

THE STEINER PERSPECTIVE PRACTICE IN MODERN EARLY YEARS ESTABLISHMENTS

Introduction. In recent years early childhood education and care has been increasingly seen as vitally important in both a political and social context across the globe. In many respects we have come a long way since the pioneering work of Rachel and Margaret McMillan in Deptford nearly a century ago. This is to be sincerely welcomed, and the Steiner Waldorf movement in the Ukraine commends in the last decade in increasing the profile accorded to early education within the policy agenda and the corresponding growth in the allocation of resources to the well-being of the young child. In the new vocabulary of education and care words such as creativity, citizenship, emotional learning, childhood well-being, and personal, social and health education are current, alongside the public requirements for assessment and evaluation. One aspect depends on an implicit freedom for practitioners to use their vocational skills in areas that are basically immeasurable, together with their professional insight and sense of responsibility [5, p. 46]. The other seeks to make their services accountable to the general good by requiring a healthy degree of transparency and cooperation.

The *aim of the article* is to present product of this form of cooperation, illustrates precisely that process in both making Steiner Waldorf principles and preschools' practice more visible and available, while at the same time elucidating and developing them in the context of our times.

The main text. The Steiner Waldorf early childhood approach takes as given the interdependence of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive development. It takes account of the whole child, including his/her soul qualities, and believes that children's learning flourishes in a calm, peaceful, predictable, familiar and unhurried environment that recognises the child's sensory sensitivities [6]. Young children need to experience the relevance of their world before they separate themselves from it and begin to analyse it in a detached way [8].

Learning gains meaning by its relevance to life and should not be separated from the business of daily living. The learning experience of children under the age of seven therefore is integrated and not subject-based. Mathematics and use of mathematical language, for example, might take place at the cooking table, where food is prepared (thinly sliced carrots make wonderful natural circles and have the added virtue of being able to be eaten later in soup!) and concepts such as addition and subtraction (or more or less), weight, measure, quantity and shape are grasped in a practical manner as part of daily life. Children are able to tell a story by "reading" the pictures in a book, which develops verbal skills, frees the narrative from the printed text and encourages children to use their own words. Many children also act out or perform puppet shows and develop dramatic skills through working with narrative and dialogue in an artistic way [6, p. 137].

Steiner believed that children's learning is intrinsically linked with his view of child development and that it is detrimental if inappropriate learning challenges are presented before a child is developmentally ready. *As Steiner has mentioned: "We must not think out work for children to do, even in play, that is not an imitation of life itself"* [9, p. 18].

Although in Steiner philosophy, the stages of development evolve roughly within seven-year cycles, this readiness will vary from child to child. As children unfold in an appropriately stimulating environment, supported by sensitive and knowledgeable adults, they will learn to fulfil their innate potential and bring forth their individual gifts.

The environment. The indoor space. The Steiner early childhood approach is based on an understanding that the senses of the young child are sensitively impressionable and that *everything* that surrounds children has a direct or subtle impact on them [1; 3]. Very careful consideration is therefore given to the detail of the quality of all aspects of the setting's environment to ensure that it is gentle to the eye, ear and all the senses. The physical space is designed to be home-like in the way it is set up, and as free from exterior distraction as possible. The scale of the space should not overwhelm a small child and so where possible the ceiling is low, there are no "hard" corners and it is decorated in soft tones of pink to create a gentle, secure feeling. Each child has his/her own coat peg with their name or a picture above it and somewhere to leave a change of shoes. There is a nature table which follows a seasonal theme and the decorations are also seasonal, always displayed with moderation, using soft material and pastel colours. There is a quiet corner, a home corner, an area for floor play and building large constructions, an area for activity and snack tables and chairs. The kitchen area is partitioned but usually within the room [6, p. 36].

Materials and toys. The furniture is made of wood and is intended for multiple use. Toys are made of natural materials and are deliberately crafted to be relatively undefined which allows maximum scope for imaginative use as props in children's play. They include wooden blocks, planks and logs, natural plain cloth, shells, cones, and hand-made dolls. Equipment includes grain mills, juice presses, woodwork tools, spinning wheels and other simple manual tools, watercolours, broad brushes, beeswax crayons, sheep's fleece, sewing materials and specially designed picture books. There is also a variety of materials in soft colours for dressing up or using to cover the wooden screens, which can make houses, boats or castles. In the home corner there are small cradles, prams, table and chairs, kitchen equipment and more such domestic items. There are often instruments for musical activities, and sometimes a quiet/book corner with a few carefully chosen picture books which are changed regularly [5].

The outdoor space. The kindergarten setting will have a protected and safe outdoor area for play and work where the children can climb trees, hide in bushes or play in the sand or mud pit. The outdoor equipment is simple, with a choice of skipping ropes, digging or raking equipment, and logs and branches for building dens. Where outdoor space is limited, children are taken to the local park, playground or wherever they can experience nature. Where possible, children are introduced to gardening/composting in the kindergarten garden where there is an opportunity to become familiar with the process of growing from planting to harvesting.

Play is a young child's work. Young children find their own learning situations in play. Studies demonstrate that good players show more empathy towards others, develop good social skills and are less aggressive. They are able to see things from the perspective of the other and show less signs of fear, sadness and fatigue. Play also strengthens the imagination, which is an essential aspect of cognitive development [4, p. 53].

Creative play supports physical, emotional and social development and allows children to learn through investigation, exploration and discovery. It encourages children to become inventive and adaptable. Children are able to exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and to think through their play and take initiative. In addition it develops and strengthens concentration [2].

"Doing" is learning. A kindergarten is a community of "doers" and through "work" the young child learns not only social and domestic skills, but is able to develop good motor and practical skills. Children "think" with their entire physical being, learn through doing and experiencing and "grasp" the world through experiential and self-motivated physical activity. Also, the will is developed through doing activities when children are young and such activity brings long-term benefits to learning later on. Young children learn for life from life [4, p. 59].

Rhythm and repetition are crucial. Regular patterns of activities create routine and foster a sense of security and self-confidence and help the child to know what to expect. Working with rhythm helps children to live with change, to find their place in the world, and to begin to understand the past, present and future. It provides a very real foundation for the understanding of time — what has gone before and what will follow — and helps children to relate to the natural and the human world. Children's memories are strengthened by recurring experiences: daily, weekly and yearly events in kindergarten (such as festivals and celebrations) are remembered and often eagerly anticipated a second time around [2, p. 90].

The role of "mood". The kindergarten day has different "moods". These provide opportunity for children to learn that there is an expectation to adjust behaviour in different situations. The creating of different moods to accompany different kinds of activities is done very deliberately as a way of allowing children to become aware of the invisible boundaries that determine what kind of behaviour is appropriate for the situation. For example, there are moments of reverence each day when the children associate the mood with stillness, awe and wonder.

Conclusion. The overarching aim of the Steiners' practice showed that it helps preschool children achieve the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being by: setting the standards for the learning, development and care young children should experience when they are attending a setting outside their family home, ensuring that every child makes progress and that no child gets left behind; providing for equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice and ensuring that every child is included and not disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability; creating the framework for partnership working between parents and professionals, and between all the settings that the child attends; improving the quality and consistency in the early years sector through a universal set of standards which apply to all settings, ending the distinction between care and learning in the existing frameworks, and providing the basis for the inspection and regulation regime; laying a secure foundation for future learning through learning and development that is planned around the individual needs.

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