

Without Freedom, No Development – Thoughts on Free Play and Religious Tolerance in Waldorf Kindergartens

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When Emmi Pikler opened her pediatric practice in Budapest in the early 1930s and had her first child, Hungary's policy was determined by a right-wing government under Miklos Horthy which passed anti-Semitic laws and brutally persecuted dissenters. It was in this context that she began to develop her infant pedagogy. At the center of this is the idea that the most important thing for a child's development is free initiative: "The essential thing is that the children discover as many things as possible on their own. If we help them to solve all the tasks, we deprive them of precisely what is most important for their mental development".¹

Exactly at the same time in Berlin, the music pedagogue Heinrich Jacoby developed revolutionary pedagogical approaches together with movement therapist Elsa Gindler. The revolution referred to the fact that in education it is the adults who had to change their behavior instead of constantly harassing children: "The mentality and behavior of the teaching adults had to change. Through regulations, inappropriate questions and hasty assistance, the child's development is disturbed, the child loses the ability and courage to try things out for itself, to improvise and to spontaneously allow its own expressions, whether in the field of music, movement or linguistic expression."² Jacoby had to rush to end his collaboration with Gindler and had to flee to Switzerland. He knew, like all people who professed freedom and as a Jewish fellow citizen, that he would end up in an extermination camp of the Nazi regime.

When Maria Montessori gave a speech on peace education to the League of Nations in Geneva in 1932, underlining that only education for freedom and autonomy would lead to lasting peace,³ fascism was on the rise in Italy as well. From 1934 Mussolini turned against institutions of his great contemporary, who a spring that you should let bubble".⁴

Just like the Montessori institutions in Italy, the Waldorf Schools in Germany were tolerated for a few more years at this time before they too had to close. Rudolf Steiner had already adopted a revolutionary pedagogical tone in 1919: "We are then faced with the task of not wanting to teach the child all kinds of things through our will but ... to be in the child's environment in such a way that the child can imitate the thing in question."⁵ Above all, the self-education of the educator promotes the development of the little child, the most important thing is to give the child time and space for free play in an environment designed according to the child's needs.



Although well-known authors still emphasize today that the will of the small child to learn and develop is lastingly disturbed by the suppression of self-initiative, one can get the impression that the educational policy of many countries wants to finally reverse the pedagogical revolution that began a hundred years ago. Free play imitated by the child itself is once again suspect, or better: it is tolerated as a sympathetic romantic phenomenon, but it is not given a significant place in pre-school education. Today, it is not totalitarian regimes that prohibit institutions that apply this basic idea of the above-mentioned pedagogues. It is concerned parents and officials in education ministries who believe that children have no chance on the labor market if they do not spend their time in pre-school from the age of three learning steps programmed and controlled by adults. In France, the book by the Canadian educational scientist Catherine L'Ecuyer "The Wonder Approach, Rescuing Childrens Innate Desire to Learn." is a bestseller - at the same time, compulsory schooling from the age of three is being introduced and the legal status of kindergartens abolished. The book, which has also sold well in Spain, England and the USA, states: "If we shower small children with external stimuli, we paralyze their innate capacity for wonder and stifle their self-motivation."⁶ In the United Kingdom, learning programs, tests and safety regulations make free play in pre-schools largely impossible. At the same time, the well-known journalist Sue Palmer publishes on her website: "Research connects too early school start to long term damage to mental health."⁷

Waldorf kindergartens all over the world have for decades provided a natural, artistically appealing environment that encourages individual activity, wonder and learning - ideal for free play. Here and there, however, one can hear and read worried voices who object that freedom of thought is not guaranteed in these institutions, because Rudolf Steiner, as is well known, had a spiritual worldview which was transferred to the children via the educators. Even if it is pointed out that Steiner himself repeatedly emphasized that Waldorf institutions should under no circumstances teach any religion or world view, nor the anthroposophy described by Steiner,⁸ this concern remains with some, for spirituality and religion were for centuries bound up with strict regulations and with ideas represented as dogmas. If one submitted to the rules and believed in the dogmas, one belonged to a certain group; if not, one was excluded.

However, if you read Steiner more closely, you will find that he thinks the same way about world views as he does about the role of personal initiative in education: just as a child under six develops best through personal initiative and free play, so does every adult in terms of spirituality and world



views. Coercion, regulations, rules of conduct and dogmas are a thing of the past. A free, open atmosphere invites experimentation, seeking and wonder and encourages everyone to develop - adults and children alike. No matter whether children have a huge urge to move and are constantly running, jumping and bellowing, or whether they are contemplative, constantly asking questions, or building houses - in the Waldorf Kindergarten there is room and time and space for their initiatives. Whether parents are Muslims, Jews, Christians or atheists, whether they are interested in yoga or basketball, in the Waldorf Kindergarten the educator together with all the parents tries to create a suitable environment for the free play of the children. Education for freedom and tolerance are among the most important ideals of the Waldorf Kindergarten - and of anthroposophy: "It is precisely because people are becoming more and more individual that attempts are being made to free themselves from dogma. In our time more and more tolerance must be developed, especially with regard to the thoughts of religious life".⁹

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¹ Quote in German: <https://erzieherauge.blogspot.com/p/zitate.html>

² Quote in the German Wikipedia: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Jacoby

³ Quoted in French on :

<http://journaldecole.canalblog.com/archives/2014/11/10/30931216.html><http://journaldecole.canalblog.com/archives/2014/11/10/30931216.html>

⁴ Quoted in French in: M Deny, A-C. Pigache : Le grand guide des pédagogies alternatives. Eyrolles, Paris 2017.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner: Soul Economy and Waldorf Education, Lecture 7, GA 303, Dornach, December 29, 1921

⁶ See her English website here: <https://catherinelecuyer-eng.com/thewonderapproach/>. And her Spanish website: <https://catherinelecuyer.com/2016/07/06/la-importancia-de-educar-en-el-asombro-y-en-la-realidad/>

⁷ <https://www.upstart.scot/research-connects-too-early-school-start-to-long%2adterm-damage-to-mental-health/>

⁸ “The principle of the “universal human” is expressed by Waldorf education. It does not in any way promote a particular philosophy or religious conviction. In this sense, as an art of education derived from spiritual science, it has been absolutely essential for Waldorf schools to remove any hint of being “anthroposophic schools.”

Rudolf Steiner, A Modern Art of Education, Ilkley, Lecture 10, August 15, 1923.

⁹ Rudolf Steiner: “How Can the Soul Needs of the Times Be Met?”. Lecture on October 10th, 2016, in GA 168