

Supporting Self-Directed Play in Steiner/ Waldorf Early Childhood Education

• Reviewed by Susan Weber

Supporting Self-Directed Play in Steiner/ Waldorf Early Childhood Education

by Renate Long-Breipohl (WECAN, 2010).

In August, 2008 at the international conference in Wilton, a colleague from Australia took me aside to share the collection of photographs that she had brought with her. We spread the photos out all around us and I could not tear myself away from them. Here were children indoors and out, playing in ways that Pauline described as illustrating the whole history of humanity, in ways that I could never recall having seen.

I was filled with joy to see the fruits of her years of teaching in this artistic outpouring, but all I could think was that others as well as myself deserved the opportunity to experience these wonderful pictures. It's a book, I kept telling her, you must make them into a book!

Here, only two years later, we have not only the fruits of Paulene Hanna's artistic work and sensitive observing reflection, but the fruits of her colleague Renate Long-Breipohl's work as well. **Supporting Self Directed Play in Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education** brings together something most special, a true picture of the possibilities that lie within collegueship. Renate's own work on play includes not only her own scholarship but also the fruits of the Play Project that she facilitated in Australia from 2006 to 2009. We have much for which to be grateful for in this little/big book.

Those who borrow my books know that the margins are often filled with notes, questions, reflections. Thank goodness the margins are so large here, for mine are already full of questions, *aha's*, and notes of gratitude for new insights. Renate gently but knowledgeably questions some of our accepted ideas about play and our roles as teachers, always pointing the way with careful observations and rich descriptions. She widens the dialogue and invites us

to consider new possibilities.

The book is rich with examples that may stand as models for other teachers, young and older, who wish to further develop their own capacities for supporting play. As the teachers in the Play Project overcome their own reservations and even fears, observe and learn from their own observing, and find the inner courage to loosen something inside themselves, we see and hear something new emerging for the children and for themselves.

The book is a treasury into which are slipped other themes that one might not immediately consider when studying play—for example, dream consciousness and sleep—that again raise new possibilities for us as we examine play through varying lenses.

For all of us—teachers in training, experienced teachers, teacher-trainers—there is an invitation to sit still, stop doing, and observe the children's play. I admit that I've been inspired and have already begun new observations with our one- and two-year-olds here at Sophia's Hearth Family Center. What will, without doubt, emerge for each of us is a new awareness and respect for the play of the child, and a recommitment to inviting the metamorphosis in our own early childhood settings that will lead the children to the future as Rudolf Steiner hoped.

Paulene's photographs led me into new territory: the blending of indoors and outdoors into a seamless whole, the richness of the children's play in the out-of-doors, the recognition of phases of historical development re-enacted in their play, and the correspondence between the individual child's play and his artistic creations. The glory of human potential shines forth in these photos, and those of the other photographers also. To realize that we, as Waldorf teachers, have the privilege to be with these children each day in this most extraordinarily creative period of their lives is a blessed gift.

This is a book that brings the higher principles into the practical. It brings the reader into the

deepest aspects of the human being and their expression in self-directed play, and simultaneously reveals types of self-directed play replete with concrete examples. It also provides clear, structured support for each of us as we strive to improve our capacity for facilitating play. A path of observation for the teacher is laid out, alongside clear questions for self-reflection. I hope that others take up the questions from the Play Project in their own work.

I was particularly struck with Paulene Hanna's reflection that "the play of the children gets better

with increasing consciousness of the adult. If one observes the play of the child, follows his movements with consciousness, then observing enhances the play rather than restricting it as one may fear."

The footnotes are gems; don't skip over them. This is an unprepossessing book—it does not have a hard cover or even a spine—in relationship to its importance for our work. But the quality of the design and of the photographs themselves is excellent. Thanks to WECAN for bringing this gem to us all.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

In this issue, we only had space to list major upcoming conferences. For many more events, including workshops, short courses, puppetry, craft, and eurythmy events, and ongoing trainings, please visit our newly revamped web calendar at www.waldorfearlychildhood.org/calendar.asp.

Please also contact our advertisers in this issue for information about their upcoming events: *Sunbridge Institute, Rudolf Steiner College, Eurythmy Spring Valley, LifeWays North America, Rudolf Steiner Centre Toronto, Sophia's Hearth Family Center, West Coast Institute.*

To submit or update an event, email Lory Widmer at publications@waldorfearlychildhood.org.

November 12–14, 2010, Rudolf Steiner College, Fair Oaks, CA: Early Childhood Symposium. **The Heart of Childhood: Cultivating the Wisdom of the Pure Heart.** First annual WECAN conference on the West Coast with Suzanne Down, Laurie Clark and Nancy Blanning. Join leading researchers and educators in exploring the therapeutic aspects of movement, puppetry, storytelling, and self-development. Professional puppet show, nurturing activities, and vendors' bazaar. Contact Lauren Hickman, 916-961-8727 x 117, lauren.hickman@steinercollege.edu.

February 11–13, 2011, Spring Valley, NY: WECAN East Coast Conference, **Movement: A Path Toward Freedom** with Nancy Blanning, Laurie Clark, and Jane Swain. Detailed conference information will be sent to WECAN members by email in late November and will also be available online by December 6. Registration is on a first-come, first-served basis. Register early to ensure a place! Registration closes on January 24. Contact conference@waldorfearlychildhood.org or visit www.waldorfearlychildhood.org.

A flyer for posting is enclosed with this issue.

February 19–20, 2011, Vancouver Waldorf School, Vancouver BC: WECAN Pacific North West Conference, **Birth of the Etheric** with Dr. Johanna Steegmans. In the third part of a three-year cycle, Dr. Steegmans, out of her understanding of child development, will continue to lead us in an exploration of the growing child as a developing human being. This conference will address the kindergarten years. How have our earlier practises prepared and supported the children for these years and what environment is required as we accompany them towards the Grade One threshold and the birth of the etheric. Contact Annie Gross, 250 537 4644, anniegross@gmail.com.

February 20-23, 2011, Rudolf Steiner College, Fair Oaks, CA: West Coast Educator's Conference, **Child and Community: Therapeutic Challenges in the 21st Century** with Dr. Michaela Glöckler. A former pediatrician and school doctor, Dr. Glöckler works with teachers, physicians, and therapists worldwide, focusing on the essentials of healthy childhood. Contact Lauren Hickman, 916-961-8727 x 117, lauren.hickman@steinercollege.edu.