

Two Streams Entwined

Striving to Understand the Work of Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber in Relation to Waldorf Education

Trice Atchison, with Susan Weber

We thus see that man accomplishes a momentous thing during the first three years of his life. He is working on himself in the spirit of the highest wisdom . . . This happens because the human soul and entire being are, during the first years of earthly life, in much closer connection with the spiritual worlds . . . Man works on himself by means of a wisdom . . . mightier and more comprehensive than any conscious wisdom of later years.

Rudolf Steiner

As a matter of principle, we refrain from teaching skills and activities which under suitable conditions will evolve through the child's own initiative and independent activity . . . While learning . . . to turn on the belly, to roll, to creep, sit, stand and walk, [the baby] is not only learning those movements but also how to learn. He learns something on his own, to be interested, to try out, to experiment . . . He comes to

know the joy and satisfaction which is derived from this success.

Emmi Pikler

The newborn baby . . . is between heaven and earth, not quite here yet . . . Trust that she will develop in her own time, rhythm and manner. After all, who knows better how to be a baby than a baby?

Magda Gerber

Rudolf Steiner, Emmi Pikler, and Magda Gerber all recognized in babies and toddlers the awe-inspiring process of growth and development that takes place during the first three years of life. During this brief time, the child's organs are still forming and she learns to roll, sit up, crawl, stand, walk, speak, and think. She is becoming herself.

Steiner, with his spiritual insights that formed the basis of Waldorf education, saw in this process

the formative Christ forces at work – forces that are more active and evident during this time of life than at any other. Pikler, the Hungarian pediatrician who founded the remarkable Budapest orphanage Loczy, and Gerber, who brought Pikler’s wisdom to the U.S. through Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), also saw this process as clear evidence of an innate wisdom at work. All three spoke out against prevailing childcare practices that failed to respect this profound process by interfering with, rushing, or thwarting development or by neglecting the child’s basic needs for connection and trust.

Early childhood educators who have been exploring these themes met this summer in Hancock, New Hampshire to identify topics for contributions to a publication on the first three years of life. The goal is to shed light on ways in which these streams overlap, intersect, and diverge. The proposed contributions are intended not as a definitive work, but rather as a continuing conversation on these important, and sometimes challenging, topics.

The intention is to contribute to the publishing of a book to be available in time for the International Waldorf Early Childhood Teachers’ Conference in Wilton, New Hampshire, August 4 – 8, 2008. The conference is an ideal forum for disseminating birth-to-three work and for elucidating ways in which educators can consider integration of Pikler/RIE work in Waldorf settings.

As Waldorf early childhood teachers explore the insights of RIE and of Emmi Pikler, many questions arise that have the possibility to send us more deeply into learning from our own observations and from our deeper study of the anthroposophical picture of the incarnating human being. At this July gathering, the full group worked hard to clarify questions and to look at contributions that could be made to further our work with the very young child. A lively discussion engendered the following proposed topics for publication:

What Is All the Talking About? Ute Strub of the Emmi Pikler Haus in Germany, a foster care home for neglected and abused children, described a Waldorf teacher who had come to observe care at the home. Like many others, she wished to know why the caregiver spoke to the baby about caregiving activities, since the Waldorf approach uses fewer words with young children. At the end of her

observations, the teacher said that she had come full circle in answering her own question as she grasped the value of the connection created through this purposeful, respectful, and soothing manner of speaking. A future article will elaborate on the reasons for, and manner of, verbally engaging with young children during caregiving activities such as bathing, feeding, and diapering.

Exquisite Play. Another topic is the importance of teachers and caregivers serving as facilitators of healthful play. Related to this idea is the phenomenon of more and more young children being diagnosed with ADD and other disorders and, thus, beginning formal remedial work earlier and earlier. Related, also, is the growing incidence of young children who don’t know how to play. How can facilitating play serve as an effective way to meet the child with various challenges, and promote general healthy development in all children, thus obviating and eliminating the need for premature therapeutic intervention?

Independent or Alone? Hearsay stories of questionable practices in the care of young children – attributed to the incorrect usage of Pikler/RIE principles within Waldorf settings – beg for further description of the true aims of the Pikler/RIE approach. There is a need for a greater understanding of the difference between inappropriately pushing the child toward independence and what Pikler and Gerber intended in their caregiving model: sharing in the child’s joy of movement and self-mastery, which means remaining aware and respectful. Celebrating the development of independence is not the same as leaving the child alone or unassisted. We recalled the admonition of Anna Tardos, Emmi Pikler’s daughter and director of the Pikler Institute: the young child needs to become independent out of joy, not out of duty, and it is the responsibility of the adult to warmly and intimately accompany the child on this journey to independence.

Similarities and Differences between Waldorf Education and RIE. Is Waldorf education open enough to allow other streams of wisdom in? How can the two worlds be bridged? An article outlining what practitioners of Waldorf education and RIE have observed in their work would be helpful – noting where Waldorf education and RIE meld, and how they differ. Ute Strub mentioned that Anna

Tardos specifically stated that we need to explore the differences between Waldorf education and RIE, and the reasons why they differ. Similarities, while important, can be recognized as sympathy forces that make us comfortable; dissimilarities, as antipathy forces, might ultimately bring more knowledge.

The Spiritual Underpinnings of Rudolf Steiner and Emmi Pikler. An exploration of what stands behind the views of Pikler/RIE and Steiner would further elucidate this work. Pikler came out of a humanistic and observational/scientific framework. She carefully observed children, and came to conclusions about what the infant/toddler does and does not need that support Steiner's spiritual-scientific observations. Anna Tardos has described Pikler as a seer who could, through observing children and their parents, tell what was happening with them now and project what would happen in the future. Pikler described, for example, one mother at the beach who allowed her young children to play while she was engaged in another activity nearby, remaining aware of the children and available to them when they needed her, versus another mother absorbed in her own business and unavailable to her children while they played. The first mother embodied the healthy Pikler/RIE approach; the second did not.

According to Ute Strub, the Pikler approach doesn't deny spirituality, but doesn't articulate it or outwardly work from it. Pikler seems to have recognized the special forces at work during the first three years, although she didn't name them as the Christ forces. She felt it supremely important not to interfere with this profound process, and so saw that the best approach was to allow the forces do their work by getting out of the way and remaining mindful not to interfere, while simultaneously remaining attentive and ready to respond.

Reverence Observed. Pikler herself gave no overt statements about a spiritual reality, but a strong sense of reverence was and is conveyed through deeds, through the caregiving ritual, and the relationship between adult and child. One research group member, when observing at the Pikler Institute, saw a nurse tenderly oiling all the creases of a baby's arms and legs. Anna Tardos said, "Look, she is anointing the child in the way Mary Magdalene anointed Jesus." Another member similarly experienced a sense of the sacred

while watching a Pikler Institute pediatrician work with a seriously developmentally delayed sixteen-month-old. Every day the child needed his spastic limbs moved. The pediatrician sang, spoke, and otherwise engaged with the child in such a loving and healing manner that the observer felt that she was witnessing spiritual substance, the I-thou relationship, in action.

Transformation of the Adult's Gesture toward the Child from Birth to Age Seven. A year's research conducted by staff working with the older children (four- to six-year-olds) at the Pikler Institute included observation, looking at the daily records of caregivers and studying Pikler's writings, with the intention of recognizing what the evolving gesture of the adult toward the children needed to be. This presentation at the April 2007 international symposium prompted the idea of an article on Waldorf early care that would look at this question from the other side: what inner transformation is needed by a Waldorf early childhood teacher in his or her gesture when the care of children in the first three years (rather than from age three to seven) is taken up? This question could be viewed through various lenses – for example, in terms of movement, sensory awareness, rhythm, touch, imitation, and so on.

Ute cautioned that many older children today haven't had a Pikler/RIE experience as a baby and may need to experience what they haven't had in order to regain confidence and mastery; therefore in certain cases the nursery or kindergarten teacher may need to bring in elements considered appropriate only for younger children. In these cases, the caregiver would be conscious of what she was doing and the reasons for doing it, rather than unwittingly neglecting to adjust her behavior to the changing needs of a child at a different stage as new soul, spiritual, and physical qualities emerge.

Mixed Ages or Developmental Stages? The Emmi Pikler Haus in Germany groups children by developmental stage. Other educators and childcare providers advocate mixed-age settings with a wider range of ages as being more familial and natural. A look at the different explanations of these groupings and real-life scenarios is another topic for future consideration.

Fragmented Care: Is There a Better Way? Great care is taken in Waldorf grades programs to