

# 2003 NAEYC Conference

Rosario Villasana-Ruiz

Over 20,000 people attended the 2003 National Association of Education for the Young Child conference at the McCormick Convention Center in Chicago, a huge conference center about four city blocks in size! From Wednesday, November 5, to Saturday, November 8, Cynthia Aldinger and I participated in the annual national conference of early childhood educators.

During the four days of the conference, we shared a corner of the convention center with over one thousand exhibitor booths representing the major names in early childhood and school equipment, products, services and supplies of every imaginable kind. And some we couldn't quite figure! In a 10 x 10 foot booth, with a sign bearing the name "Waldorf Early Childhood Association" and beautiful fleece puppets on loan from the Chicago Waldorf School, we created a respite for eye and soul. Cynthia and I engaged in many conversations and answered a steady stream of questions about Waldorf education. There was much interest, and the requests for information filled many pages of our mailing list. This experience served as an affirmation for continuing WECAN's participation in conferences of this magnitude. When Joan Almon attended the NAEYC Conferences many years ago, she had a similar response from people. Many expressed a sense of relief to see Waldorf there. As educators working from a Steiner/Waldorf approach, our voice is an important part of a whole picture of early education. Unfortunately, it has been missing from the more accessible arenas, and the response to our presence attests to the need for the gifts of Waldorf-based education.

The materialistic aspects of the early childhood education industry were rampant with much to buy and choose from in the exhibitors' hall. This view of education in which "things" are seen as very important and pivotal in the education of young children is a chilling reminder of the over-stimulation and bombardment of the

senses to which children are exposed in many childcare centers around the country. Often, with the best of intentions, teachers fill walls, bins, shelves with things that are "educational," and too often these rooms seem to "eat up" the children in the sense that they overwhelm the children and distract them from the important and joyful tasks of childhood.

Visitors to our booth often had an "aahh" expression as they visually allowed themselves to take in the softness and beauty of the materials in our booth. Many wanted to buy our display materials, and we could easily have sold a good amount of the items we used for puppet shows. One had the feeling that our booth was an oasis in the middle of a desert. Considering the tremendous amount of things for sale and the great degree of difference in quality and workmanship, this was not surprising. In fact, for me it was quite overwhelming to see the numerous and—too often—arbitrary things for sale; it was difficult to see how many of these things would be a benefit for the growing young child.

Our presentation, "Foundations for Literacy: The Critical Role of Storytelling, Puppetry, and Poetry for Language and Literacy Acquisition," was very well received with over three hundred people in attendance. It was rewarding to have an enthusiastic response.

The joy with which educators engaged in hand gesture games with partners was palpable. While hesitant at first to actually touch each other, the sound of laughter soon filled the room as they learned the rhymes. Moving through an autumn circle, teachers experienced the continuity of song that weaves a theme to create context for a special story for the young child.

After the presentation, many came up to look at the materials used for the presentation and commented on the fine and beautiful quality of the puppets and animals. Affirming that the beauty of the puppets and materials used for the

nursery rhymes is an important task of the teacher was a new but welcome thought for many, especially since they had just experienced for themselves the impact of using beautifully handcrafted materials. In many settings, teachers must spend a considerable amount of time on curriculum planning, administrative duties, and program requirements, rather than on the careful build-up of the environment and elements that nurture the child's senses. Creating materials for a puppet show, knitting animals, and dying silks is more often a priority for Waldorf teachers than for non-Waldorf teachers.

These two topics were the major part of our presentation: the critical role of storytelling, puppetry, and poetry for language and literacy acquisition and building up a circle time into a story, including conscious intentionality to transform the basic elements into an engaging mystery.

We rounded out the presentation by offering suggestions for appropriate activities for the stages of the child's development from infants through kindergarten age.

All in all, it was wonderful to be present at this conference and to meet the visitors to the booth. I would hope that someday we are able to host a special interest cluster group to discuss healthy childcare practices. Perhaps this could be taken up as an alliance between a number of the Waldorf Early Childhood efforts. The times seem to call for engagement with all who care for young children to help focus the work in a way that truly nurtures and protects the child.

**Cynthia Aldinger**, Executive Director of *Lifeways*, is a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the Alliance for Childhood and is a WECAN Board member. Her passion is the preservation of the playful spirit of childhood and the recognition that the most important schooling in the early years comes from the Living Arts (domestic, nurturing, creative and social arts).

**Rosario Villasana-Ruiz, M.A.**, LifeWays Consultant, is a Child Development Specialist at

*the Children's Council of San Francisco, Instructor at City College of SF in one of the State Preschool programs, and Early Childhood Consultant. Her primary focus is the birth to seven-year-old child, as this is a critical stage setting the foundation for future learning and quality of life. During this period family support and parenting is an important service and an essential aspect for successful programs.*

## ***Conversations Overheard***

Child 1: Do you know who made the world?

Child 2: Yes, Captain Canada made the world.

Child 1: No, God made the world.

Child 2: God is the hardest mystery there is.

Child 1: I don't know what you are talking about.

Child 2: God was born before people existed, even before dinosaurs, even before Egyptians.

Child 1: I think God is dangerous.

Child 2: No he is not. There are actually lots of gods: gods for trees, gods for animals and flowers.

Child 1: God lives in the sky.

Child 2: God is a big light.

Child 1: I know where God lives: He lives in a castle in the sky and you only can reach that castle if you go up in a rocket ship.

Child 2: My mom knows how to get to China.

Child 1: You have to dig through the earth to the other side of the world.

Child 2: But you can use an airplane.

Child 1: My mom knows better!

*Recorded by Anna at snacktime.*