

Six Gestures for the Waldorf Early Childhood Educator

Holly Koteen-Soule

From the first to the seventh year, gesture predominates in the life of the young child, but gesture in the widest sense of the word, gesture that in the child lives in imitation. 1

-Rudolf Steiner

In this elaboration on the principle of Waldorf methodology, I have chosen to describe the work of the early childhood teacher as a set of qualitative gestures, because this approach is more closely aligned with the nature and orientation of the child before the age of seven than a typical set of guidelines.

Rudolf Steiner speaks about the task of educators as a continuation of the work of higher beings. 2 He tells us that before a child says, "I," before experiencing him or herself as separate from parents or the surrounding world, spiritual beings that guided the child before birth are still active in the life of the young human being, especially in the child's learning to walk, the acquisition of speech and the beginning of thinking. 3

The quality of this activity could be described as a gesture of Accompaniment. Early childhood teachers accompany and support the child's coming into the physical body and developing these primary human capacities, sometimes by placing ourselves behind the child, sometimes by placing ourselves at the child's side, and sometimes by leading the child. When the teacher leads, it is primarily through movement- either outward physical movement or inner soul movement.

Accompaniment to me means a gentle hand, a warm heart, and a keen sensitivity to when and how to be helpful. In recent years this responsibility to observe and be aware of the developmental needs of individual children requires a deep understanding of the role and importance of the senses of touch, life, self-movement and balance and the kinds of activities that support the critical development of these foundational senses.

The second gesture is intimately connected with the first and is Worthiness of Imitation. In Waldorf education we recognize that young children learn through imitation and that this capacity is especially potent during the first seven years and diminishes as a portion of the child's etheric forces (also called life or formative forces) become available for conscious memory and learning.

We can observe that young children imitate not only what they take in through their senses, but even very subtle aspects of their environment, including the mood and thoughts of the people around them. This requires that the early childhood teacher be dedicated to self-awareness and self-improvement in order to be a positive model for the children. Young children continually mirror back the lesser selves of the adults around them and show us where we need to be more diligent!

In early childhood teacher education courses there is an emphasis on developing awareness of our movements and speech. No matter whether we are moving artistically in circle time activities or purposefully in practical life tasks, our movements need to be clear, appropriate and meaningful, so that we are offering the children healthy nourishment for the development of their own movement potentials.

Correct and beautiful speech is equally important, as it works deeply into the being of the young child, and can even have an affect, according to Rudolf Steiner, on a child's maturing organs. ⁴ Because the young child's consciousness is not yet enclosed within its bodily form, we must also be mindful that our thoughts and feelings are nourishing and not harmful to the children.

The openness of the young child means that we must also prepare the environment with care. The essential gesture in this case, I would characterize as Life-embracing. The Waldorf early childhood setting should be more like a home, even if it is connected to a school, with a focus on real life activities. In early childhood we are working primarily to support the growth and development of the physical body as a foundation for further social-emotional and intellectual growth and this requires an abundance of life forces.

Our early childhood classrooms are usually abundant in beautiful things. It is my experience that creative activity- the doing and making of things that are needed by the community of the classroom- generate more sense of life than already made things. Being in nature and being conscious of our relationship to nature and nature beings in an authentic and unsentimental way is also a key to a lively environment. While beauty and artistry were important to me, the question that I asked myself regularly was, "Is what I am bringing to the children, simple, essential and life-embracing?"

Play is the creative activity of the young child and the heart center of each day in the early childhood classroom. Children are masters of improvisation. We can serve their rightful focus on process, if we have cultivated and are able to renew our own Joy and Delight in Transformation. This gesture allows us to watch and listen more openly and attentively to the children, to respond more creatively and effectively, and not be overly influenced by our past assumptions or judgments. It is a protection against getting stuck and can also help us practice open-mindedness in our work with parents and colleagues, as well as with the children.

We can also apply this gesture to our work on ourselves and to the revitalization of classroom traditions, especially in the celebration of festivals. This impulse, of course, must be kept in balance with our other equally important task as keepers of form in time and space.

The gesture of Creating Space includes the creation of safe physical spaces, clear emotional-social spaces, and implicit moral-spiritual spaces. A space is created when its perimeter is bounded. Boundaries can be fixed and permanent, like the walls of the classroom or invisible and situational, like the established habits of the class when they are walking together in nature.

A mother's womb is a space for the growing child that adapts to the changing needs of the baby. Boundaries will be moved as children become more capable. However, children feel most free when they can sense the protection of whatever surrounds the created space. The creation of space includes order within the space, such that everything has a place and at the end of playtime, can go "home." The picture of a walled garden, open to the sky, connected to the porch of the house on one side, and with a gate to the wider world on the other side is a helpful image to me.

We also work with time and create temporal spaces during the course of the day with our breathing-like, alternating rhythm of child-directed and teacher-led activities. Young children do not yet live in "clock time" and these predictable rhythms help them to feel free within these secure spaces of time, in the same way as the boundaries of a physical space provide them with the possibility of free exploration towards the goal of healthy will development.

Class habits (learned by imitation, of course) are the social boundaries that offer individual children the opportunity to explore relationships and learn how to move with and become a part of the group. The self-discipline and striving of the teacher is an aspect of the moral-spiritual space that is unconsciously perceptible by the children and perhaps by other adults, too.

The creation of a moral-spiritual space is closely connected to a final gesture, that of Gratitude for the Goodness in the World. Rudolf Steiner emphasized gratitude as an essential influence during the first seven years.⁵ The young child enters life with tremendous openness. Many aspects of modern life are not supportive of the needs of the young child, to the extent that some children tend to withdraw inwardly or are otherwise hindered in their course of development. If the early childhood teacher meets this openness with a genuine feeling of gratitude, children can feel invited to connect themselves with their physical bodies and earthly existence.

Goodness, beauty and truth belong respectively to the first three stages of life, with the feeling that "the world is good," being the most important for the child from birth to seven.⁶ In these times, it is also increasingly important that the early childhood teacher feels a deep trust in the goodness of life and the goodness in other people. Children will learn trust just as they do other lessons during the first seven years, through imitation. For a young child, the teacher's trust serves as an affirmation of the child's intention for life and can be a helpful bridge between the spiritual world and

this world until the individual is able to consciously connect to his or her own sense of purpose and destiny.

- 1 Steiner, R. Human Values in Education, GA 310, Lecture 3
- 2 Steiner, R. The Foundations of Human Experience, GA 293, Lecture 1
- 3 Steiner, R. The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity, GA 15, Lecture 1
- 4 Steiner, R. Education and the Moral Life, the Goetheanum Weekly, 1923
- 5 Steiner, R. Human Values in Education, GA 310, Lecture 6
- 6 Steiner, R. The Foundations of Human Experience, GA 293, Lecture 9

This article first appeared in the Research Bulletin for Waldorf Education, vol. XX, no.2, Spring/Summer 2015. Reprinted with permission.