

The Significance of the Doll in a Child's Development

Silvia Jensen



This year I found myself twice involved with doll making. The first time was when I was teaching in a kindergarten training seminar and the second time was a project in my kindergarten for our Christmas bazaar at school. On the whole more than 45 dolls were born, and around 32 people learned how to make them.

My first question each time was, how should this doll I was going to teach look like?

It was so interesting that at the moment I started to engage in this field the children in my class had a totally new relationship to the dolls. Suddenly the dolls became alive, they received food, were taken for a walk, had a mother and a father, and even came to story time.

What I have been seeing lately is that very often we are giving children many “toys” that are very beautiful, but I wonder if they aren’t too formed. One example comes from the growing use of the technique of needle felting with wool. There are now all kinds of animals on the season table or in puppetry, and puppets with so many details. There is no doubt that many of them are very well done and look nice, but is this the way Waldorf education should go? With this kind of props, do we leave space for the child’s fantasy to work? Do we really trust this potential in children?

There is a quote from Rudolf Steiner that occupies my mind, and it is where he speaks about the dreamlike consciousness that has to be cultivated in the first seven years of childhood. What does this mean? How do we cultivate this in our daily practice? It is not an easy task because we as adults are not at this level of consciousness and it is an effort to provide this to the child through the way we move, behave, and think!



For me is very clear that the way children play can go one or another direction depending on what they have as a "toy". In the German language the word for "toy" is very interesting, it is called "Spielzeug", which could be translated as "play thing, or something to play". In early childhood anything can become a "Spielzeug," isn't it true? So why do we complicate life? The time my children play most beautifully is when we go to the woods with no "toys".

Coming back to the dolls: they could easily be formed every day in kindergarten out of cloth for the body and wool for the head, for instance. Why not? For me they should be simple, with simple dots for the eyes and mouth if necessary. They could have a rag around them, have clothes to be dressed and undressed, could be given "food" provided by children that have pots to cook. With these simple elements we give the right environment for the child to experience the act of care, nowadays so important, in a dreamy way.

Astrid Lindgren was wise when she wrote in her book "Märchen"¹ the story about a rich princess that had all possible kinds of dolls to play with but still could not play, until the day came when she met a poor peasant girl called Pia who carried with her a piece of wood wrapped in a rag, and Liselotta felt that this was a real doll and asked the queen why she had never been given a doll like Pia's.

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¹ No English translation available. In German: Astrid Lindgren. Märchen. Hamburg (Oettinger) 1978.