Life Is the Curriculum
By Cynthia Aldinger
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Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

A friendly, warm new resource has come to us in the form of Cynthia Aldinger’s new book, Life Is the Curriculum. In the late 1990s, Cynthia began considering the needs of very young children in care away from their families while parents worked. Already a trained and experienced Waldorf kindergarten teacher, she could see that institutional settings with large groups of same-aged children did not serve the children’s needs. Warmth, personal attention, and the richness of the home environment with simple, practical rhythms and routines of daily living and growing were lacking. All the advantages (and sometimes challenging opportunities) of living with siblings of differing ages were thwarted by the same-age groupings. And the large-size groups were overwhelming and overstimulating for little children.

A new paradigm for providing home-based care arose out of pondering how to create a gentle and unhurried environment that would invite the children into healthy, secure incarnation. Rudolf Steiner’s insights into child development provide the foundation for this approach known as LifeWays. Children are cared for in small groups, from babies up to six-year-olds, in a home-like setting. The wisdom, richness, and insights of this relationship-based care fill the pages of Life Is the Curriculum.

The book is divided into considering four “curricula”—Life, the Child, the Adult, and the Environment. The introduction observes that “pressing down” the forms and schedules of the kindergarten does not serve the needs of the very young child in the home or home-care setting. Parents and care providers “need to know how to set up a meaningful home life.” The chapter “Life as Curriculum” then considers the practical and domestic arts that surround the children in the home setting, giving them experience of process and orderly care for the environment. Seeing adults do their work with intention and interest gives the child reassurance that life is good and purposeful. People’s work and care for one another contribute to the common welfare. Steady, quiet rhythms reassure the child that there is time to explore, grow, and be.

“Child as Curriculum” reminds us that each child already comes into earthly life with a spiritual biography and pre-birth intention for this incarnation, and that children pass through lawful stages of development. Watching the child with true interest and respect allows the adults to learn much. Knowledge of child development is essential so we can know what to offer and what to fairly expect from the children as they move through these different passages. Here the children and their unfolding instruct the caregivers.

“Adult as Curriculum” emphasizes the importance of consciously embraced self-development. Children imitate not only what they see. They are more substantially formed by the authenticity of deed, feeling, and thought of the caring adult. Rudolf Steiner is quoted: “In helping the child as he learns to walk, we must be pervaded by love; in helping the child to gain the power of speech, we must be absolutely truthful; and since the child is one great sense organ and in his inner physical functions also copies the spiritual, our own thinking must be clear if right thinking is to develop in the child from the forces of speech.” This chapter’s section on “Relationship-based Care” is important reading for all of us involved with children in any setting.

The chapter “Environment” reminds us how subtly and deeply the children’s surroundings affect them. This is beautifully summarized: “The bodily-religious devotion the young child experiences toward her surroundings is of the same nature as the oneness she experienced prior to incarnation, while cradled in the non-material spiritual world. One can
see in the infant’s long gaze, in the toddler’s caress, and in the two-year-old’s lively dialogue over and through all surrounding sounds and noises, that the choices we make regarding the sights, sounds, touches, tastes, smells, and thoughts, feelings and things that the child encounters will, in some way, merge into the child’s being.”

These thoughts are not new to Waldorf educators. Preschool and kindergarten classrooms are centered upon these essentials as we plan our rhythms, activities, and interactions with the children. What is so nice about Life Is the Curriculum is that it gives a review of these fundamentals through quiet, accessible consideration. The book is written with no rush or hurry about what anyone should do, no haranguing to make a point. Rather the book helps the reader to step out of the flurry of activity to sort out what really matters in the flow of the day, the week, and the seasons. This small volume is a fine resource to recommend to parents with its clear descriptions and real-life examples. It also gives a useful and satisfying framework to help teachers review these “curricula” in our classrooms.

When I finished reading the last page of Life Is the Curriculum, I felt refreshed and satisfied. I think this will be the experience for many more readers as well.

Resources

An important part of WECAN’s mission is to create and gather resources for educators. We would like to direct Gateways readers to some resources of which everyone might not be aware.

We invite you to visit our website, www.waldorfearlychildhood.org, to explore a wealth of online resources for educators and parents, and subscribe to our Research Digest email newsletter.

The Research Digest gathers recently-published research, thoughtful analysis, and commentary on subjects that touch upon various facets of Waldorf early childhood education. For example, in the February 2016 edition you will find:

On Play and Movement:
- Study: Sparing Chores Spoils Children and Their Future Selves
- The Play Deficit
- Here’s What Happened When a School Tried Recess Four Times a Day
- What to Say When Your Kid Says “I’m Bored”

On Early Intellectual Stimulation and Reading:
- School Starting Age
- Is the Drive for Success Making Our Children Sick?
- Why Forcing Kids to Do Things Sooner and Faster Doesn’t Get Them Further in School
- Kindergarten the New First Grade? It’s Actually Worse Than That

On Media Exposure and Electronic Device Use:
- Exposure to Electronic Baby Toys Associated with Decrease in Quality and Quantity of Language in Infants
- Don’t Let the Toys Do the Talking: The Case of Electronic and Traditional Shape Sorters
- Association of the Type of Toy Used During Play With the Quantity and Quality of Parent-Infant Communication (Study)

On Other Topics:
- One More Reason to Get a Good Night’s Sleep
- Taking an Interest: The Bridge Between Teachers and Parents
- Phylogenetic Analyses Suggests Fairy Tales are Much Older than Thought

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You may also direct parents to the “Parents and Families” section of our website.

Finally, we encourage you to visit the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE), at www.iaswece.org. See their “News and Events” link for recent research and publications, upcoming international conferences, and more.