual blocking and the negation of memory are the kind of adult symptoms that result from the person's inability to digest mentally such a bad childhood experience. Moreover, such debilitating adult psychological symptoms are exceedingly difficult to treat successfully because the patient tends to feel compelled to defeat the therapeutic healing process.¹⁵

In psychoanalytic object relations theory, an object can be any human person or cultural-environmental influence that the child imbibes (or introjects, in object-relations terminology) and makes part of her developing psyche. Royston continues, "In psychodynamic terms, the autocratic object gives *the self of the subject no space to flourish and instead pushes its own narcissistic needs center stage*, forcing the other, in a variety of different possible ways, to bear witness to the object's superiority."¹⁶ Further, tending to operate "through a range of covert, almost invisible interactions," the autocratic object "uses his or her interactive power to stifle the individuality of the child and will not brook independent ideas or challenge to his or her often dogmatic ideas and maxims."¹⁷ I argue that the intrusive adult-centric, over-intellectual agenda of the early years public school environment constitutes an autocratic object that may well be doing systematic and untold damage to a whole generation of cognitively hot-housed children. And it should also be clear from this example how we can use the clinical evidence from psychotherapeutic data to verify the insights that Steiner bequeathed to us nearly a century ago.¹⁸

Discussion

Materialistic learning . . . dominates education. . . .
Education . . . has become an institution whose purpose . . .
is not to make culture, not to serve the living cosmos, but to
harness humankind to the dead forces of materialism.

Education, as we know it, from pre-school through graduate school, damages the soul.

— Robert Sardello

If the above analysis is correct, then we might expect to witness signs of the harm being done by the current early years educational regime—though of course it is essentially impossible to separate the respective effects of the educational environment per se and the pernicious effects of modern culture more generally (e.g., Healy, 1990). Take a disturbing front-page story in *The Observer*: “Mind control drug threat to children.”¹⁹ It reported on the frightening scale of medically diagnosed child “behavioral disorders,” with “tens of thousands of schoolchildren with mild behavior problems [now] being drugged with Ritalin . . . simply in order to control them.” It is by no means far-fetched to propose a causal relationship between the burgeoning and comparatively recent epidemic in child behavioral disturbances and recent (and autocratically objectionable!) early years policy innovations, which demand a relentless and intrusive control-freak surveillance, measurement, assessment, and testing of children’s developmental process—not to mention the forced imposition of premature, adult-centric, cognitive-intellectual learning at ever-earlier ages.

In England, Ritalin prescriptions rose from 3,500 in 1993 to no less than 126,000 in 1998—a thirty-six fold increase in five years. The article highlighted psychiatrists’ proposed new drug prescribing powers for behaviorally disordered children—which represents a chronic misdiagnosis of what is at root a profound educational and cultural malaise. For rather than attention deficit and hyperactivity being medically pathologized and their sufferers subjected to normalizing biological treatment, these symptoms are surely far better understood as children’s healthy response to, and unwitting commentary on, technological culture’s ever-escalating manic over-stimulation and the routine violence it is doing to children’s

healthy development—not least its cognitively biased distortions of early child development. And until our policy-makers develop the insight to recognize and to respond to this malaise at a cultural level rather than at an individualized medical level, as is now done, the prevalence of children’s behavioral difficulties will inevitably continue to escalate.

Another tell-tale sign of the damage being perpetrated on our young children is the research by Dr. Judith Whitburn of UK’s prestigious National Institute of Economic and Social Research, reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* (“Nursery lessons ‘damage’ learning”).²⁰ Whitburn found that because English children start school so young, “many do not have the social behavioral skills necessary to learn.”²¹ Before long, the seemingly positive effects of the head-start they receive from early formal schooling are swamped by a learning malaise around six or seven—leading in turn to significant, underperformance in maths compared with their Japanese counterparts, who start formal schooling later. In a letter published in the *Times Educational Supplement*, “Stop damaging nursery children,”²² I wrote: “It seems highly likely [Whitburn’s] findings will apply to educational performance in general. . . . In the light of these findings it will be extraordinarily irresponsible if the government persists with its massively over prescriptive formalization of our early years learning environment.”

Conclusion

The lucid interpretation, the concise formula can be a misleading picture for the child; and indeed, a strain—an *impossible demand on his emerging powers of representation*. The nursery age child is not struggling for clarity, she is struggling for articulation.

— Adam Phillips
(author’s emphasis)

Overall, then, the principal concern here is that those whose early childhood development is inappropriately intruded upon and distorted are likely to end up suffering from emotional-behavioral disturbances in childhood, or—as psychotherapist Adam Phillips has graphically argued in his important contribution to the Anna Freud symposium²³—end on the analyst’s couch down the road. And the fear is that such pernicious long-term effects certainly will not be picked up by public education policy-makers until it is far too late to do anything about it.

Footnotes:

¹ See, for example, my article in *Steiner Education*, 34 (1), 2000, “But what about childhood?”

² Goleman, Dan. *Emotional Intelligence*, p12.

³ *Ibid.*, p286.

⁴ Denham, Susanne. p9, p16, 1998.

⁵ *Times Educational Supplement*, October 8, 1999.

⁶ Isaacs, Susan. *Social Development in Young Children*, p104, 1930.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p210, 1933.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 425–7, 1933.

⁹ Heaton, John. pp124–5, 1978.

¹⁰ Isaacs, Susan. *Social Development in Young Children*, p104, 1930.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² As Chris Woodhead chillingly called it, “a very fine, sharp instrument”—BBC News, August 2, 1999.

¹³ As so clearly argued by Susan Isaacs, earlier.

¹⁴ Royston, Robert. p15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, author’s emphasis, p17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Please see Cotrigan and Gordon’s 1955 work for a comparable discussion of what they term the mind object, and its debilitating pathological effects on human development.

¹⁹ *The Observer*, February 27, 2000.

²⁰ *Times Educational Supplement*, p6, January 28, 2000.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Times Educational Supplement*, p16, February 18, 2000.

²³ Ward. 1998.

Some Further Reading (Non-Waldorf):

Corrigan, E. G. and Gordon, P. E. "The mind as an object" in their (eds) *The Mind Object: Precocity and Pathology of Self-Sufficiency*, Jason Aronson, Northvale, NJ: pp1–22, 1995.

Denham, S. A. *Emotional Development in Young Children*, Guilford Press, New York: 1981.

Elkind, D., *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts: 1981.

Goleman, D. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, Bloomsbury, London: 1996.

Healy, Jane M. (1990) *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What You Can Do about It*, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, New York: 1990.

Heaton, J. "Ontology and Play," in B. Curtis and V. Mays (eds), *Phenomenology and Education. Self-Consciousness and Its Development*, Methuen, London: pp119–30, 1978.

Isaacs, S. *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, George Routledge, London: 1930.

_____. *Social Development in Young Children*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1933.

James, M. "Premature ego development: some observations on disturbances in the first three months of life," in G. Kohon (ed.), *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1986.

Moore, R. S. and Moore, D. N., *Better Late than Early: A New Approach to Your Child's Education*, Readers Digest Press (Dutton), New York: 1975.

Royston, R. "Analysis of intellectual dysfunction," in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 12 (1), pp.15–27, 1995.

Salzberger-Winenberg, I., Henry, G. and Osborne, E. *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching (Anna Freud Centenary Conference)* Routledge, London: 1983.

Ward, I. (ed.) *The Psychology of Nursery Education (Anna Freud Centenary Conference)*, Kamac Books and Freud Museum, London: 1998.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, London: 1971.

About the author:

Richard House is a graduate of the London Waldorf Teacher Training Seminar and currently runs the Steiner “Fir Cones Parent & Toddler Group” in Norwich, England. Dr. House is soon to retire after more than a decade as a counselor and psychotherapist, during which time he has been a frequent contributor to the professional literature in that field. He plans to move into full-time Waldorf education in the near future, and also to reactivate his former career as a editor and publisher.