

***As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap***  
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Despite meeting most of the requirements set out in Britain's Desirable Outcomes document, the Steiner Waldorf philosophy differs in a crucial respect: we believe in developmentally appropriate education, in education which acknowledges the maturational stage of the child and provides a curriculum sensitive to each phase. We stand against the current tide of educational thinking which seeks to rush children through childhood at an accelerated pace. We feel that early *learning* is of more value and is more child appropriate than *early instruction*. In our view the Desirable Outcomes for *Literacy and Numeracy* place premature demands on the developing faculties of the four year old child.

We do not wish to hurry the child into formal learning; we feel that early instruction is detrimental and may cause anxiety, tension and low motivation to work at future stages. There are indications that forcing children to learn skills before they are maturationally ready is both ineffective and counterproductive. Full perceptual processing ability is not complete in a child of four years old and we respect the process of gradual development which allows the aural and visual senses to mature slowly over time. Research indicates that the younger the child, the more difficulty she will have moving her eyes across a page. A young child will skip words, use her finger and jump lines, simply because her eyes are not yet sufficiently developed to cope with the task before her. We feel that accelerated formal learning is achieved at a cost - and our concern is that "hot house" children may prove to be less robust in the long term. We subscribe to the view that the experiences of childhood are intrinsically worthwhile and that they should be lingered over rather than fast-tracked. Children have the right to their childhood.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child ...” These beautiful words - wonderfully simple yet devastatingly profound - bear testimony to a truth long held dear by respectful educators: children's minds and souls are not like ours - nor are children simply miniature adults. As AN. Kelly, the Dean of the Faculty of Education and Professor of Curriculum Studies at Goldsmiths College writes: “[Rousseau suggested that] ... we select [children's] educational diet by reference to what he called their 'childish interests' rather than to the subjects we adults feel they ought to learn - whatever the reasons for our choices. We should not do what Rousseau says most educators do, who are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man. We must respect what Charles Dickens once called 'the childhood of the mind', and accept his warning against the possibilities of injuring this. (Kelly, 1990, pg. 91). Rousseau knew that children have their own ways of seeing, feeling and thinking and that working with their 'inclinations' was the best way to promote their education. The child shouldn't be adapted to the curriculum, it should be the other way round.”

In her book, *Early Childhood Education* (Bruce, 1995), Tina Bruce notes that Fröebel, Montessori and Steiner, the three founders of early years education, share a common understanding of and belief in the intrinsic value of childhood: they do not underestimate its value nor do they regard it merely as time to prepare for adulthood. Cathy Nutbrown, writing in similar vein, states:

“There is a sense of urgency about childhood - of hastening progress, of accelerating development. Is this born out of wanting the best for children or from some belief or value base which says the state of

childhood is worth less than the state of adulthood and so we must do all we can to reach the day when childhood is over... But children have their own pace and while, as adults, we pursue our own (and others') time scales and agendas, we need to be mindful of the need young children have to take *their* time. Pausing to listen to an airplane in the sky, stooping to watch a ladybird on a plant, sitting on a rock to watch the waves crash over the quayside - children have their own agendas and time scales, as they find out more about their world and their place in it: they work hard not to let adults hurry them and we need to hear their message." (Nutbrown, 1996, p.53).

Children need their childhood: each stage of life has its own secrets to impart and its own discoveries to be made and we should respect the child's experience and mode of learning. Two universal features, which characterize their earliest way of learning, and which are in effect the *sine qua non* of childhood, are *imitation* and *play*. These twin impulses are at their strongest before second dentition. After this time, when certain physical processes are complete, they give way to other modes of learning: this is when we feel the child has reached the stage of school readiness. Imitation allows the child to belong to a community, to learn its language and to copy various models of behavior, and play involves the child in imaginative, transformative exploratory activity - in "physical thinking". In a seamless way, these two attributes create a lively and fluid dynamic which supports cognitive, affective and cognitive development. By means of play and imitation, children begin to know and understand the world; they become willful explorers and they learn in the way most suited to their age and ability. Allowing children to make sense of their world by using the means which are so clearly there to help them with the task, seems to be a far more productive and principled approach than does the struggle to make them assimilate abstract information. (In first grade in a Waldorf school when children *do* begin to learn formally, it happens very quickly.)

For the Waldorf school movement, the notion of the protection and extension of childhood is paramount. Just as a good gardener protects his seedlings until they are strong enough to withstand the elements, so do we feel that children should be shielded from the pressure of formal learning until they are intellectually mature. Similar arguments are raised by E. Ogletree in *School Readiness. - The Developmental View* (Steiner Education Monograph, 1997). Ogletree writes about children under stress: There is what Elkind (*The Hurried Child*, Elkind 1981) calls a depletion of "clock energy" - the energy we need for daily living. The early symptoms of stress associated with "clock energy" are fatigue, loss of appetite and decreased efficiency. If early learning puts too much strain on children, they begin to dip into their reserves of calendar energy (energy that is of a fixed quality for physical growth and maintenance of the body, etc.). Rudolf Steiner arrived at the same conclusion over seven decades ago: "If we force intellectual powers in the child we arrest growth... certain organic processes that tend inwardly to harden the body are brought into play." (Steiner, 1928)

In effect, children become old before their time. Rudolf Steiner's passionate concern was that children before second dentition should be busy building strong, healthy bodies and not using immature intellectual faculties which cause them to draw upon their precious supplies of calendar energy, properly reserved for later.

So when to begin? For Waldorf educators, this rests with the concept of *readiness* - the experience of learning that is appropriate to age or biological development. Elkind notes with dismay that readiness, once an honored educational concept has been shelved in the desire to accelerate children's acquisition of academic skills and has been replaced with programs which favor early intervention. He states: "We are a time oriented and time regulated society and we impart these values to our children... we hurry our children because we hurry ourselves. (pg. 195) This headlong rush can be misdirected as Ogletree argues: "A child's inter-sensory development - sight and hearing - is not fully developed until age eight or later. Before age seven a child has perceptual difficulties; he often cannot distinguish visually between "b" and "d" and "q" and "p". He cannot hear the difference between "b" and "d"; and "m" and "n"; "g" and "k"; and

"z", etc. Full perceptual processing ability may not occur until age nine. Visual development, e.g., the ability to decode letters, shapes and words serially, essential to most reading programs, occurs later than auditory development. Our conventional psychometric approach to education of pouring knowledge into the child and "fitting him into a curriculum" that is foreign to his nature must cease. We must replace it with a developmental approach which examines the needs of the child and how and why he develops as he does. Developmental research suggests that forcing a child to learn a skill or to master a subject before he is ready is ineffective and inefficient. It takes him longer to learn it, and the learning is less complete... formal-instructional pre-school programs are not the most propitious way of preparing children for school." (pg. 40) Cathy Nutbrown is unequivocal. In her view: "There is a mischievous mistruth in the belief that doing certain things early helps children to get ready for the next stage." (pg. 54)

At a recent meeting in preparation for the voucher plan, I was moved by a heartfelt request from a nursery teacher who said: "Please don't make us teach them things too soon." Sadly, many teachers know how disheartening this experience can be. As E. Carpenter, professor of early childhood education at Kent State University recognizes: "Children are constantly involved in different degrees of readiness. They are put on their feet to walk and plop down on the floor. There are signs for being ready and for not being ready. The state of readiness has not come about through practice of things to come but through a maturing process fed by successions of related experiences. *A child does not become ready for walking by walking* [author's italics]. When all elements are perfectly coordinated he begins to walk and he perfects his skill over a long period of time." (*Better Late than Early*, pg. 210)

It is these "elements" with which we work in our Waldorf kindergartens - we concentrate on pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, skills which are "caught rather than taught". As visiting school inspectors note, our children have good phonological awareness, their oral skills are strong, their vocabulary is extensive and by their seventh year they are ready and physiologically able to learn. By creating a friendly environment, where each child feels safe and not under pressure to perform, the kindergarten teacher weaves a tapestry of learning experiences for the child - all the elements of which have context and meaning and arise from the life of the kindergarten itself. Through familiar events, which make sense to the child, at *her* level - and which relate to the well ordered Kindergarten daily, weekly and yearly rhythms - children cook, bake, garden, paint, draw; they listen quietly to stories told to them by their teachers, they celebrate festivals together and they learn to consider the needs of others. All learning is practical and substantive. To quote Rousseau: "What is the use of inscribing on their brains a list of symbols which mean nothing to them? They will learn the symbols when they learn the things signified." (Rousseau 1762, pg. 76)

Our children do involve themselves in activities such as making their own books; many write their names and a few discover reading but most are busy with their own "serious work" and we support their self-initiated activity.

I recently visited a kindergarten where teacher and child were having a conversation. It went like this:

Child: "I've got some lawn seed."

Teacher: "Is Mummy going to sow it?"

Child: (After a pause and looking very puzzled) "No, not that kind of lawn, I mean soil."

Teacher: "Yes, is Mummy going to sow it?"

Child: "No, she's not going to sew it, she's going to scatter it."

Teacher nods. (Scatter and sow agree).

Despite his unwillingness to accept the teacher's use of the word "sow", at least this time, the child has learnt in a non-conceptual way, that although sewing and sowing are identical phonetically, there are two meanings to the word. (The image of his mother sewing seeds must have been very confusing.) The

teacher chose not to point out the child's mistake and correct him. Instead, she repeated the sentence, gently using the word again as an example for him. Her responses and her awareness of his confusion, helped the child to extend his knowledge in the context of a very natural and non-didactic exchange. She created a structure for his learning borne out of their close relationship, and she supported his individual learning need: her teaching was relevant, not arbitrary.

Later that morning, I sat next to a friendly boy who introduced himself to me by telling me that his name was "M.O.T." and that he was a car. I said that I thought he must be a very safe car. His friend, sitting nearby, turned to me with a withering look and said: "His name's Tom really..., that's M.O.T. backwards." The two boys took great pleasure in their good-natured jest - especially as I had been so effectively caught out; we all laughed and things moved on. The morning was full of letter writing which the children were keen to show me, particularly when the window misted over, making an irresistible writing surface: "This is my name, and this is Mummy's name." "That's an 'A'." "Those are my letters." Numbers also scored well; fingers were spontaneously used to denote their owners' ages and children sang along with the teacher's counting rhymes. They took great pleasure in the alliteration and onomatopoeia of that morning's "slithery slippery snake" rhyme.

None of the learning experiences quoted above would translate neatly into the precise wording of the Desirable Outcomes. Because Waldorf educators choose not to teach children to "recognize letters of the alphabet by shape and sound or to write their names with appropriate use of upper and lower case letters" and because we don't demand that they "record numbers", for the reasons outlined in this paper - we forfeit our right to funding - at least in the scheme as it was structured. The way our principled approach to not forcing early literacy and numeracy, is codified via the school inspector's "tick-box" assessment form, is as a program with "significant weaknesses". We feel this is unfair, ruefully narrow minded and a misrepresentation of our position: the "choice" hailed by the scheme's creators turns out to be no choice at all for our parents. Our training courses, our attention to child development, our own advisory bodies and the demonstrable success of our pupils, are all dismissed. The notion that there can be quality education without the teaching of formal skills is swept aside in the face of a more rigid ideology.

Kenneth Kenniston, depreciating this trend, wrote as long ago as 1976: "We measure the success of schools not by the kinds of human beings they promote but by whatever increases in reading scores they chalk up. We have allowed quantitative standards, so central to the adult economic system, to become the principal yardstick for our definition of children's worth." (op. cit. in Elkind, pg. 54)

Approaches which promote many faceted intellectual development in a wider sense, in a manner which allows child-initiated activity and in a way which supports the gradual development of *many* competencies are, of course, much more difficult to assess. Clearly they don't lend themselves to tick box. They have been used to illustrate differing views of the child in inspection reports; they require the teacher to become a skilled and subtle observer of her children and, above all, they require time to implement and time to assess. An age-appropriate approach may not "deliver the goods" in the short term but may offer the child a better chance of becoming a sensitive, purposeful and thoughtful adult who is both intellectually and emotionally literate. Children whose needs are considered will grow up to consider those of other people in return.

Anyone who observes children with care will discover that they learn from everything around them in ways which are multi-dimensional, exciting and sometimes breathtaking. Methods of learning more suited to older children can have a crippling effect when applied too vigorously in the early years. Too much instruction too early can turn children into dependent learners who are unable to learn unaided. Sharon Lynn Kagan, senior associate at Yale University's Bush Centre for Child Development and social policy, asks the question: "What if a child can say his ABC's but has no curiosity to learn? The result will be a child who learns only what he is *supposed* to learn. Such an attitude is particularly dangerous as we head

into the 21st century, when initiative and creativity in the workplace will be especially important. Many educators believe motivation to learn is more important than knowledge itself. “ (Seal, 1997, pg. 20) Children who can't think for themselves risk becoming disadvantaged as adults.

Another danger of delivering packaged learning programs is that such methods - which by their nature focus on narrow categories of learning - can effectively curb the diversity and creativity of the very intelligence they seek to promote. Moore quotes American psychologist, Dr. Hans Furth, who argues: “Mark well these twin conditions: learn reading and forget your intellect... Neither the process of reading itself nor the comprehension of its easy content can be considered an activity well suited to the developing mind of the young child.” (op. cit., Moore 1975, pg. 96) He argues that the acquisition of limited skills in literacy and numeracy is not congruent with supporting many-faceted, intellectual development in the early years.

David Elkind draws attention to the two metaphors, one agricultural and the other industrial, which have been used to illustrate differing views of the child (these are loosely linked with the views of Rousseau and Locke, respectively). In the agricultural image, the child is likened to a plant which unfolds and develops according to seasonal time. In the industrial image, the child is a product, 'predictably fashioned' and quantitatively measured," subject to machine time and outer demands. Elkind suggests that those who work with children work with the metaphor of the growing organism, according to rhythm and season, whereas those who make policies view the child as an assembly line product. Words which relate to traditional agriculture are: growth, ripeness, plant, fertile, yield, harvest. Words which relate to industry are: outputs (outcomes?), deadlines, targets. In the headlong rush to meet quotas, achieve attainment levels and get results, the natural cycle of unfolding developmental activity has been set aside. Audrey Curtis acknowledges the lack of study in child development in many current teacher education programs in the United Kingdom.

“The new three-year B. Ed. Course with its emphasis upon subject teaching and, for the youngest children, a narrowly defined skills curriculum of literacy and numeracy, will go against all the principals of early childhood education. The concept of a broad based, integrated approach to the curriculum has long been the hallmark of good early years practice. Traditionally, it has always been considered that a sound knowledge of child development was fundamental to the training of early years teachers. Compared with their counterparts in Europe the early years teacher in the UK has far less training in child development. Good educational practice should aim both to understand and nurture the learner's development and to create an appropriate learning environment.” (Curtis, 1996 p.71)

Cathy Nutbrown also addresses this issue. In an elegant and apparently paradoxical phrase she puts forward the principle of simultaneously “seizing the day and biding one's time” (pg. 53) This seemingly contradictory statement lends itself to a delicate adjustment of Elkind's exposition of “clock energy and calendar energy”. My adaptation, with apologies to Elkind, relates to clock and calendar time rather than energy”. In clock time, within the rhythm of the daily plan and in an appropriate learning environment, we need to be alive and awake to the needs of the moment, to the needs of every second. We need to be in tune with our children and ready to support their learning and respond to their feelings in such a way that they are satisfied and fulfilled. When we are being creative and spontaneous, and getting it right when we are practicing the “Zen” of teaching - we are “seizing the day” - we are making the best use of our clock time. In calendar time, we understand how to nurture the learner's development and we do not hurry the child. In calendar time, we pay attention to the maturational timetable and respect the unfolding capacities, some of which the child already has at her disposal and some of which will arrive later. This is biding one's time. To “seize the day and bide one's time” is an educational challenge: a challenge which exhorts us to make the most of every moment and to have patience and consideration for the slow but infinitely wise pace of child development.

*“As ye sow, so shall ye reap.”*

The value of delaying early instruction and allowing children to play and learn at their own level also has positive repercussions in social development as the findings of the recently published research from the High Scope Educational Research Foundation in America demonstrate. This study (1997) now has data through to age 23. At the outset of the study, 68 three and four year-old African American children who were living in poverty and at risk of school failure, were randomly assigned to one of three groups, each following a different early years program. The first taught formal academic skills in a traditional and rigid manner, the second allowed children to plan, carry out, and review their own activities with teacher support; and the third used the conventional nursery school model with a loosely structured play environment. Those who had faced the more formal regime were found to be four times more likely to have a criminal record by the age of 23 than those in the other two groups and eight times more likely to have had treatment for emotional problems. The study supports the idea that early childhood programs in which children initiate their own learning are superior to programs based on teacher-directed instruction.” (Lasting Differences, 1997) According to Dr. Weikart, who helped perform the study: It shows that while high intensity teaching may not affect a person academically, it can have very negative consequences for their social behavior.” (Guardian, April 22, 1997)

We feel that by delaying formal education, valuing childhood and being mindful of children's needs, many skills and qualities will develop and unfold. It is our belief that, when the time comes, the eventual yield and benefit, both to the individual and to society at large, will be greater and the harvest richer. This is the genuinely desirable outcome of Waldorf early years education and we earnestly hope that the government will embrace real freedom of choice for parents - all of whom have the right (according to European convention) to proper financial support in order to affect the education of their choice.

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