

Book Reviews

Reclaim Early Childhood: The Philosophy, Psychology and Practice of Steiner Waldorf Early Years Education

By Sebastian and Tamara Suggate
Hawthorn Press, 2019

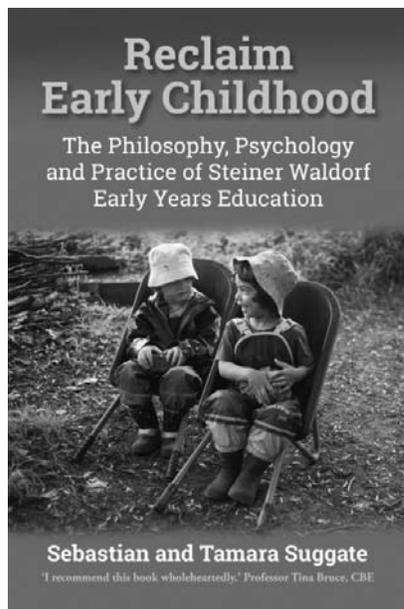
Reviewed by Bernhard Schmalenbach

The arrival of this book is most timely. The late Joan Almon contributed a foreword to this volume in which she stated: “In my 50 years of working with and for children, I have never seen a time of greater need to defend childhood, especially in the United States... There is a growing materialistic view of the world and this applies to children, as well. Rather than paying attention to the way children actually develop and then creating educational approaches that support the child’s healthy development, the child is viewed in a machine-like way, and arbitrary goals for achievement are set as if one can simply recalibrate the child to perform tasks at ages we arbitrarily decree.”

The rightfulness of allowing and protecting children’s development to unfold in an unhurried way has been the foundation upon which Waldorf early childhood education has stood these past 100 years. Now questions in our demanding, fast-paced society challenge whether this view can still be supported. Is there modern research to validate this developmental approach and practices that surround and support the child in a Waldorf kindergarten?

The answer is yes. The following detailed review is kindly shared from the journal *Anthroposophic Perspectives in Inclusive Social Development*, where it was printed in March 2020. Bernhard Schmalenbach, professor and director of the Institute for Curative Education and Social Therapy at Alanus University in Germany, describes the book’s wide and carefully researched content.

~ Nancy Blanning



Reclaim Early Childhood is the title of a recently published introduction to the philosophy, psychology and practice of Waldorf education, jointly written by Sebastian Suggate, empirical developmental psychologist at the University of Regensburg, and Tamara Suggate, psychologist and Waldorf teacher. The title alone makes it clear that the authors are not only interested in a presentation of Waldorf education but also in the commitment to “reclaim” childhood. For childhood as a period of the greatest openness and formative potential is endangered and

often threatened. This is not only true in countries that suffer as a result of poverty, child labor and social as well as political constraints, but—in important ways—also in industrialized countries where a one-sided and superficial concept of “childhood” often prevails.

According to the authors, Waldorf education has the potential to stimulate a profound understanding of this phase of life and to provide concepts for the creation of appropriate developmental environments. The book covers a wide range of topics in a relatively small space (180 pages). It presents central anthropological principles and themes of Waldorf education. In contrast to classical concepts of aptitude psychology, these include the importance of sensory perception for child development, the various sensory modalities and their interaction, as well as the often-misunderstood concept of “will”. These and other explanations form the basis for the presentation of a pedagogy which claims to provide an “education for freedom,” understood in the sense of enabling individual and self-determined action over the entire life span.

It is noteworthy that the “basics” often described in a formulaic way in Waldorf education are reconstructed here in the light of significant developmental psychological research, not least that of the first author’s working group on “Embodied Cognition”: the significance of the educator as role model, the promotion of imaginative play, language and practical activity, the design of the spatial environment, the choice of materials, the relationship to nature, to mention but a few. These general principles are then followed through to the concrete practice of the Waldorf kindergarten and described clearly, with the help of numerous examples.

Connections are drawn to important concepts in developmental psychology such as salutogenesis or attachment. S. and T. Suggate also outline the relationship to other educational approaches with regard to similarities and differences (Montessori, Emmi Pikler, Forest Kindergartens, etc.) and attempt to develop a picture of Waldorf education that transcends cultures and worldviews. This is illustrated by three reports from teachers from kindergartens in Israel, Nepal and South Africa.

The book ends with a reflection on challenges for the further development of Waldorf education — those arising from the Waldorf movement itself, e.g. a dogmatic approach to its basics, as well as those arising from current social and cultural developments, such as the use of digital media and the paradigm of promoting cultural techniques as early as possible.

Of course, much of the content of this book has already been described elsewhere—but not in this form. The authors commit themselves to a phenomenological method and claim that this is appropriate to their subject. In this way they strengthen the phenomenological core of

anthroposophy in particular, which is still scarcely taken up in the public consciousness or by leading authors on Waldorf education who are also oriented towards educational science.

But they also show that childhood is a period in which the perception and witnessing of what appears and shows itself is of the utmost importance. Without presuming to be able to take on the perspective of children, they try to trace the child’s experience and to stimulate the reader to do the same. Through this, it becomes clear that supporting children has to do with “inner qualities” and the stimulation of forces, not with the external features or rules of the Waldorf environment, which are often invoked. In doing this, the authors give a “description of the becoming human being” from the perspective of Waldorf education, which always remains vivid, characterizing even complex connections in a few sentences.

The authors make it clear throughout that their presentation has an experimental character and remains provisional. They give adequate space to objections and critical perspectives. Their presentation clearly advocates for the concerns of Waldorf education without romanticizing it. Its language combines descriptions of everyday life, the review of a wealth of scientific studies, philosophical exploration and evocative poetic images, yet it always remains sober and down to earth. This leads to a text that is as rich in experience as it is reflective, fulfilling to a high degree the claim of providing an introduction to Waldorf early childhood education. Hopefully, it will find many readers and translations in the near future. ♦

Note: This review was originally published in the *Journal Anthroposophic Perspectives in Inclusive Social Development*, 3-2020, and is reprinted by permission.