

From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

Words are powerful. As speakers, the words we choose communicate not only factual details but also overt or subtle attitudes that we hold about a subject. As listeners, the words we hear can go far to influence how we begin to think about what is described, particularly if it is new to us. We use words to clothe our thoughts and feelings. Rudolf Steiner, in *How to Know Higher Worlds*, describes how “feelings and thoughts are actual facts, just as real tables and chairs are in the physical-sensory world.” Thoughts are so real that they can build up or diminish without ever being verbalized. This is also true with the words we use to capture the thoughts. So our choice of words is no small matter.

The featured topic of this issue of our journal is our interactions with parents of the children in our care. What to call this? For many years I remember hearing the phrase “parent work.” The word “work” means “physical or mental effort exerted to do or make something.” It is also defined as “purposeful activity.” These are both true of our interactions with parents. But this term indicates an activity that may be one-sided. “Work” says little about what goal we are striving toward. The four articles you will read on the following pages encourage us to look beyond just the activity of interacting and toward the goal of *creating relationship* with our parents. The dictionary defines “relationship” as “the quality or state of being related, connected” or “continuing attachment or association between persons.” We tend to think of “work” as a strenuous or sometimes mundane activity. There can be a subtle negative association with this term; work can be seen as a burden. So it is not an ideal choice for describing our interface with parents. “Creating relationship” implies something that builds connections, that is dynamic and ongoing between human beings. This is a worthy goal.

Our responsibilities as educators have changed so much over the years. Most of us were probably drawn to teaching because we love being with children and want to foster their development. We thought the

time we would spend with parents would be incidental to the time dedicated to the children. This has shifted dramatically. We still spend our hours with children, but circumstances often require that we additionally spend large amounts of time communicating with parents, explaining and perhaps justifying Waldorf education, and calming fears and worries. The “olden days” where the teacher shared advice as a respected authority are gone. Modern people have ready access to information at their fingertips and expect us to answer questions quickly with research to confirm the truth of what we say. Ours is a society used to products and solutions. Our Waldorf commitment to process rather than product and to allowing situations to grow and unfold over time sometimes seems alien. Our study and experience has deeply ingrained in us a knowledge of what we know is truly good for children. But we may feel an urgency to share this information too quickly; parents can feel overwhelmed and sometimes spoken down to.

We also see that many families are under great stress, some actually in crisis. It is undoubtedly true that parents come to our programs so their children can experience a humane, respectful, compassionate start into life. Yet it is also true that many parents are seeking acknowledgement, encouragement, nurturing, and sometimes even healing themselves. This is a very big job to set before a teacher. Job descriptions do not often delineate the need for skills as counselor, coach, arbitrator, and sometimes even priest. How can we possibly do all this?

This issue’s articles on building relationship with parents have a common thread of encouraging us to listen. That is something everyone can do. Rudolf Steiner spoke to this, again in *How to Know Higher Worlds*: “Particularly important as we develop as [educators] is that we also work on the way we listen to other people when they speak. On the path to higher knowledge this listening skill is extremely important. We must become accustomed to listening in such a way that we quiet our own inner life completely

when we listen. . . On the path to higher knowledge we must learn to silence any agreement or disagreement with the opinions we hear.”

Each contribution on this subject gives us ideas in how to genuinely listen. Thanks so much to Louise deForest and Susan Weber for sharing thoughts on how to help cultivate this listening space. Christine Summerfield shares her interactions in parent classes that help families make their own choices in how to simplify their lives. This process includes much listening and sharing of experience without any judgment. My article is a contribution from the perspective of the therapeutic educator—which we all are in one way or another. This article considers how we might approach speaking with parents on the most tender and frightening subject of all—that there is concern about their child’s development. Here the choice of words and tone is critical.

After this big topic we return to the children. The WECAN East Coast February Conference was blessed to have Renate Long-Breipohl as keynote speaker. Her topic was “The Education of Feeling in Early Childhood.” She shared anthroposophical insights and discussed research that supports our Waldorf approach. She also considered some current mainstream cognitive approaches (“Talk about your feelings”), and pointed out the deviations from what we understand about child development and the threefold nature of the human being. Interestingly, the healthy development of feeling in the child is an essential foundation for relationship-building in the future adult. The included summary gives only a taste of her wise and deeply researched presentations. The lectures need to be studied in their entirety. WECAN intends to publish these three lectures in a separate volume. Treat this summary as an appetizer.

International activity has been concrete and full of energy this year. Two international colloquia in Dornach have been sponsored by IASWECE and the Pedagogical Section. Last fall a Birth-to-Three colloquium took place, followed by a Six/Seven-Year-Old Transition from Kindergarten to the Grades meeting this past February. Two articles describe the focus of these working groups. The research these groups are doing will all come together at Easter of 2015 with an international conference at the Goetheanum on “Transitions,” considering child development from birth to three, the transition to school readiness, and the nine-year change. This will be a rich collabora-

tion of early childhood and grades teachers coming together with doctors to advocate for health and happiness for children in their educational situations.

A spring circle by Laura Donkel of the Chicago Waldorf School offers inspiration for the classroom. It is full of lovely imaginations and lively movements. The newly published book *Tell Me a Story: Stories from the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America* is also highlighted with three little stories for spring, as well as the lovely illustrations by Deborah Grieder and Jo Valens scattered throughout these pages. We hope you will enjoy these stories and whisk them into your classrooms. A review of the book gives a description of the range of these 80-plus stories. Early responses to this collection suggest that this will become a treasured classroom resource.

Another book reviewed is *Cosmic Child*, available through WECAN books. In *Study of Man*, Rudolf Steiner states that we cannot understand the nature of the human being if we do not appreciate life before birth as well as life after death. This volume offers pictures in poems and recollections to help us appreciate this pre-birth existence and remember what the children have left behind in order to join us here in earthly life.

Looking ahead to future *Gateways*, we wish to feature **Storytelling and Puppetry** as the theme for the fall issue. Thoughts and insights about these activities are invited as well as examples. If the response is enthusiastic, we may have material for yet another WECAN book of stories and puppet plays! Please send your contributions. *Gateways* is also eager to receive little vignettes of transitional songs, hand gesture games, small movement pieces for transitions or to enrich a longer circle time, and so on. There are gems living in each classroom. We would like to see more of them.

May your remaining weeks of school be filled with new vitality and inspiration as “Spring comes tripping over the lea.” Parent-Teacher conferences will have already concluded for most of us. We trust that you will discover that you have intuitively embraced some of the suggestions in these lead articles. Through the deed of enrolling their children in our classes, parents have invited us to be partners and companions with them in welcoming and escorting their children into earthly life. May we walk this path together with equality, true listening, and appreciation for one another. ♦