

FOCUS: Practical Work in the Kindergarten

“A Kitchen, Not a Parlor”

— Annie Gross

Many years ago in England, the summer before I began teaching my first kindergarten class, I had the good fortune to attend a seminar in Wynstones given by Margret Meyerkort. Although at the time I didn't understand the full breadth and depth of all that she offered, her words resonated within me and I knew instinctively that I was on my intended path. Her enduring comment, “The kindergarten is above all a kitchen and not a parlor,” informed my study and practices over the subsequent years. It implied rhythmical activity, purposeful work, and warmth.

As I grew into my work I grappled with these principles and found that the more we, as adults, worked at our daily life-sustaining and nurturing needs, the more the children would play. Almost on a daily basis our large kitchen table was moved more fully into the room, always in full view of the entering children. One of us would be working, and more often than not, if our daily work was purposeful and earnest, some of the children would engage in their own work—which is play. All children were welcome to join us at our work; there was always room for more. We never asked if they wished to join us. It was a legitimate and perhaps an unconscious inner choice for each child to make for him- or herself. We hoped that our activity would inspire play or the golden words, “Can I help?”

In the time since I first met Margret Meyerkort, the world has changed drastically. The experience of many children today is of adults engaged in passive activity, mainly through technology, or extreme activity, as in sporting pursuits. The former requires little movement even though important and creative work can be taking place. The static body with sliding hand, wiggling thumbs and pointing or touching fingers gives no hint of the tremendous capabilities of the human being. Sports, on the other hand, certainly can demonstrate the amazing feats of athletes, and one can easily understand how captivating this can be for children who don't often see adults using their bodies otherwise with such vigor.

*Gardening at The Cottage Garden in Amherst, Massachusetts.
Photo courtesy of Celia Riahi*

When my own children were growing up it seemed that our biggest challenge was the neighboring televisions. Today, with the proliferation of hand-held devices, it is hard for children to avoid screens in any shape or form! Unless they are in a rural environment, not many have the opportunity to experience human beings engaged in the human activity of life arts. It would appear that never before in the history of human development have the sheaths that protect the young human being been so thin. However, we know today's children have chosen to incarnate at this time. They have said yes to these times, and as they have come most recently from the spiritual world, they have much to teach us. We are beholden to them, to listen to what they are bringing and to create environments that welcome them and guide them towards their destiny.

Over the last few years, at each of our Pacific Northwest Regional meetings, we have asked of each participant “What are the questions and burning issues that you carry regarding your work in Waldorf education?” Boys, imitation, play, and continuity of care were among the leading topics asking for attention. A frequently-voiced concern was that many children were experiencing fragmented and breathless days, and that play was becoming less imaginative and less creative. A picture emerged of boys, in particular, often finding themselves



beside the teacher and being given handwork or fine motor skill activity in order to redirect their “energy.” Perhaps now is the time to be courageous and review our practices. Perhaps we can tip the balance in favor of a simpler format with fewer transitions, and provide a fuller vista of meaningful activities to soak up and drink in. Maybe it is time to consider moving back into the kitchen?

In many of Rudolf Steiner’s writings, we are reminded again and again that in the first seven years of life the environment is one of the human being’s most influential educators. Young children are in an empathetic relationship with their environment, irrespective of its content or qualities. Through their senses they flow out into the environment and soak up whatever their senses find. That environment impresses itself upon the young child’s physical body. If children can take up developmentally-appropriate surroundings that are created in a warm, rhythmical and experiential manner, their innate capacity to imitate will be sustained and cultivated. This vital capacity of imitation, so easily sabotaged and diminished by early intellectualization, lays a foundation for freedom in adulthood.

In *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science* Rudolf Steiner writes:

If people have knowledge of life, it is only out of life itself that they can take up their tasks. They will not draw up programs arbitrarily, for they will know that the only fundamental laws of life that can prevail in the future are those that prevail already in the present. The spiritual investigator will therefore of necessity respect what exists. No matter how great the need they may find for improvement, they will not fail to see the embryo of the future within what already exists. At the same time they know that in everything “becoming” there must be growth and evolution. Thus they will perceive the seeds of transformation and of growth in the present. What they read becomes in a certain sense the program itself, for it bears within it the essence of development. For this very reason a spiritual-scientific insight into the being of humankind must provide the most fruitful and the most practical means for the solution of the urgent questions of modern life.

Anthroposophic principles provide a framework for us to work with. As we consider these principles we are able to ask ourselves whether our activities are true to these principles. Anthroposophy has given us “the pedagogical law.” It states that the higher member of the fourfold human being supports the development

of the member immediately below. Within the first seven years etheric forces impress themselves upon the growing and transforming physical body, like a seal on molten wax, creating a lasting impression. The activity of the etheric body impresses itself upon the physical body, allowing for the transformation of the still-unborn etheric body.

As caregivers of young children working with the pedagogical law, our primary focus is on creating an etheric atmosphere that supports and nurtures the physical bodies of our young charges. The child’s physical body is forming and transforming through etheric influences, both from his own incarnating etheric body and from etheric forms surrounding him. Before the change of teeth, children are developing a bodily intelligence that will stay with them for their entire lives. In the body, the individuality of each child is slowly finding its earthly home.

The first seven years of life are phenomenally formative for the whole of life. Beginning at birth the child is still under the guidance of the spiritual world, acquiring movement, speech, and thinking. Those caring for the youngest children create environments that support the healthy awakening of the foundational senses. We know that much of the activity that surrounds the children is devoted almost exclusively to their care. Feeding, clothing, and cleaning in a warm and loving fashion conducted within patient, rhythmical, orderly, and consistent forms, allows for the acquisition of healthy habits to develop. The little ones might not notice our activity, per se, but our consciousness that determines our gestures, pace, mood, and intentions fills their surroundings. Our warm interest in the children and in each other provides sculptural forces for these young bodies.

It is fortunate for all concerned when little children are in the care of consistent caregivers who are given the time to attend to their needs and who allow them the freedom to move out of their own intention without adult interference. When I asked Carol Cole of the Sophia Project what she considered to be an ideal adult to two-year-old ratio, she replied “one for each hip.” As we know, the care for these tiny ones leaves little time for anything but the simplest of songs and stories. The care given to them is a large part of their day. Their play material is simple. As we go about our work, they fill and empty baskets, they put and place, they wrap and unwrap and so on, mirroring the gestures and activity of their carers. This is pre-social play and pure imitation.

As the children enter the middle phase of childhood,

the capacity for fantasy and play really takes hold. The extent to which these two capacities have developed and continue to develop depends largely upon two aspects—the individuality of the child, and the environment in which he is finding his new earthly home. Out of our adult activity within the child's environment, the capacity for play and fantasy helps a child build his body. At this stage, habits created in the previous phase become evident. I recently came upon the term “accidental parenting.” It describes how our unconscious habits nestle themselves securely into our children, only for us to realize at a later date that that which we do unconsciously, comfortably and habitually is also part of the environment that our children soak up. Teachers’ “accidental parenting” may be more subtle, but I have no doubt that there were areas that I was blind to. My only hope is that they were happy and positive “accidents”!

As the children mature and enter a more social stage, play can become sustained in a fluid manner. However, they need a constant context for play. Fine motor activity such as handwork or complex crafts certainly suits some children, but often requires explanations or instructions. Not all of the household tasks that our day requires call for vigorous bodily engagement, but those repeatedly-conducted tasks that do, and show what humans are capable of in service of others, not only inspire healthy movement and play, but also lay a strong social foundation. The children soak up our activity of purposeful work and in return manifest it in their play, which is the child's work.

In the final stage of childhood, children continue to be inspired by purposeful work in their midst. As their capabilities develop they are able to work and play alongside their caregivers. The diversity of tasks that they are exposed to, still in an experiential and non-instructional manner, allows for their bodies to develop in increasingly differentiated ways.

In answer to colleagues who would ask me each year if older children were ready for first grade, my picture of readiness was always that they could move with confidence, play imaginatively and creatively, sit at their place for meals and story time, look after their own needs, be helpful to their fellows and, above all, know that the world is good. I can't pretend that it was always the case, but I do know that our adult work amongst the children, if it was not too complex, always brought about a sense of well-being, which in turn allowed for the children to be themselves.

At every turn we are called upon to establish surroundings that are worthy of imitation. So what con-

stitutes being worthy of imitation, and how does that relate to the purposeful life arts? One way to consider this question is to look at the fourfold nature of the human being and how these aspects might support healthy development in the children.

On the physical plane, our movements and gestures, as we engage in the many activities that are needed to provide for our children and ourselves, bring an opportunity for us to use our bodies with purpose and, if appropriate, with vigor. Cooking: bread baking, making soup. Laundry: washing, rinsing, wringing, hanging, folding, ironing, storing. Cleaning: sweeping, wiping, washing, scrubbing, dusting, washing windows. Gardening. Cleaning and polishing shoes. The list is endless. The archetypal movements required by these activities need the engagement of our whole physical body. Our coordination, balance, and dexterity will inform and inspire the children in their own movement. Each child will absorb and integrate visual experiences according to his or her own individuality.

On the etheric level, all of the preceding physical attributes brought at a comfortable pace within rhythmical and repetitive cycles allow for the young child to develop trust in her environment. It can be challenging to give consideration to the rhythms and structure of each child's whole day, but it is important to remember that our time with them is just part of their day, and we are one person amongst many whom they encounter. It requires tremendous good will, flexibility and tolerance to de-compartmentalize the day and provide continuity of care with as few transitions as possible while at the same time keeping what is essential for their well-being. The order in which we do things with a beginning, middle, and end—assembling, producing, and cleaning up, for example—is an important aspect of practical work. The more that these processes can be done in the presence of the children, the better, even though it may mean that something else has to give. Ambitious overscheduling of our time with children has its costs, and less is truly more. Unpredictability is stressful and can lead to social challenges and a lack of confidence.

On an astral level, work brought about with equanimity and joy sets a tone of warmth and tolerance. Whether we are sloppy or perfectionists, whether we view our co-workers or neighbors with a critical or judgmental eye or not, whether we under- or over-value our own abilities, affects the mood that surrounds the children. Whether our likes or dislikes determine our activities is worth considering. As with all aspects of our work with young children, it is helpful if ideas and intentions precede our deeds.

On an ego level, work performed in a lawful, considered, timely, and intentional manner can support a calm, confident, and stress-free experience. A daily practice of reviewing our day will give us the opportunity to ask of ourselves, “How did the environment that I have created impress itself upon the children today? How did this environment inspire the children to play?”

Working with these questions and with these principles is an individual matter. As with the children the manifestation of our inner selves is in accordance with our own individuality. But with our adult four-fold maturity, unlike the children we have the opportunity to strive for a deeper understanding of human development. The children have courageously said yes to these times. With the wealth of wisdom available to us within anthroposophy and from colleagues in compatible streams, we surely can find the courage to review our practices either to affirm our present environments and practices, or to transform them. Above all, in working with children and using core aspects of anthroposophy, the recognition that our intention and striving to understand and transform ourselves is at the heart of the matter. This inner work can deepen our capacities to understand the children and our colleagues. As each of

us takes up these principles, out of earnest contemplation, we are able to create forms and rhythms that reflect our own authentic and individual intentions while at the same time representing human development in the light of anthroposophy.

I encourage colleagues to share their research and questions regarding practical life arts with other colleagues, both within our Waldorf movement and those working in differing disciplines. It can be both wonderful and daunting to visit one another’s classes to observe and share practices, for older colleagues to consider a different approach, and for newer colleagues to break through long-established traditions within our schools, but always worthwhile. Our deepened interest in each other’s work warms the environment that we create with social impulses that massage their way deeply into the core being of these dear children. ♦

Reference

Steiner, Rudolf. *The Education of the Child and Early Lectures on Education*. Anthroposophic Press, 1996.

Annie Gross, a Waldorf kindergarten teacher for many years in both the UK and Canada, and WECAN board member from 2001 to 2011, continues to do consulting and mentoring work with Waldorf schools.



Sanding wood blocks. Photo courtesy of Su Rubinoff