Building a Bridge of Trust: Supporting Imitation with Mindful Verbal Practices

~ Jane S. Philipson

"Two 'magic' words indicate how children enter into relationship with their environment. These words are *imitation* and *example:* The Greek philosopher Aristotle called human beings the most imitative of creatures. For no age in life is this truer than for the first stage of childhood, before the change of teeth." (Steiner,18) All that we know, therefore, about the young child as a total organ of sense and the relationship of the unconscious will-forces to the business of sensing, perceiving, and imitating, would intuitively support Steiner's admonition that we teachers be adults "worthy of imitation."

In their article *Imitation, Interaction and Recognition: Communication between Children and Adults in the Waldorf Kindergarten,* Arve Mathisen and Frode Thorjussen posit that we can expand and further enliven the existing picture of imitative work in the kindergarten by considering the role that authentic, intentional and reciprocal communication—*in the right measure*—can play in meeting the incarnating child in the early years. In this view, incorporating warm recognition and reflection of a child's statements and observations can support a more successful integration of that child's imitative experience:

> *"In [Rudolf] Steiner's educational lectures, there is a strong focus on the role of imitation during a child's first years of life. According to Steiner, imitation provides important impulses for childhood development and later manifests itself throughout life as a source for independent thinking and sociability. However, imitation in Steiner's oeuvre is mainly presented through an emphasis on the responsibility of adults as role models and through explicating the processes children undergo when they imitate adults. There is little discussion of mutuality and interacting communication between children and adults. This article focuses on why interaction, recognition and mutuality should be given a more prominent position within Waldorf kindergarten pedagogy […] The idea is that these perspectives may inspire an expanded understanding of imitation and a reconsideration of what is at stake in the interaction between children and adults. The argument is that Steiner's statements regarding imitation will not lose their significance, but that an element of dialogue and response can be added and thus enrich the understanding of human and material encounters in the Waldorf kindergarten." (*Mathisen & Thorjussen, 18*)*

As I move more deeply into my work with infants, toddlers and their parents, and continue in my role with mixed-age groups of kindergarten through fifth graders, I have frequent cause to reflect on the question of this interplay of *example*, *imitation,* and *verbal interaction*. In the case of the parent-child work, there are several layers to consider: One is the negative impact of a constant barrage of speech and commentary on young children's being and ability to live into their imitative nature, and, conversely, the extraordinary benefit of learning to *simply be quiet* in their midst. Another is the conscious, mindful, and judicious use of verbal interaction that invites the child into a relationship of trust, imitation, cooperation and respect. Mathisen, Arve, & Frode advocate for this in the context of Waldorf kindergartens, but it is a practice already inherent in the RIE/Pikler approaches to caregiving for infants and toddlers. Elements of the work of Dr. Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber are finding a happy and natural place in a growing number of Waldorf parent-child programs, making this question even more relevant.

In a world of ever-increasing sensory overload, it is a strong emphasis in my teaching, and that of my colleagues in the parent-child work, to gently encourage the adults to cultivate a practice of sustained quiet observation. It is no small accomplishment for many of them to spend a mere 10-20 minutes in stillness, just quietly being present to the children in

their midst. It is a worthy accomplishment, indeed, on several counts.

Once they overcome the habitual drive to talk, move and *do*, most parents express gratitude for this quiet sanctuary to just *be* in the presence of their children, to watch, and to breathe. It is an absolutely astonishing idea for many that they need not respond verbally to every statement, gesture, action or query from their child. They are learning—by *example* and by *imitation*—to create space for their little ones to live fully into the sense-impressions of all that is around them.

In our parent-child *Mornings Together* classes, the basket of many-sized colorful felted balls is an endless source of wonder and recognition for the youngest friends, as are the cupboard doors in our little cottage. With sustained time to explore, uninterrupted by adult chatter and direction, yet held in reverence by their parents, the toddlers' intrinsic drive toward these archetypal play encounters is a joy to behold. Week after week, they approach the "refrigerator" with delight and anticipation to find each familiar item within, just where it was the time before. As they enter the classroom each morning, I can almost always predict to which activity each friend will go. Henry, for example, will always make a bee-line to the cottage kitchen to cook—an activity which his mama tells me is a big part of their family life together. Robin will go straight for the basket of little bears in the upper left corner of the shelves. She will swaddle, nurse and rock them faithfully.

From this predictability in the environment comes trust. This trust and the repetition of experience nourishes the seeds of imitative activity. It is as if to say, "I know that behind that door will be the banana. When I can find the banana, I can feed it to the baby doll…" In this example, it is precisely the practice of *refraining* from habitual and often reflexive interaction, verbal and otherwise, that not only supports the child's encounter and experience of the objects and images in their surroundings, but also sets the stage for imitative play to unfold.

This quiet observation time also becomes an opportunity for parents to observe the children's innately wise, purposeful threads of activity in a longitudinal way. The moment to moment activity of a toddler can appear quite random when seen by the adult as a brief snapshot in time, which is so often how children are observed in the busy-ness of daily life. The experience of watching their children without

interruption gives parents a new lens through which to contextualize their children's activities. Of course, most every parent finds their child's imitation of adult activity to be cute and charming, but when seeing it through this new lens—with some gentle coaching—many parents come to understand this "child's play" as so much more. I hope that offering a window into its deep importance becomes something for them to carry home and integrate into their own parenting wisdom and choices, now and in the future.

One example of such a realization for a parent occurred just this week. She quietly watched her child climb into the rocking boat and out again, probably six or eight times in a row. She later laughed and said to me, "I am just amazed that she does that over and over… I would find it so boring!" I said something like, "Ah, yes. You and I do the dishes over and over again because the dishes need to be done, and we know what happens if we don't do them. Some of us find it boring. For us, the imperative comes from without. Avery is coming into her body and learning about its relationship to the earth (and, though I didn't say it then, is supported by her connection to the spiritual world). The imperative for her comes completely from within. She will never tire of it, she will simply keep doing it until she is finished, and then she will move on to the next right thing." I could see from her nod of recognition, that mama was moved to consider this

new perspective with significant interest.

While the above is not specifically an example of imitation, it does speak to the power of inviting parents to see their children with new eyes, and to the value of giving parents the opportunity to imitate and learn from another trusted adult. Often in my own teaching, I recognize echoes of my wise mentors and early role models in my words, physical gestures, songs or story-telling. I strive to pass along these gifts to the parents in the classes that I hold, and in doing so, cultivate in them the disposition to bring a habit of respect and quiet reverence for their child's innate drive to discover, wonder, and imitate.

In his book *The Creative Word,* Daniel Udo De Haes writes:

> *"How is it that children, who experience so deeply this inner relationship with their surroundings, can wonder so fervently at everything that they perceive? Later we shall see that it is precisely this recognition [of the heavenly] which calls forth such wonder. It is the inner experience of wonder that we observe in young children as they marvel at the world. In order to form a somewhat clearer picture, we could perhaps compare this 'marveling at the familiar' with the surprise that we would feel if, upon arriving in a strange country, we were to meet only intimate friends who, oddly enough were clad in native costume […] Allowing toddlers to be completely absorbed in their surroundings enables them to perceive archetypal images. So here we see—in its purest and most archetypal form—like being assimilated by its likeness." (15)*

On the one hand, in my work, I advocate for this verbal restraint in the presence of young children, and on the other, I also do my best to model a deliberate and intentional use of calm and respectful words in a tone that says to the children, "I see you, I respect you, and I invite you to participate in this experience." This is a place where Waldorf pedagogy meets that of Magda Gerber and Dr. Emmi Pikler and brings to bear precisely the opportunity for enriching Steiner's picture of imitation which Mathisen, Arve & Thorjussen suggest in their abstract (cited above).

Janet Lansbury describes this use of respectful communication in her article, *How to Talk to Your Newborn*:

> *"Speak to her authentically, honestly, slowly and in simple language about the real things happening to her and her immediate world. Respectfully inform her a bit in advance about events, changes (like being picked up or placed down), and uncomfortable or new experiences. Acknowledge the sights and sounds in her surroundings, especially when her expression indicates she notices. Most importantly, make an intensive effort to understand what she is communicating and then acknowledge these thoughts and feelings. When in doubt (and there's almost always doubt), ask."*

Of course, carefully chosen rhythmic experiences of language, gesture and song, rhymes, finger plays and simple stories for the youngest children already have a well-established place in Waldorf early childhood education. These teacher or parent led experiences invite imitation through the experience of playful, healing movement and sound. I have been bringing the Wilma Ellersiek finger play "Oolla Woolla" to the children in my classes each week as we sit around the snack table. There is something truly special in the nature of these verses, which are admittedly a bit odd to adult ears. I have been quite surprised at

how quickly even the youngest among them begin to imitate this simplest of "stories." After the second class, one parent shared that she was rocking her 20-month-old child to sleep one particularly tricky night and that after finally falling asleep in her arms, the toddler opened her eyes and began chanting "Oolla Woolla, Oolla Woolla…" before drifting off to sleep again. Apparently this scenario played out several times more before the child finally fell asleep for the night. Another mother said that she was amazed to observe her child imitating the verse and hand movements in her car seat on a long drive to Southern California, after only two classes together.

Of course, the shared enjoyment of rhymes and songs builds connection and relationship, but the addition of deliberate, simple and respectful speech in the context of caregiving rhythms (diapering, dressing, bathing, and grooming as practiced in the RIE and Pikler approach and described by Janet Lansbury, above) and in putting simple words to a social encounter—referred to as "sportscasting" in RIE circles—adds an element of reciprocity and reflection to the relationship that deepens trust and invites not only imitation, but anticipation and participation in these tasks from even the youngest of infants.

To this end, though I intentionally leave most of the direct physical interaction with the children in my classes to the parents, when I have occasion to interact in a physical role with a child, I make a point to verbalize slowly and quietly what is about to happen: "Maggie, I am going to move your chair closer to the table now. It will help you reach your sunflower seeds." After some weeks of repetition, when she is physically able to do so, dear Maggie will inevitably take hold of her own chair and move herself closer to the table. This practice of compassionate communication around a caregiving task has a quality of dignity that supports imitation and elicits participation by the child.

It is quite a different gesture than becoming the object of an expeditious diaper change or hasty face-wiping. Similarly, calm, matter of fact, minimalist commentary can be of benefit in moments of frustration or conflict between children or when recognizing an apparent need or urge: "You were holding the dump truck and Numa took it out of your hands. Come, let's find another one."

It can be said that importance of providing children with regular opportunities for organic, sustained play and exploration, undisturbed by verbal clutter and over-engagement, and the need for calm, authentic speech related to the child's immediate experience are, in some ways, two sides of the same coin. Both practices are rooted in respect and they support a healthy engagement of the young child's imitative nature. The first creates space for its unfolding, while the second enriches it, as Mathisen, Arve & Thorjussen suggest, by building a bridge of trust between teacher or parent and child which deepens the experience of imitation through a gesture of reflection and reciprocity. While there is no question that we can happily turn down the dial on the indiscriminate chatter which can so assault the senses and impinge on the consciousness of the young child, I am also deeply interested in considering how, as early childhood teachers, we might stretch the mindful verbal practices arising from the work of Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber upward into the nursery and kindergartens, and bring them to bear on the traditional pedagogy as we strive, always in our work, to be "worthy of imitation." ◆

Resources:

- Lansbury, Janet. "How to Talk to Your Newborn."*Janet Lansbury: Elevating Childcare.* Originally Published Oct. 9, 2014, https://www.janetlansbury.com/2014/10/how-to-talk-to-your-newborn/ Mathisen, Arve and Thorjussen, Frode. "Imitation, Interaction and Recognition
- Communication Between Children and Adults in the Waldorf Kindergarten." *ROSE: Research on Steiner Education*, Vol.7 Number 2, Dec, 2016. Pp.18-22.
- Steiner, Rudolf. "The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science." *The Education of the Child and Early Lectures on Education.* Anthroposophic Press, 1996.
- Udo de Haes, Daniel, "The Creative Word: The Young Child's Experience of Language and Stories." WECAN, 2014. p 15

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