

*Ringtime as Pedagogical Opportunity - Some Thoughts*  
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Ringtime (circletime) is a powerful pedagogical tool for supporting the young child's development. With it, the kindergarten teacher has an opportunity for concentrated work in a variety of developmental areas.

To begin with, ringtime needs to be defined in general terms as a starting point. Ringtime is a thematic description in song, poem, and prose accompanied by gesture and movement that paints a picture of what is going on in the life of the child. It is not necessarily a story with a plot, but it would not do to have a hodgepodge of assorted songs and poems without a connecting theme. The children need a thread to tie it all together in their imagination. It is essential to include the appropriate work of human beings within the given season. Ringtime provides a physical experience and exercises the imagination in creating inner pictures of the activities as well. The children are not instructed how to do the movements, or even to do them. The teacher's example is simply imitated out of the children's will. At the beginning of the school year, my ringtimes last perhaps 10 minutes. As the weeks and months progress, I sometimes stretch out to 30 minutes. As with all aspects of kindergarten work, we must look to the needs of the children in a particular group to know what is appropriate and needed.

Ringtime is a daily activity (except when replaced by a once-a-week visit with the Eurythmy teacher). The same basic ringtime can continue for a month or more. Songs and poems can be added, and others deleted, modifying the core that might even last through a season. Repetition is important for neurological development and the forming of habits. Repetition over days and weeks, and repeating a song or poem within the same day's ringtimes, are both valuable.

It is important to have open space for the movement ringtime requires. We need to have room to hop, skip, jump (2 feet together), and roll. These movements are important for kindergarten-aged children, and they should be mastered by first grade. Chairs and other obstacles need to be removed, and ideally the space has a rug or carpet for crawling and rolling. With this introduction, here are some brief thoughts about certain areas of focus that can deepen this work.

Ringtime can be a tool to support the child's incarnating spirit to take charge of the physical body and for working with difficulties of incarnation that children are having.

First of all, it is an opportunity for thorough observation of the children. In relation to the group as a whole, we can observe which children are more mature or less mature in specific areas. We can observe the children in movement and listen to them speaking. Our attentiveness can tell us who can skip and hop, and who can't. We see which children run with both hands up like a toddler. We can see clumsiness and awkwardness, as well as coordinated, smooth movement; stepping with heels and stepping with toes. Who can imitate, and who not? How is their balance? Do they crash into each other, or fall down a lot? If our ring activities are diverse, we can assess the children's needs. Objective observation gives us the chance to come to an understanding of each child, and the group dynamic.

The children's sense development can be supported in ringtime, especially the lower senses of touch, balance and movement or the will senses. Sense of touch is exercised in activity involving touching; touching themselves, each other, taking hands, and touching the floor. Lying on the floor is a meeting with the earth, our ground of existence, and an important activity. Working with the sense of touch helps the children meet the boundaries of their physical body. We can also help children with tactile sensitivities by creating opportunities for safe and acceptable ways to come up against each other. We exercise the sense of movement throughout ringtime, and this brings the children awareness and control of their bodies as they move in space. We sometimes see children who have difficulty maintaining

equilibrium. They may often tip over in their chairs, or have difficulty on swings. Jumping down from even low heights appears daunting for them. Balance can be exercised in various ways, including standing on tip-toes or one foot, hopping, or perhaps walking on a narrow bridge in ringtime, either as an imagined bridge or a real board on two logs. Rolling is very good for development of the inner ear, the organ for the sense of balance. To be upright is to achieve balance in the three planes of space; up/down, right/left, and front/back. These three spatial planes can be worked with every day. Upright adults lead the children into their own uprightness.

Ringtime can also be a big help for the overcoming of primal reflexes. This is an area of early childhood development where we need to become more conscious. Primal reflexes are patterns of movement that are present in infants and serve specific developmental needs. They should not be present by the end of the first year. These primitive movement patterns or reflexes should certainly be absent in 4, 5 and 6 year olds. (Descriptions of these movement patterns follow.) If they remain, they become barriers to later academic learning, and to the child's ego taking charge of the body. These reflexes usually disappear as the child progresses through the stages of movement development, particularly the stages of rolling, crawling (dragging belly along ground), and creeping (hands and knees on ground). More and more children in kindergarten today have remains of these primal reflexes. Bringing concentrated, archetypal stages of movement development in ringtime in repeated, imaginative ways supports the overcoming of these patterns. The children can become free in their movement.

There are many of these movement patterns. They include "tonic neck reflexes" and "labyrinthine reactions." Tonic neck reflexes are related to hand-eye coordination, and they affect the child's arms and legs when the head and neck move. For example, a child who tends to extend or straighten the arm on the side that his or her head is turned to, and bends the opposite arm at the elbow, is exhibiting a tonic neck reflex. A child who runs or skips with elbows bent and hands up has this still present as well. We can do crawling and creeping activities within ringtime for the whole group to help one particular child overcome this kind of reflex. Crawling and creeping also help neurological development because they involve cross laterality (coordination of right and left sides).

Tonic labyrinthine reactions have to do with the overcoming of gravity and with balance, and they are related to the inner ear (the labyrinth). Changes in the position of the body cause the head to move to regain an upright position. An example of a child who has not overcome this pattern of movement, which should be accomplished by six months, is one who cannot lift its head, arms and legs while lying on its stomach, or move its head separately from its trunk. The child may have difficulty bending his or her head forward when standing or sitting. Balancing activities, and rolling and spinning, can be a big help in overcoming these kinds of reactions. The child needs to develop so that various parts of the body can move separately from each other. The goal is balance in the upright freedom of movement. Again, creeping, crawling, and rolling are particularly helpful in this work, and can be used regularly for all the children. They need to be brought in imaginative ways, as pictures. They are tools that support the development of movement capacities and coordination. This is just a beginning on this topic: a whole book could be written! Some suggested reading can be found at the end of this article.

**Ringtime provides examples for the children's play.** In our media-filled world, children are bombarded with images not their own. The thoughtful, beautiful movements of the teacher are an antidote to the mechanical movement images the children receive from videos and TV. Their own imagination is stimulated by song and poem accompanying gesture, and they must create their own inner images to be able to live into ringtime. This strengthens and enriches their capacity for imaginative play. They can take the ringtime themes and activities into their play as a starting point.

As stated at the beginning of this article, the portrayal of human beings at work is essential at ringtime. The children experience the movements and gestures of workers they may never actually see. They can

learn that shoes do not come from boxes, nor do vegetables grow in supermarkets. They can play farmer, fisherman, and blacksmith only if they have had an example. They are on their way to becoming human workers.

Traditional ring games are not a part of our culture anymore. If we bring them to the children as the non-violent, cooperative play that they are, then the children can play them out of their own initiative at home, in their neighborhood, etc. The value of folk games such as 'Round and Round the Village', 'Ring-a-Ring-a Roses' and 'Old King Glory on the Mountain' should not be underestimated. These games offer a possibility of self-organized play for the children and should not be lost!

**Ringtime is an opportunity to work with breathing in various ways.** Breathing is the rhythm between polarities and this rhythmic activity is in itself healing. Rhythmic activity exercises and strengthens etheric forces and thus furthers the development of the child's physical body, bringing health. Children with asthma or other breathing-related conditions especially benefit from these rhythms.

The polarity of above and below is very important for the young child. Movements of jumping, of falling to the ground, and of moving from standing to sitting help the child in coming down to earth, and help the child gradually become aware of his or her own self. Movements and games that breathe between the periphery and the center also strengthen this self-awareness, this moving from the cosmos to the self. This is incarnating activity! How about the rhythm between humor and seriousness?

Within a ringtime we can be louder and quieter, faster and slower, standing and sitting. Another particularly important breathing is between movement and rest. The children need moments of stillness and quiet. These moments are rare in our modern world. Can we find ways to bring these moments within ringtime?

Social life is one level of breathing. Children who are socially awkward can be socialized through the group process of ringtime. And a social breathing between chaos and form is possible. We don't have to instill the form of the circle out of authority and instruction. We can use the "bunch of grapes" or "open circle" approach, and observe when and how the circle form arises out of the movement of the children. Enforcing the circle form limits the children's spatial relationship to each other. The bunch of grapes allows all manner of spatial relating, not just side-by-side. There is a possibility of socially and physically finding one's way into the group. And when the circle arises organically, how much stronger it is.

Another breathing, another polarity to work with is between finger movement and whole body/large muscle movement. The younger children need more gross motor activity than fine motor activity, but by working with the breathing between them we can help the children gradually incarnate all the way into the fingers and toes.

Another area of rhythm that deserves our attention is the effects of the various meters of the verses we choose or the rhythm of the words. For the young child, trochaic and iambic meters are especially important. Trochaic meter (long, short,...) is the rhythm of incarnating. (For example, "Ring around the Roses.") This is the rhythm of coming in from the spiritual world. This is oriented to the past and helps the child to incarnate to its locality, to "here."

Iambic meter, (short, long...) is future oriented. It takes us from where we are, out, and forward, into the future. For the child who is ready to begin to look out into the surrounding world, to "there." "The Grand Old Duke of York" and "I Had a Little Nut Tree" are in iambic meter.

**Ringtime can support speech development.** By our own example of clear, enunciated speaking, and out of the material we choose, we can support the children's speech development. We can help in the overcoming of speech delays, and increase vocabulary, in a non-invasive way: out of imitation.

Movement itself is a way to work with speech development. Coordinated movement leads to articulated speech. Particularly movement that involves fingers and toes can help develop articulated speech sounds. Many speech problems are related to movement and coordination problems.

One area that needs research is the use of specific speech sounds to help with developmental obstacles in areas other than speaking. Which sounds help work with which areas of development? Rudolf Steiner said, "With every vowel sound, we speak directly to a child's feeling life .... The realm of the consonants [is] where we work directly on the child's will. We can thus observe that we stimulate in one instance a child's feeling life, and in another the child's life of movement, which lives in will impulses." (The Fundamentals of Waldorf Education Aarau, November 11, 1921.) For instance, using alliteration is strengthening for the will. Consonants also have a physical, formative quality that we can learn to use in our work. Curative eurythmy and chiropnetics work with these principles. We can work with them as well by selecting poems and songs for the particular sounds of the words. (See The Listening Ear, by Audrey McAllen.) I am not suggesting that kindergarten teachers do curative eurythmy with the children, but that they become more aware of the qualities of the sounds of speech, and their effects. (I'd be interested to hear of work anyone has done in this area.)

**Warmth is perhaps the most important element of the work with ringtime.** Warmth is the physical expression of ego activity; warm hands, warm feet, etc. We're not talking about aerobics, but it is a good sign when sweaters and long sleeves want to come off. Warm hands and rosy cheeks tell us that the incarnating ego is working into the physical body. The development of the organs of the young child is dependent on the working of the warmth organism. There can't be development without warmth. To support the other aspects of ringtime as pedagogical tool, we must create a mantle of warmth. Will activity creates warmth. If the will of the teacher is engaged, it is more likely that the child's will is engaged as well.

One element of warmth is how we ensoul our movements and gestures. If we create vivid and living inner pictures of what we are creating outwardly for the children, and if our gestures present a clear image to the children, then we have a ringtime with warmth, enlivened by our adult consciousness. A ringtime that we create ourselves can bring more warmth than one we have learned. There is more of our own inner effort in it. We ensoul our own creations more. If we love ringtime, if it warms our heart, then the children will love it as well.

Keeping ringtime alive and ensouled over weeks of repetition is important. One way is to vary the movements and gestures little-by-little for the same songs or poems, and make them harder and more particular. With the older children, questions of discipline during ringtime disappear if they are interested and challenged with movement and gesture that grows more difficult. Our blacksmith can hammer with fist, then later with foot, then with toes. This keeps the children "on their toes", interested and involved. Interest leads to enthusiasm, a warmth that can fill the room. Children who lose interest, who are not surrounded by this warm mantle, try to get our attention. Their actions can say; "You have not enthused and warmed me." We could consider what we might do differently to regain their enthusiasm, rather than seeing a discipline problem in a child. Of course, we need to be careful not to create frustration and anxiety by pushing a child to do an activity he or she is not capable of doing.

We can make ringtime a living experience for us and the children by being awake, present, and attentive. Simply 'going through the motions' is cold and dead and not at all helpful for our work. Warmth is created out of the process, the activity of our ego. When we observe a child or group of children, and choose a

particular movement that would be helpful for them, and create an imagination to go with that movement, and bring it into ringtime, then we create warmth. This is pedagogical process. Our consciousness can work with this warmth as a pedagogical tool!

There is a direct relationship between interest, enthusiasm, warmth, and consciousness. This relationship deserves much contemplation. The warmth of our adult ego involvement is the foundation of pedagogical work, especially in the kindergarten. Warmth is a vast subject, and this is just a start.

These are just some thoughts on the richness of possibility inherent in ringtime. It is up to us to take advantage of the opportunity of ringtime as the powerful pedagogical tool that it can be, and to share our ideas and experiences with each other.

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Further reading:

Ayres, Jean, Sensory Integration and the Child especially chapter 2

Banus, Barbara Sharpe, The Developmental Therapist especially chapter 4

Konig, Karl, The First Three Years of the Child

McAllen, Audrey, The Listening Ear The Development of Speech as a Creative Influence in Education

Stern, Francine M., "The Reflex Development in the Infant", *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Vol. XXV, No. 3, 155-158

Steiner, Rudolf, Evolution in the Aspect of Realities, especially Lecture 3, Nov. 7, 1911, Berlin (on warmth) and The Walking of the Human Soul and the Forming of Destiny April 28, 1923, Prague (on walking and movement, speech and thinking)

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