

## Waldorf Early Childhood Education in Spain

— Louise deForest

In the autumn of 2017, the IASWECE Council, with representatives from around 34 countries, gathered in Barcelona, Spain for one of two yearly meetings. Meeting in different member countries gives the council a first-hand experience of how Waldorf early childhood education is developing around the world, as well as an opportunity to meet and talk with local Waldorf educators and to visit schools. Indeed, many Council members come early to spend a few days in different kindergartens and early childhood programs around the country before joining the council meeting.

Having lived in Barcelona in my late teenage years, it was delightful to revisit special places (when I could find them) and to discover some of the many changes that have happened in Barcelona. What a special city this is, with the amazing architecture of Gaudí and others, the seaport with its international flavor, the eastern Pyrenees looming over the city, and all the hidden alleyways and plazas one can find throughout.

Our council meeting coincided with political demonstrations in Barcelona, asking for more balanced fiscal support from the government (and some asking for independence from the government), and the Festival of Sant Jordi, the Patron Saint of Barcelona. It was quite a juxtaposition of images to see huge dragon puppets dancing down the side streets accompanied by drummers and sparklers while groups of all ages marched down the major roads, Barcelona flags waving, songs being sung and slogans being chanted in Catalan. Contrary to the reports in America, the demonstrations were good-natured and friendly, though the demands were serious and come from a deep history of feeling side-lined.

As far as I know, people in Spain began to be interested in anthroposophy in the late 1960s. Because this was during the highly repressive Franco regime, small study groups gathered clandestinely in Madrid. The major focus for these groups was

translating lectures into Spanish and studying anthroposophy. When democracy finally came to Spain, people pursued Waldorf teacher training in Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, with the plan of founding Waldorf schools in Spain. This happened in April 1979, just outside of Madrid, when the first kindergarten opened in what is now Escuela Libre Micael, with just five children. This school now has five hundred students from toddler groups through twelfth grade.

Presently, there are twenty-five kindergartens, twelve primary schools, four middle schools, and one high school in Spain. A deeply Catholic country, Spain remains very conservative despite its often progressive political leadership. So the growth of Waldorf schools has been slow but steady. This is also true for the Camphill movement, which has been trying for years to get a foothold in northern Spain.

In 2000, the Asosación de Centros Educativos (Association of Waldorf Centers) in Spain was established. This is made up of representatives from kindergartens, primary schools, and teacher training institutions around the country, who work together to protect the naming rights, support new initiatives, promote the quality of teaching, and actively participate in international educational associations, including IASWECE. Members of this association are also helping their neighbors in Portugal establish healthy Waldorf schools there.

There are now twelve teacher training seminars in Spain, educating approximately 1,000 aspiring Waldorf teachers. That seems like a very high number but, as we know, not every Waldorf teacher trainee becomes a Waldorf teacher. In my travels I have met many Spanish-trained teachers working in other countries. These seminars are accredited by the Ministry of Education in Spain, so graduates receive a Masters in Waldorf education. Perhaps best of all, students studying education in the major universities both learn about Waldorf education and visit Waldorf

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schools as a part of their education.

While in Spain, I had the opportunity to participate in a conference about sleep (as had been requested by the International Birth to Three group) and to visit an early childhood program in a sleepy town in the foothills of the Pyrenees. I found the teachers, like Waldorf early childhood teachers everywhere, to be enthusiastic, warm, and forward-thinking individuals. They have a healthy balance between outdoor and indoor times and a tiny but rather astonishing play yard with many opportunities for movement and meaningful activity. There were

two large classes for a mixed-age kindergarten and a small but full nursery program; in all, about thirty-five children were being served.

Waldorf education is alive and well in Spain, and I often hear of new early childhood initiatives popping up in different parts of the country. The challenges that the Waldorf movement faces there—conservatism, religious dogmatism, suspicion of anything new and different, regionalism—will all be overcome as generations of Waldorf graduates begin to transform the country through the education they have received. ◆

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