

Life should be like a Kindergarten

Gilda Rhien, Weimar

More than 1100 educators from 56 nations came at Easter to the Goetheanum to attend the World Early Childhood Educators' Conference, to celebrate the 100th birthday of Waldorf education and to speak about the future of this pedagogy, based on "reading" the human being.

... "How good it would be if we all could go to kindergarten more often, play more and live the qualities that children exemplify. In today's times of polarization, fragmentation and disorientation, questions about the nature of the child, their abilities and their protection have become questions of the future, which affect all of us socially. To understand that education is an art means to understand what human being is as an artistic, social, free and responsible being and why we need such people in the future.

The Picture of the Human Being

On the last evening of the conference, 1100 burning candles circle in the darkness around the Goetheanum, a building, a place. Many people are singing, in various languages, and one might feel embarrassed at first, if one doesn't usually like to take part in a mass. But at some point, this feeling gives way to the certainty that this is not an act of a religious community. It is a human community that forms this circle and then spontaneously places the lights in front of the south entrance on the ground, in a way that a six-pointed star is formed - a human community in which the individual is not lost. What we circle around is that invisible part within us that can form a wholeness without dissolving into it. And that on Maundy Thursday, after the child had since grown up and was on his way to sacrifice himself for the renewal of the world. The moment of transformation arrives, as Claus-Peter Röh, Head of the Pedagogical Section, later noted, where we consciously leave something old behind and allow it to die in the trust that something new can and must arise. "If you do not turn around and become as little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven," (Matthew 18,3), reads that meaningful sentence in the New Testament.

The conference attempted to bridge the gap between early childhood education and the social future of humanity. These two areas always overlapped each other and made it clear that being a child and being human are connected in a very special way.



Claus-Peter Röh, Florian Osswald: Opening of the conference without words.

Who remembers their kindergarten teacher?

Government guidelines and curricula are now digging a foundation out from under the children. Beginning with educational games, which sell themselves well, because the whole world wants their child to become an early a genius, up to and including the hygiene regulations for daycare centers, which prohibit contact with dirt and bacteria, requirements and regulations sprout up in the cultural medium of anxiety and the need for security. In England a law has been enacted for three months that prohibits teachers in state primary schools from taking children on their laps or by the hand.

State inspections require Waldorf Kindergartens to justify their "not learning". The idea: Children must be prepared for the world of the money economy in this way so that they won't become 'unfit' dreamers. Everything should be efficient. This includes misunderstanding the computer as helpful early intervention. Not only in education does the question of the sustainability of the world arise, but also most clearly here in the realm of the interpersonal.

The changed family structures, the fluctuation of people to whom children have to adjust, the dissolving away of traditions and the stress of the modern adult affect the little ones. Today's children have a harder time concentrating, defend their claims more loudly, become aggressive faster, can't stand being bored, and demand entertainment. How do educators make sure that children become strong in their individuality and at the same time feel like social beings? How do anthropology, Waldorf education and anthroposophy help to accomplish this? The experts from 56 countries asked questions and reported on their own work and its possibilities to prepare this space for the very little ones. That their concrete renunciation is already an enormous contribution to the future is something I'd never seen so clearly before. Who of us remembers his own kindergarten teacher, who almost never was able to see the fruits of her labour coming to fruition? What actually happens in these first years of a child's life, where no school-based learning takes place?

Perhaps today we are fighting the 'battle for childhood', as Stefanie Allon called it, which means that it is about the dignity of a child (and a human being) who is allowed to learn from his own impulses.

The International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) and

the Pedagogical Section had organized this conference together with a focus on the question of ways into a human future. Clara Aerts and Philipp Reubke, as members of the IASWECE Coordination Group, developed the following procedure so that the social was already tried in the lectures: one woman and one man at a time, an educator and another expert, gave the lectures.



Photo Left: 100 years of Waldorf Education - 50 years of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association: "Maintaining, protecting and caring for trust and cooperation"

Photo Right: Dolls? Best if they are as simple as possible and are created in the presence of the children. Workshop with Svitlana Eks, Ukraine.

What you can only learn through play

The conference began with flute and drumbeat. It was reminiscent of a juggler on the marketplace. In the faces were lights and amazement and it became clear, kindergarten teachers are people who love to play. Rarely have I heard so much laughter and joy to discover and try out new things. In the nearly 60 workshops and discussion groups, balls and other things flew through the air. The evenings were filled with eurythmy from all over the world, the 'Little Muck', 'Don Quixote' and an open stage where we could laugh at ourselves. So the 'Steinosaurus' from New Zealand appeared on the stage, who spread his wings over the young 'Waldorf China'. Small sketches, but also serious songs and jointly developed images of the social were shared. And the question grew within me: Where am I a child and how do I then see my fellow human beings? Which soul emotions do I experience in myself, when I no longer "have to" or "should", but just do? "Man is only fully human in play," Schiller said in his 'Aesthetic Letters'.

To understand that education is an art means to understand what human being is as an artistic, social, free and responsible being and why we need such people in the future.

Clara Aerts described that there is a quality of time in kindergarten, a timeless quality of flow. And free play is when there's nothing to lose, when it's about nothing. It is without purpose. But there is also always an element of risk, of adventure. It has creativity, curiosity, openness, perseverance, trust, consistency. In addition, a child at play solves problems and forgives quickly. In the child's play, the life intention of the child unites with its earthly being, said Steiner. The educators thus can observe and recognize how the child will deal with the experiences that life is offering him. "Where do we find that

which is in the child as a higher self, a higher entity is active that belongs to the child, but does not enter the consciousness? [...] In the play of the child we can only understand the conditions of upbringing. But what is achieved through play, that is basically what is achieved through the self-actuation of the child, through everything that we do not banish through strict rules. Yes, that's what the essential and the educational aspects of play are based on, that we stop with our rules, with our pedagogic and educational techniques and leave the child to his own forces. [...] Then the child tries by playing with the outer objects, to see whether this or that works through one's own activity. The child brings its own will into activity, into movement. And in the way in which external things behave under the influence of the will, it happens that the child educates itself in a completely different way than through the influence of a personality or educational principles, even if it is only playing."(1)



"From movement to feeling, from feeling to attention": Workshop with Alexandru Bugnariu, eurythmist from Romania

What will we take away from the future human being if we can no longer have these experiences or make them possible? In her workshop, Kathy MacFarlane from New Zealand, who teaches in China, worked out how free play metamorphoses into adult life and enables us to engage with others, to change perspective and makes possible the inner soul gesture of togetherness. Free play at kindergarten age becomes social competence. One can

then see "how one is now doing with the seriousness of life, with that which is useful, which is purposeful in life, where one must find oneself through experience, then one finds that now the human being places himself in the usefulness, in the purposefulness of the world, in the that which is demanded by life, with the same character, as he has himself first showed freely in childhood years in childlike play."(2)

Children live most strongly their will, with no outer goal, to explore the world and to feel at home in it. They sleep and dream in the unconscious certainty that they are part of a whole.

Children live most strongly their will, with no outer goal, to explore the world and to feel at home in it. They sleep and dream in the unconscious certainty that they are part of an whole. They act entirely out of will, and it is only afterwards that they think.

All expectation and too headstrong speech paralyses their development, described Sabine Häfner. Silvia Jensen, Waldorf kindergarten teacher from Brazil, presented the picture of the lighthouse, which gives us an orientation "in the sea of eternal incarnation".

This orientation is anthroposophy and the study of the human being. It appeared during the conference like a roof under which people found themselves. Whether in Israel, China or Africa, anthroposophy enables a self-knowledge that does not extinguish our cultural identities and allows us to be in our individuality. It lies above and fosters the Incarnation of the human being worldwide. "It gives an answer to why you are able to do something, which religion usually doesn't do," said Lakshmi Prasanna from India. She even went so far as to think that we should forget everything we've learned. For this, she used the word 'unlearning'. In this sense there can be no fixed picture of Waldorf education, no indication of what rhythm is, no systematics. Rhythm must be listened for every day anew, then we as educators are connected with our life forces and not tired after a working day with 18 children, said one kindergarten teacher.

Jump headlong into the water

In their dialogue lecture, Stefanie Allon and Claus-Peter Röh described the seven stages of art. Mirroring architecture on the invisible axis on which the music lies, we will find social art in the future. When educators cultivate their own musicality not in the sense that they have to play an instrument, but by hearing the sounds of the situation and reacting musically to it, this is already doing a lot for the future. The sound, the mood, is agile and constantly changing. Sometimes you have to endure chaos. And all education is self-education, as everyone is aware.

Whereas the arts create works of art, the social art may no longer create a work of art, but is rather a joint work, a doing, shaping and building together. Like child's play. In art, something appears through a medium, for example through color or language. If in the future we were each other's medium, we could manifest what the other himself cannot. (Zvi Szir)

"We already shape the social in the way we talk and think about each other," stressed Gerald Häfner. The art of the future leads from aesthetics to ethics. It concerns our togetherness.



*Photo Left: In front of a world map without national borders, greeting the language and national groups;
Photo Right: Stefanie Allon from Israel: From architecture to social art*

When Rudolf Steiner emphasizes that in the context of kindergarten and school, self-administration plays an important role, there is a possibility here to understand what the human being is as a free and self-determined being. Where do we consciously decide how our children grow up how and what they learn? Where and how do we give ourselves the framework, that does us good and allows us development? "I have great joy in bringing people together to encourage them to

jump headfirst into the water," said Anne-Kathrin Hantel, kindergarten teacher and IASWECE representative for Germany, in her workshop.

Maybe that's why social art is the 'highest possible' artistic form the human being can achieve, because he can shape himself and the totality of his fellow human beings.

"This is how the world goal is achieved, when everyone rests within himself and each one gives to the other that which no one wants to demand." (3) This was one of the final sentences of the conference, which was like a gift to be taken along and is suitable for meditation.

For the organizers, the conference was a success. The exchange of ideas with colleagues around the world had the touch of what children carry inside them: an amazement at the the magic of diversity, the desire to travel, interest, no fear of the unknown, playful discovering one another. Between the tables, plates and cakes, in the breaks, on the paths to the workshops, lying on the meadows, sitting in the hall or in the free initiatives, one could hear how the participants were thinking about what to take home and transform, what to re-experience that has spurred us on or inspired us to think further. A constant I A O. The social gestures which the child feels in the educator, it can imitate, their mobility and elasticity. "In our becoming the child can follow us," said someone. Perhaps that is a goal for the next 100 years of Waldorf education, it understands the human being in his will, the future part of us.

(1) Rudolf Steiner, Lecture of March 14, 1912, GA 61.

(2) Rudolf Steiner, lecture of 10.6.1920, GA 335.

(3) Rudolf Steiner, Mystery Dramas, The Portal of Initiation GA 44.

Photos: Xue Li, World Educator Conference at the Goetheanum 2019

About the author, Gilda Rhien: Religious scholar, ethnologist and Waldorf teacher, works on a freelance basis as a teacher, tour guide, journalist, and social worker, and lives with her two children in Weimar, Germany.

This article originally appeared in German in the May 9, 2019 issue of *Das Goetheanum*. Translation into English by Susan Howard.