

A Michaelic Fighter for the Little Child: On the 100th birthday of Wilma Ellersiek

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Wilma Ellersiek was born on 15 June 1921 in a small town in Schleswig-Holstein. There was neither radio nor telephone in the living rooms, not to mention television or devices such as PCs and smartphones. We cannot judge whether the world was better because of that; it was different in any case. Probably no generation has experienced such changes as the one that saw the light of day in the first 30 years of the last century.

Wilma Ellersiek had the good fortune to grow up in an educated home. She was able to attend a grammar

school and complete her schooling with the Abitur exam - not a matter of course in those days. Around the age of 20, she encountered anthroposophy, which became the basis of her life. School was followed by studies, which was rather unusual for a young woman at that time - and even more so at the time of the Second World War. This was also the reason why she had to abandon her studies of German, art history and school music. She experienced a terrible time with being buried by debris and escaping.

After the turmoil of war, she resumed her studies, but with completely different subjects; she chose speech training and rhythemics at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart, where she graduated with distinction and was immediately offered a teaching position due to her special talent.

As a teacher, Ellersiek always tried to get the very last reserve out of the students. Her lessons were exciting and often very spontaneous and not infrequently led to great surprises for the participants. In return, she expected absolute presence and reacted with extraordinary severity when a student's commitment seemed inadequate to her. Even if it was sometimes difficult to meet the high demands, the yield from Ellersiek's teaching was incomparably high.

Speech and hand are connected

Some graduates of the speech teacher training course experienced in their practice that they were not having the success they desired with children with delayed speech development and turned to Ellersiek for help. She accepted the challenge. It seemed crucial to her to involve the mothers, whom she invited to join in. Because of her anthroposophical knowledge of the human being, it was clear to her that language is learned through imitation and that "a relationship exists between speech function and hand movement." So Ellersiek offered fairy tales and little poems with hand gestures to encourage imitation. From these hand gesture fairy tales, which were led in a sitting position, the participants then moved into spatial movement.

Wilma Ellersiek herself was the model for speaking and moving. In these group lessons, passages spoken in rhyme alternated with free text parts. Soon, however, she revised the method, as the freely spoken phases seemed to her "like a slump", "from which it was difficult to regain the level of effect through the linguistically designed games... The tensions in the muscles of speech and movement, the congestion of breath, were released more effectively when the play was continuous in the composition, the flow was not interrupted, everything remained breathed through".

Ellersiek subsequently began to write her own texts. The success proved her right: "Word

quickly got around among parents, doctors, therapists, there was a fruitful cooperation".

It doesn't work without parents

The newly developed therapeutic approach was the decisive factor for the establishment of a four-semester course of study "Rhythmics in the Preschool Sector" within the Rhythmics Seminar, supported by the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg.

Wilma Ellersiek now switched completely to the toddler area. In addition, she pursued the idea of founding a nursery school. Together with Herbert Hahn, one of the founding teachers of the first Waldorf School at Uhlandshöhe in Stuttgart, she worked out a concept. Parents were to be taught anthroposophy by Herbert Hahn and receive guidance on the games by Wilma Ellersiek. With this school, she wanted to achieve that the young parents themselves would be enabled to perform rhythmic-musical games with their children. Unfortunately, this offer was only little taken up.

Wilma Ellersiek therefore decided to teach her newly developed rhythmic-musical speaking, singing and movement programme to mother-child groups within her degree programme or to have students teach them under her leadership. These group lessons were a great success.

Ellersiek received support and constant encouragement from her close friend Klara Hattermann, one of the first Waldorf early childhood educators. It was she who attempted to establish Wilma Ellersiek's artfully designed gesture games in Waldorf kindergarten education.

The hand gesture games - a spiritual impulse

At the end of the 1960s, diverse early educational methods appeared everywhere. Wilma Ellersiek saw this as a disregard for child development and felt even more spurred to continue on the path she had taken. However, her generally weak physical constitution forced her to take a long professional break.

She used this time to compose her own games. In 1975, she resumed work at the university. Together with the students, she struggled to refine and gain recognition for her impulse during the remaining seven professional years. In consultation with Klara Hattermann, she called her games "rhythmic-musical speaking, singing and movement games".

For Ellersiek, the child in its intangible dignity was always in the foreground. She demanded selflessness from the adults who worked with children. She said of her hand gesture games that they could only work "if they are passed on with the greatest possible selflessness, that is, unclouded by the personal... The games are a training path to true individuality". Hardly any other offering is able to make children so deeply happy in our time, which is dominated by electronic media, as their hand gesture games. It is all the more regrettable that they are no longer practised. Fewer and fewer people want to make the effort to learn them.

However, those who set out on the path can actually experience that the games are "a training path to true individuality".

What she demanded of others, Ellersiek also practised herself. This is why Helmut von Kügelgen, the initiator and long-time director of the Waldorf Kindergarten Seminar in Stuttgart, was also able to call her a "Michaelic fighter for the little child" in a letter for her 70th birthday.

At the age of 79, Wilma Ellersiek decided to publish her games with the publishing house Verlag Freies Geistesleben. Shortly after her 80th birthday, she suffered a severe stroke and worked intensively on her work until that day. Gratefully, she still saw the publication of the first five volumes of her work. She died on 27 October 2007 in her 86th year.



In a letter dated 13 October 1994, Wilma Ellersiek wrote: "As far as I am concerned personally, I have already pointed out many times that I do not expect people to talk about me. All that counts for me is that people take up my spiritual impulse, then, after all, I am connected with those who do."

[Wilma Ellersiek Four-Book & Two-CD Set](#)

About the author: Ingrid Weidenfeld studied rhythmic and violin at the State University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart. She edited Wilma Ellersiek's works and has been leading an in-service training course for rhythmic pedagogues in Stuttgart since 2012.

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