

Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association 2012 Conference

## Approaching Literacy in Early Childhood.

Report, December'12

We gathered in the warm, light-filled, pastoral ambience of the Bridge conference room, many of the participants having journeyed through daybreak and the countryside's first hard frost of the winter. Ulrike Farnleitner, ISKA Development officer & mentor, opened with a verse from Steiner's Calendar of the Soul ....then invited us to perform a simple whole body gesture and voice to our name, this gesture was then repeated twice with the group, serving to gently remind us that language is so much more than just words.

Philipp Rebuke was then introduced and took the floor, the following is a synopsis of Philipp's presentation.

As adults, we can tend to expect children to approach life in the same way we do, to be the same as we are. In doing so, we project our understanding and expectations upon them. As carers & educationalists of early childhood let us reconsider this and see the young child as totally different from the adult, emotionally, developmentally and spiritually.

The child is at the consequence of all that is around them, when we consider the foetus we are all too well aware of the consequences of the mother's health and emotional well being on the development of the foetus, the science of embryology has brought forth much proof in this area. "A high level of anxiety or depression of the mother between the 18th and the 32th week of pregnancy doubles the risk of emotional or cognitive troubles when the child is 13 years old" Vivette Glover , Imperial College London, cit in: "Le Monde", 2012, October 13

After birth, the babe constantly receives from outside of itself, from its environment. The very young child also does exactly what it wants, regularly demanding its needs to be met, we are aware that the child does not filter its compulsions and emotions as an adult would.

Yet it would seem, that in mainstream education there is an expectation on the young child to think and filter as an adult would. The focus of the Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy, is to relieve the child of this burden while also preserving the nature of childhood.

By observing the child we can see that learning occurs naturally through the child's own invention and imitation. Of course it is in the child's nature to please, and as adults we often ask too much of the child and show our pleasure at their accomplishment- but at what expense to the child?

“Learning is not just about reading and maths. These are higher abilities that are built upon the integrity of the relationship between the brain and the body”

Sally Goddard Blythe, Director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology UK, 'The Well Balanced Child' Oxford 2004, p.5

Observe a baby when awake, what part of the human being is active? The baby's limbs are moving constantly yet this movement has no conscious direction (no thought), yet of course the baby is learning all the time, from this we understand that learning predominantly commences through movement. This theory on the process of child development is well known, the child develops from doing/movement into speech and on to thinking. But what does this mean?

This is an exciting time because the state is now beginning to consider the child from an holistic perspective, which

means to consider a child's physical, emotional and spiritual development, this, it might be said is the root of Steiner-Waldorf education.

So in answer to that question, we could say that the spirit within the head is asleep, also the spirit of the emotions is slumbering, but the spirit within the limbs is strong and active but not conscious, rather it is connected to the spiritual beings.

So why is it so important that the child remains asleep in the head so to speak? Or asked another way, what happens to the child if we awaken them to thinking, intellect or reasoning before they are ready?

Well, the effect is similar to walking in one's sleep!

The abilities of movement are slowed down, compromised.

If we observe a dancer dancing then ask them to describe or teach what he/she has just performed, what happens? The body seems to forget the movement and must slow down considerably.

“A child’s experience of movement will play a pivotal part in shaping his personality, his feelings and his achievements”  
(Goddard, p.5)

Riley (2007) indicates that research in the neuroscience field has highlighted three important findings that may influence thinking about education in the early years, namely:

- The development of the number of synapses between neurons increases rapidly in early childhood;
- There are critical periods when sensory and motor systems in the brain require experience for maximum development; and
- The more enriched and intricate the learning environment, the greater the number of synapses will

**form.** Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals:  
Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood 2010 Walsh, G.; Gray, C.; McMillan,  
D.; Hanna, K.; McCracken, O. and Carville, S.

Over the last few decades, it seems society has responded to these neuroscientific findings by considering the child as a sponge, by attempting to fill the intellect of the young child, in case that prime time or 'critical period for maximum' learning passes them by.

But more recent research in this area recognises that one's learning capacity has its foundation in movement.

“Increased control of movement is indicative of strengthening connections between the brain and the body and within the brain itself. In this way, movement helps to map the brain” (Goodard 2004, p.28)

Let us respect who and where children are in themselves- respect their way of being- observe, be open and trust that they are showing us how they learn, and what they need to do at each stage of their development.

Play & the role of the teacher;

We can easily observe that the young child is strongly attached to the adults around them, this is because the child's etheric body is not developed, so the child is literally linked to the adults etherical body the adult's consciousness; their behaviours, habits and life force will strongly influence the child. This connection serves to strengthen (or weaken) the formation of the child's own etheric body. Taking this into consideration the work and role of the early years teacher is invaluable but is often so subtle that it is almost invisible. Confidence in the role of the teacher is very important, “Children need to be inspired by example rather

than instruction” Gerald Hüter, Neurobiologe an der Universität Göttingen

“The executive functions of the two brain hemispheres are co-dependant with lower centres, with areas of the brain that are primed through sensory-motor experience”

(Goddard 2004, p 100)

The teacher through their understanding of child development takes much time to prepare the space both within themselves and outwardly in the physical setting, in this way the being of the child is respected, their curiosity nurtured, their chaos accepted as a process of learning, while consistently ensuring the health & safety of each child.

“Being prepared to take a risk is fundamental to human learning as we endeavour to develop new skills, try new behaviours, develop new technology and abandon the familiar to explore what we know less well” Little and Eager in EECERA Journal, vol. 18, 2010, p 481

It would seem that both the Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy and mainstream education do have the same objectives at heart. The UN rights of the child states that each child has the right to play, but is this play without expected learning outcomes? It is impossible to measure curiosity or the individual daily developments of a child, but it is possible to observe and monitor these learning outcomes over time.

“Ideal spaces should have multiple, flexible parts. What is particularly pertinent to note here, in terms of the opportunities for learning inherent in such spaces, is the dramatic potential for interaction between teachers and their pupils that reflects the interests of the child rather than those of the adult” (Waters and Maynard, in: EECERA Journal 18, 2010, p.480)

What follows are quotes from present day research that confirm 'routine', yet deeply considered aspects of Steiner-

Waldorf early education pedagogy, which on a daily basis contribute & strengthen literacy development in the young child.

“Balance supplies the brain with information regarding body position in space which gives the child ...‘gravitational security’.”... “Immature vestibular functioning is frequently found amongst children who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and Dyspraxia”

(A.J. Ayres, *Sensory Integration and the Child*, Los Angeles 1979/1982)

Singing combined with movement has a powerful effect on brain development, when we sing with others the sound penetrates inwardly.

“Vocal experience supports learning by incorporating language into the self” Goddard, p. 83

It is notable that a stutter will disappear when singing, research also suggests that through singing, dementia can be diminished, and depression alleviated.

“Music training improves verbal memory” (Y.C. Ho, M.C. Cheng, in *Neuropsychology* 17, 2003)

“Through music, the senses are refined and the musical and rhythmic aspects of language can be developed to assist higher cognitive learning” (Goddard 2004, p. 74)

Children’s brains are not computers which work mechanically, in the process of learning their emotions are always interwoven. For this reason babies and toddlers need less cognitive knowledge, but need someone who is caring and loving and enfolds them.

“This period of giving voice to thoughts and feelings is an important stage in identifying or finding language with which to express them” (Goddard, p. 82)

## Reading;

When we read we build an inner picture. This picture is created through the faculty of imagination. A printed sequence of letters on a page creates something totally different within us, there is no direct relationship between these symbols and the inner picture that is formed. A child who's imagination is compromised will not be attentive to stories or reading, simply because they are not able to form the inner pictures required to maintain their attention. Steiner -Waldorf pedagogy is a strong advocate in the preservation and development of the child's imagination. The daily rhythm of the Steiner early years setting contains many examples of these pre literacy skills. Songs, eurythmy, puppet plays, ring time and of course stories which are told and repeated for up to three weeks, using simple props & role play strengthen the child's capacity to create strong, fluid inner pictures.

A further example of this conscious preservation comes from the toys used in Steiner settings, these toys are not overly formed, giving room for the imagination of the child to enliven these pieces again & again to their hearts content. T.V is the best way not to instil the mechanics of inner picture building, because the pictures are being created outside of the child, the child therefore simply has no need to exercise the imagination, and the muscle weakens.

## Drawing & Writing;

What the child draws is what is living in the child at this moment. When we introduce the colouring 'between the lines' and the drawing of symbols too early we literally push out this ability of the child to be in, and experience the now. Of course young children can and do show great enthusiasm for writing through their many questions, but this does not necessarily mean that the child is ready for formal learning we can always answer these questions in a general manner.

In addition, while the child waits, they are developing a wonder and curiosity which translates into a healthy eagerness for formal learning... when the time comes.

“A recent comprehensive Cambridge Primary Review entitled ‘Children, their World, their Education’ edited by Alexander (2009) stated that starting formal learning before the age of six renders an ill service to young children, damaging both their confidence and their overall learning. Furthermore it states that the primary curriculum has focused too heavily on the ‘3Rs’ and needs to be broadened to provide for children’s wellbeing, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, respect and reciprocity, interdependence, citizenship, celebrating culture, exploring, fostering skills, exciting imagination and enacting dialogue. Concluding that England should conform to international practice by delaying the start of formal school until children turn six. This would extend the preschool, play-based curriculum to give children a stress-free grounding before they start formal lessons.” Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals: Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood 2010 Walsh, G.; Gray, C.; McMillan, D.; Hanna, K.; McCracken, O. and Carville, S.

“In the thrust for academic achievement it is often forgotten, that in order to pay attention, a child needs to have a degree of control over the body” (Goddard, p. 137)

For Steiner (1996: 179), the instruction of reading and writing could be best achieved through art. Walking or running letter shapes, painting and drawing them, clapping, stamping and reciting rhythmic poems, all call on the child’s active will and lay foundations for healthy initial learning in which the child’s limbs as well as heart and lungs are energetically engaged. Only gradually, with such an approach, does the head awaken to intellectual understanding and the secure mastery of written language

out of which fluency in reading can emerge. By denying, as it learns, the small child's natural delight in movement, poetic speech, singing and the activity of making pictures in a playful, free way, we run the risk of 'torturing the head aspect' (Steiner, 1996) until reading and writing become pressurized chores, subject to the demands of an ever-encroaching testing regime that raises 'standards' while killing the enthusiasm for language that all true educators would engender.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Philip Pullman (2003) sounds a sombre and prophetic note, warning us of the consequences of embedding reading and writing in a too narrow 'performativity' culture. If the path to literacy is not a pleasurable one, we run the real risk of 'losing the plot' in the unfolding narrative of what it means to teach children language. Once lost, the 'plot' will not be easy to recover with untold consequences for future generations.

Pullman, himself an English teacher, expresses his concern that: . . . in a constant search for things to test, we're forgetting the true purpose, the true nature, of reading and writing; and in forcing these things to happen in a way that divorces them from pleasure, we are creating a generation of children who might be able to make the right noises when they see print, but who hate reading and feel nothing but hostility for literature. *John Burnett, Journal of Early Childhood Literacy 2007; 7; 321*