

## Waldorf 100 conference in the UK

### Working together for children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Inspiring innovative and creative early childhood practice

Sam Greshoff, Janni Nicol, Jill Taplin

This exciting early childhood conference was held at the beginning of October at Michael Hall School in Forest Row. It was organised by Janni Nicol and Sam Greshoff from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and was attended by around 200 people, including many IASWECE council members, who came together to celebrate not only Waldorf 100, but to meet and hear different thoughts with one aim, to protect childhood. At this time in the UK and around the world children need advocates to speak up for their right to a healthy childhood and for age appropriate care and education.

Early Childhood practitioners are passionate advocates for children and families within schools and settings, working with parents, local authorities, other professionals and government agencies. Working together we are able to develop a more effective and powerful voice that can influence policy makers.

At this moment, we are celebrating 100 years of Steiner Waldorf education and this conference provided a wonderful opportunity to come together with early childhood colleagues from different disciplines and approaches to explore ideas such as play, school starting age, current research and digital technology. Our hope is that by working together we can develop innovative practice that truly meets the needs of young children now and in the future.

**Wendy Ellyatt** (Flourish Project/The Save Childhood Movement)

#### ***The Freedom to be my Self: Creating the Foundations for Flourishing Lives.***

Wendy's work on the *Flourish Project* introduces a new 'Ecology of Wellbeing' that puts lives of meaning, purpose and value back at the core and the natural, healthy development of young children as fundamental to the process. She spoke about the 7 key needs for the child, security, relationship, independence, engagement, fulfilment, contribution, growth. The ecology of well-being can be mapped against these. Compassionate understanding is crucial, not just for the child, family and community, but they are also signing up 'compassionate cities' to work with.

Although there are some good examples globally, the UK, especially England, has terrible policies for children, focusing strongly on academic achievement. She asked; what would make a real difference in this country? What do Montessori and Steiner add to the 7 key areas? [www.flourishproject.net](http://www.flourishproject.net), [www.savechildhood.net](http://www.savechildhood.net), [www.nationalchildrensdayuk.com](http://www.nationalchildrensdayuk.com)

#### **Madeleine Holt: SATs, Stress and Scientism: Why children are more than a score**

School is a time for self-discovery, building confidence and nourishing potential. But primary school children in England are being let down by a system that cares more about measurement than their education. Our system is obsessed with league tables, turning children into data points and denying them a broad, stimulating education at key stages in their development. Testing (5 tests before 11, starting at 4 years old, puts an unnecessary burden on children, parents and teachers alike. Parents and professionals are starting to collaborate and take action to protect children from unnecessary testing. There are 19 organisations combining on this topic. All parties, except the conservatives, are opposed to SATs and a book is in process on the alternatives for SATs. Since 2016, SATS results have plateaued with a steady proportion of children 'failing'. Teaching to the test has brought a certain level of 'success' in SATs terms, but politicians cannot explain why the improvement is not continuing.

<https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/>

#### **Sue Palmer: Upstart: why the under-sevens need a kindergarten stage**

The Upstart Scotland campaign for a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage (3-7 years) was launched in 2016. Researching her book 'Toxic Childhood' (2006) transformed her into a passionate advocate for play-based kindergarten education for the under-sevens.

<https://www.upstart.scot/>

Play is disappearing from children's lives. How can we put it back? Kindergartens provide a place that acknowledges the well-being of the young child and the value of play. UNESCO defines early childhood as up to the age of 8 years old. This time is not just about preparing for school but has its own value. The

kindergarten ethos has an emphasis on child development, being outdoors, and informal, self-directed play. Both the disposition to learn and a child's resilience are undermined by 'schoolification'. As John Bowlby says, 'Life is best organised as a series of daring ventures from a secure base'.



From left to right : Madeleine Holt, Wendy Ellyatt, Clara Aerts, Barbara Isaacs, Sue Palmer, Philipp Reubke, Christopher Clouder

**Philipp Reubke** (IASWECE, International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education)

#### **Free Play - the healthy way of learning for children before six**

More and more, researchers agree that self-initiated play makes an important contribution to the learning outcomes for young children. But many government officials and parents continue to think that the only way of efficient learning is academic, formal learning conducted by adults. Actually this attitude can be compared with what was the educational paradigm in the middle ages: By strict rules and punishment adults forced children to learn and to adapt to civilization. But since the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, another way of learning was promoted by many artists, philosophers and educators: Rousseau, Schiller, Pestalozzi, Fröbel and many others considered the child as one who manifests truly human values in self initiated play, whereas adults lose more and more their original innocence and creativity. Steiner, Emmi Pikler and more recently Winnicott emphasized the fact that the child wants -through strong desire and love - to adapt to the surroundings and imitate the environment. Today more and more researchers, including the authors of comment N° 17 to the Conventions of the Right of the Child, agree that stimulating the child's own desire to imitate and giving children time and space to express themselves through self -initiated play is the healthy way of learning for the young child.

**Barbara Isaacs** (Montessori Global Ambassador, Montessori St Nicholas)

#### **Montessori education - promoting children's sense of well-being, belonging and resilience**

Traditionally the UK has accepted diversity. Where else would you find a school like Summerhill? But now we must fight to maintain this. Montessori is celebrating 100 years of training teachers in the UK. We share the celebration of the young child as a unique force. [Note from PhR: What Waldorf- and Montessori education have in common is the recognition that each child is an unique and individual being]. This is something that we all need to articulate in ways that everyone can understand. Sometimes we are defending ourselves rather than sharing our joy in our practice. Maria Montessori said that early childhood is a more significant time than the university years and is the responsibility of society. [Note from PhR: and that its effects are responsible for the development of society.] Respect for the child grows out of diligent observation. Our task is to support children today to build up physical, emotional and intellectual autonomy. We all need resilience to survive ,and our question is; what can we do to help the child towards this?

**Clara Aerts** (International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education)

#### **Early childhood as a cradle for a humane future**

Despite the dazzling possibilities new technology seem to offer, the social and ecological challenges we are

facing are not adequately met with sustainable answers. Where does it stumble and fall? Artificial intelligence is on its way to take over from human intelligent thinking. But at what cost? What is the added human value to find answers for a future that is unknown? What are the capacities that are needed to face this 'new world' and how can they be developed?

Perhaps questions are more important than answers. Images are timeless and powerful, and they can evolve over time. As artificial intelligence expands, remember the heart: what is the potential of the pause between expansion and contraction? We practice being present to create a held space for the child. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing china with golden lacquer (see last photo). The philosophy behind this values and cherishes the imperfect, the weathered and the perishable. How can we show children how valuable this part of life is? It is an aspect which demonstrates what is unique about being human and beyond AI. We have a prophetic pedagogy based on our power to develop for the human future through time. [www.iaswece.org](http://www.iaswece.org)

After the lectures, a panel discussion took place, facilitated by Christopher Clouder. Some of the speakers and participants expressed how powerful it was to be together, to hear and feel now much we have a common cause. What can we do as activists? Keep up with the websites given in the programme and sign up for updates and newsletters to find information of what you can do. Invite people in the public eye to visit your setting: children can speak powerfully for themselves. Develop relationships with your local community, find commonalities, and keep talking to everyone about what a good education could be.

Christopher then ended by describing two invigorating precepts Rudolf Steiner gave: be devoted to what you are doing and be interested in what others are doing. We need to have patience in our work, for example for our work and contacts with politicians. The Waldorf movement should be part of the fight for pluralism.

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*Sam, Jill and Janni have all taught in Steiner early childhood and worked as advisors, mentors and in early childhood teacher education. Janni and Sam work for the umbrella Organisation the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship with an overview of Birth to Seven. [www.steinerwaldorf.org](http://www.steinerwaldorf.org). Janni is the UK representative and board member of IASWECE.*

*Jill Taplin runs an early childhood training course in the North of England. [www.neswec.org.uk](http://www.neswec.org.uk) and works abroad as teacher trainer, mentor and advisor.*