

Book Review

Under the Stars by Renate Long-Breipohl

Jill Taplin

This is a very thoughtful series of essays that together provide a stimulating journey through the phenomena of early childhood development. The introduction includes an interesting historical overview of how Steiner Waldorf early childhood work developed purely through oral and experiential tutoring for twenty-five years before any publications on the subject or formal training courses appeared. At that point some of Rudolf Steiner's own words on the child under age seven were compiled for use by the growing number of kindergarten teachers, and guides to the practicalities of kindergarten work slowly began to appear. More recently there have been deeper works going beyond the practical, alongside the development of more formal trainings. This book is an important addition at a time when the tremendous international growth of Steiner/Waldorf early childhood education requires research and consideration of the quality offered here.

The author is not only an experienced early childhood practitioner and international adult educator, she is also an admirable researcher and thinker. The essay format has allowed her to develop and weave her thoughts across the principal themes of Waldorf early childhood education. Her method is to look in depth at the picture of child development behind each theme, describe what Rudolf Steiner had to say about it and how his ideas have been developed, and compare ideas and practices to the results of modern research. Bringing these together has been a considerable project and provides a valuable synthesis for anyone working in this area. Long-Breipohl is not afraid to explain the difference between spiritual scientific and natural scientific research, and she has endeavoured to bring

these together in this book. She presents "intuitional cognition" as her method of investigation and as the unique contribution of Rudolf Steiner, pointing out that by this method, an investigation is never complete.

The author's statement of purpose and aims for this book are an example of her clarity and of the importance of her themes not just for early childhood educators:

This book is written by an early childhood educator for teacher trainers, educators, and parents who are interested in the deeper aspects of Steiner early childhood education. It originated as much from my own experiences with young children as from Steiner's insights. It is about incarnation, the influences of spiritual forces in the child's development, and the appropriate steps the educator can take to support this process, be it through forming relationships, supporting the development of movement and thinking in the child, play, child observation, or working on one's inner development. In order to progress further in improving and refining early education, and thus contribute to the future evolution of humanity, a deeper understanding of human existence is needed. Studying the incarnation process of the child is a good way to gain a picture of the underlying spiritual reality of human existence.

Essay by essay, Long-Breipohl applies herself to this task with a thoroughness that can be challenging. But the topics of the first three essays—the life forces, thinking, and the will—are long going to be at the boundaries of intellectual comprehension, and one can benefit from the work of others without gaining

a complete understanding oneself. I particularly value the way the distinctive nature of the child under the age of three is discussed, and also the detailed exploration of the nature of the child in that transitional age between five and seven. I find it wonderful that towards the end of each essay, when it comes down to the practical outcomes that will best support the child, the author returns again and again to the twin powers of the self-education of the adult and the natural strength of imitation in the young child.

Attachment to the prime care giver is now acknowledged as deeply formative for the child under three years old, and the fourth essay, "Relationships in Early Childhood," looks at this theme in the light of Steiner's picture of human development. Long-Breipohl suggests that too early an awakening of the "I" is the danger when the young child and mother figure are separated too soon. The question of how we support children and parents who have already been pressured into a too-early separation, by economic, social, or other factors, is one that we have to explore further within Waldorf early childhood education.

The next essay also tackles a modern idea, that of the Indigo or Star Child. Has there been an evolutionary shift that has brought a new kind of child into the world now? Or is it just environmental pressures that have caused children to bring so many new challenges to those who try to care for and educate them? Whatever the answer, we are called on to find new responses to these new challenges and to recreate education so that it fits children, rather than trying to force children to fit traditional educational forms. Again, Long-Breipohl shows us how Steiner education, with its emphasis on relationships and its awareness that premature intellectual awakening is harmful to young children, has much to offer to this task.

In the essay on movement (Chapter 6), Rudolf Steiner's profound indications from a hundred years ago are brought together

with the recent and contrasting work of Sally Goddard Blythe and Wilma Ellersiek. Long-Breipohl explores the interweaving nature in the development of physical and soul movement alongside the much bigger picture of the spiritual evolution of humanity.

The self-initiated play of the young child is a subject that this author has written about before, and the essay on this theme is full of rich analysis. The statement that "becoming a play facilitator is a path of learning" provides a deep source of further study. Long-Breipohl presents her "six dimensions of play" and compares them with analyses by others, and the chapter ends with the extremely practical "five indications for play facilitators" that make for a meaty pedagogical discussion in a group of early childhood colleagues or in a kindergarten parent evening.

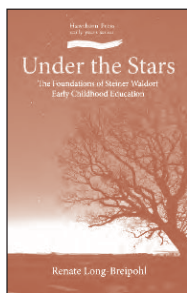
Essay eight looks at an art experience for the young child and its developmental significance. I enjoyed the exploration of the importance of practitioner's aesthetic sense and artistic practice. The quality of simplicity is emphasized as the best foundation for the young child's imitation, and this is sometimes a lesson that students and new practitioners struggle to learn. The essay ends with the thought that the artistic activities we provide in the kindergarten form the bridge from play to formal learning.

The short essay on child observation, or what one might call the "search for the hidden child," focuses our attention on learning to read the code of the messages that the child gives us or "letting the child speak." We are reminded that intellectual and sensory faculties alone will never be enough and that, again, the core is self-education. In this case it is the inner schooling that allows us not to jump to conclusions but to work through the qualities of wonder, reverence, and surrender in order to make space for the phenomena to speak for themselves.

In the final essay, Long-Breipohl shares with her readers a personal exploration of

eight of the twelve virtues indicated by Rudolf Steiner through their connection with the circle of the zodiac. These are discussed in relation to both the child and the adult which, I believe, is an original contribution of the author's on this subject. The essential truth is found again, as it was so often in these essays: it is through our own self-development that we might come both to understand the incarnation of the child more deeply and to bring this knowledge into our work through the education of our own will so that the child can freely imitate this inner gesture.

These essays combine to provide a source of much future study for those already engaged in the practice of working with young children in Steiner/Waldorf settings. This is not an introductory book, but one written for those with the experience to acknowledge that there is so much more to be known. It benefits from fine research, including access to German texts not available yet in English. A good index and thorough referencing make this book valuable for those engaged in academic study in this area.



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of Steiner Early Childhood
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by Renate Long-Breipohl*

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