

Childhood as an Impulse for Integrated Human Development

The 2010 Brazilian/International Conference

• Louise deForest

The International Early Childhood Conference took place on July 4–8, 2010, in the Escola Rudolf Steiner in São Paulo, Brazil. The theme of the conference was *Childhood as an Impulse for Integrated Human Development*. The Escola Rudolf Steiner is one of forty Waldorf Schools in the São Paulo area; it is hard for us to imagine so many schools in one area, but São Paulo is one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of 20 million people.

Waldorf education first came to Brazil in 1957, but as with so many other anthroposophic endeavors in Brazil, it has spread rapidly. There are now 73 Waldorf Schools in Brazil, twelve of them with high schools. Fifteen teacher training seminars exist, training 450 new teachers at present, and there are 2,050 Waldorf teachers throughout Brazil. In 2008, Brazil became a member of IASWECE (The International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education), making it the first country in South America to have representation on the Council. Sylvia Jensen, from Florianapolis, is the representative to the Council from Brazil.

All schools in Brazil must be authorized by the state; in 1972, the state authorized the Waldorf schools with the condition that there be an overseeing body. The Federation of Waldorf Schools of Brazil is that overseeing body, much like AWSNA and WECAN in North America, and is recognized as such by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. The Federation is made up of two representatives each from eight regions in Brazil and they meet several times a year to look at the state of Waldorf education in their country and to identify the burning issues around childhood.

As in many countries, the Waldorf Schools in Brazil are private schools and this often determines the student population. One of the major difficulties in Brazil is the economic disparity; all the schools make every effort to provide scholarship assistance to families but still the concern remains that the Waldorf Schools are elitist. To address this concern,

many early childhood programs are spreading into the poorest areas of Brazil, much as with Ute Cramer's work 30 years ago in the favelas (slums) throughout São Paulo. Each early childhood program and school has also been asked by the Federation to become socially active and to offer support for any number of social initiatives and impulses, with the hope that this would foster an international, or at least a broader national perspective, and to protect against becoming insular and isolated. Many have taken this to heart; I was able to bring back a donation of \$790.00 to support the ongoing work in China.

The conference itself was co-sponsored by IASWECE and the Alliance for Childhood and the conference was preceded by an Alliance conference. In Brazil, unlike in most other countries, the Alliance for Childhood has a very close connection to the Waldorf Early Childhood movement, though at the Alliance conference there were many more teachers from public and independent schools than attended the following conference. Christopher Clouder, from the UK, opened the Alliance conference by giving an overview of the evolution of thinking around the young child over the last century, from the child as an animal-like creature, to the image of an empty slate, to the present situation of the over-watched, over-loved, over-protected, misunderstood child of today. He also gave the opening lecture at the Early Childhood Conference, encouraging us to find simple language to be able to reach a broader community to help insure that Waldorf education can become a reality for all children. As he so often does, he encouraged those present to enter into a dialogue with the world outside of Waldorf education. To do this, he spoke about the Five Bases of Dialogue: modesty (asking for help and support rather than thinking that we have found *the way*); love of the world; faith in the human being (and gratitude to all the extraordinary people doing good work around the world); hope; and critical thinking.

He encouraged us to have confidence in our ideals, which should never become fixed, and reminded us that the space between confidence and doubt is where love can be found.

Helle Heckman, from Denmark, gave the second keynote address, focused on the outer movement of the child. She stressed that it is only when the child can experience his or her own physical body through movement that he or she can begin to feel interest for the other. Only when the child can say, "Here I am!" can he or she ask, "Who are you?" Helle prepared a DVD with eloquent images of children in her program with healthy lower senses, giving us a small picture of the variations of healthy development in children. A picture *can* be worth a thousand words! Helle reminded us that today the young child is loved as never before, but children are not needed in daily life and they are often frustrated with their inability to contribute and to find their place in the world. It is our task to review our thinking and ways of working to meet the needs of our children and to provide these young ones (and their parents) with homes.

I gave the next talk on the outer movement of the child and the inner movement of the teacher. In this talk, I focused on a child who was one of my most important teachers, pushing me beyond what I knew and engaging me in a more creative way of working. I described the difference between looking at a child, *seeing* a child, and then moving into beholding a child. Einstein once said, "Perhaps our insistence on answers is our last refuge from wonder." Out of respect for the divine being in front of us, we must be willing to not know or understand anything, and yet still be able to accompany the child with wonder and reverence for each individual.

Nancy Mellon led the next two lectures, taking us right into the inner organs, including the organ of our skin, and creating stories that can bring warmth to those organs. She mentioned that pictures—images, as in stories—of happy social life can build forces for the lonely children of today, and she drew our attention to the three different dresses of Cinderella as a picture of the building up of the layers of our skin. She then led all 550 of us in story exercises to warm the kidneys and to activate and warm the heart forces and she encouraged us all to imagine that we have a magic pocket in our aprons that contains just the right clothing for each child in our care. How would we dress the vulnerable, struggling child? The aggressive child? We could

even carry with us an invisible cape to provide any given child with a sanctuary. These imaginings are powerful forces and tools that we can use to surround the children with warmth and protection.

During the plenum on the last day, Luiza Lameirao, director of early childhood teacher training, recapitulated the themes of the lectures, quite masterfully taking us from the profound spiritual inner work of our vocations as teachers back to the outer work with the world around us.

Germany, Denmark, the United States, México, Finland, Norway, Belgium, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, all parts of Brazil and Holland were all represented among the 550 participants, making this a very international conference indeed. There were translators on hand to meet the needs of the English- and Spanish-speaking participants. Twenty-two workshops were offered, as well as many working groups and mini-sessions. Clara Aerts, from Belgium, a member of the Coordinating Group of IASWECE, spoke every morning about the work of IASWECE and offered mini-sessions daily to share the history of this international organization, to give an overview of the role it plays in supporting early childhood around the globe, and to clarify the membership process. In the evening, we were treated to a lyre performance by many early childhood teachers and an inspiring and innovative eurythmy performance by the young people of Monte Azul. At the end of the conference, tours were arranged to visit other Waldorf early childhood programs and to have a first hand experience of all that is being developed by Ute Cramer in the Monte Azul favela.

Food was delicious and plentiful and in spite of the large numbers of participants, there was little waiting. The mild and dry Brazilian winter allowed us to sit comfortably outside under the thatched roofs for every meal, accompanied by the ever-present parrots and surrounded by blossoms of every hue and size. All in all, it was a wonderful conference. Many thanks and congratulations go to the organizers and fundraisers for this conference, and to the Escola Rudolf Steiner, who generously donated all their spaces to the conference, an event that inspired, enlivened, and refreshed all those present.

Louise deForest is one of the representatives from North America to IASWECE, and leader of the Waldorf early childhood teacher training in Cuernavaca, México. She is currently EC Pedagogical Director at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City.