

## All about ...

# Steiner Waldorf education

The history of the influential early years education movement and how it is being put into practice today. By **Janni Nicol**



Dyeing wool outdoors is a typical activity for the children at a Steiner Waldorf kindergarten

**O**ne hundred years ago on 4 September 2019, the first Steiner Waldorf School opened in Stuttgart, Germany. Rudolf Steiner had been lecturing to the workers of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory, and its owner, Emil Moult, asked for a school for their children to be non-denominational and fully integrated. It is from this origin that the term Waldorf arises and is used interchangeably, or together with, Steiner to describe the education movement founded by Rudolf Steiner.

### STEINER AND HIS PIONEERS

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was born in Kraljevec, now Croatia. He was intensely

awake to nature and was convinced of the reality of an inner life. He studied science and the classics, and tutored pupils in the humanities. Philosophy, science, literature and the arts were his principal interests, and he gained his doctorate in philosophy.

He formulated and taught a path of inner development or spiritual research, which he called 'anthroposophy' (wisdom of the human being). His insights and inspirational ideas (given through extensive lectures, writings and private consultations) were the seeds, infused with human values, for thousands of projects worldwide from architecture to water purification. His picture of the human being as consisting of body, soul and spirit underpins the educational approach.

### Margaret McMillan

Margaret McMillan, the founder of the nursery school movement in England, met Steiner in 1923 when he came to the country when she organised his lecture tour on the New Art of Education. Afterwards she wrote to her friend Margaret Sutcliff of Steiner, 'I have found my leader and I will follow him!' She gave him her book *Education Through the Imagination*, which he reviewed favourably later in a magazine. He accepted her invitation to visit her Nursery School at Deptford and was impressed by her 'energetic labour of Love'.

### Kindergarten pioneers

The first Waldorf kindergarten was founded in 1926 by Elisabeth Grunelius. She had

completed her early childhood studies at the Pestalozzi-Froebel seminar in Berlin and began to study with Steiner at the age of 19. After the foundation of the first Waldorf school, he asked her to write a curriculum for the early years, but she felt she needed more experience first, so she declined. However, he stood behind her, giving more lectures about early childhood and the work of the early childhood educator.

She took a number of things from these teachings, such as a deep anthroposophical understanding of child development, that she must work out of imitation, and that the continuous self-development of the adult should be the basis of kindergarten life. She introduced water-colour painting, clay modelling and fairy stories, and the songs, poems and rhymes she had learned from her Froebel training.

The new kindergarten was finished in 1926, and she built up kindergarten activities from sensing what the children needed, working meditatively, and out of imitation rather than direct instruction. She invited artisans to work in the kindergarten so that the children could be surrounded by artistic striving. She began to work with others interested in this approach to early childhood, including Klara Hatterman, with whom she organised a study group.

When the school was closed by the Nazis, Elisabeth travelled to the USA where she opened the first kindergarten. It was there she wrote and published *Early Childhood Education and the Waldorf School Plan*. Returning to Europe, she helped found more kindergartens in Germany and France. She worked with Klara in teacher training and with building up the kindergarten movement in Germany.

In 1969, the Association of Waldorf Kindergartens was founded in Germany, and began working with Waldorf Steiner kindergarten movements worldwide. This has now developed into the International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education ([www.iaswece.org](http://www.iaswece.org)), with 34 country association members, supporting the growth of Steiner Waldorf teacher education and the worldwide Steiner Waldorf early childhood movement.



activities such as counting games, rhythmic activities, poetry, rhymes and singing, including in foreign languages. The oral tradition is integrated into most parts of the kindergarten day to encourage listening and speech development.

The teacher tells (by heart) a wide variety of stories from many different cultural traditions, which include a rich vocabulary. Children experience the musicality of language and its social aspects through playing ring games and doing eurythmy (a form of movement, which works with language and music). The development of a good memory and recall are reliant on the spoken word, rather than the printed word or computers, and speech develops concentration and empathy, which are essential for formal and life-long learning.

Grasping mathematical concepts such as weight, measure and shape is most meaningful when it relates to everyday activities and routines. For example, the preparation of food provides an opportunity to weigh, measure, count and use number, and setting the table is another area where mathematics is used in a practical way.

Through movement games, children recognise and recreate patterns – in, out, alternate, above and below, in front of, behind, etc. Natural objects such as acorns, pinecones, conkers and shells are sorted, ordered and counted and used as part of spontaneous play or tidying-up. This approach to early mathematics embeds the concepts in a social and useful context.

### Dexterity and co-ordination

Children develop both large and small motor skills throughout the range of directed and child-initiated activities, through free play, setting the table, ring time, outdoor play (climbing, skipping and risk-taking) and eurythmy. These activities develop balance and spatial awareness, as well as hand-to-eye co-ordination, manual dexterity and orientation. For example, doing some simple sewing or weaving is a

healthy physical body in the first seven years become available as the basis for healthy cognitive development later on. This threefold approach involves a holistic support for the development of the all-round human qualities of willing (doing), feeling and thinking – an education of hand, heart and head.

In the introduction to Steiner's lectures (1923), Marie Steiner writes, 'The need for imagination, a sense of truth and a feeling of responsibility, these are the very nerve of education... the great thing is to enable the human being to find his place in the world with due confidence in his own power of judgement.'

In the kindergarten years, the children benefit from an unhurried environment where there is time to discover the world around them. They master social interaction, learn to self-regulate, become resilient and develop physical co-ordination, speech, language and other life skills before more formal abstract learning is introduced. Childhood is not a race!

### Foundations in literacy, numeracy and communication

Good communication and oral numeric skills develop out of playing and working together. Each day the children take part in

kindergartens, or those where much of the day is spent outside. (Some of these aspects will be covered in subsequent articles.)

### Educational principles and pedagogical priorities

Steiner divided the broad principles of child development, and the educational methodology supporting it, into three psychological and physiological phases, each approximately seven years in length.

Although each stage has a precise integrity, processes coming to a certain culmination in one phase transform into faculties in the subsequent stages of development. An example of this is that the forces so strongly at work in building up a

### STEINER WALDORF EDUCATION TODAY

Today, there are more than 1,000 schools and 2,000 kindergartens in more than 64 countries. Parent education and Steiner teacher training is offered for all stages of the curriculum. The Steiner Waldorf approach to the care and education of young children encompasses birth to seven years.

In addition to providing kindergartens (three to six-plus), Steiner Early Childhood settings usually include sessions for parent and baby groups, parent and child groups (birth to three), playgroups/nursery groups (two to four), daycare and childminding where children are cared for in a respectful, age-appropriate way. There are also outdoor

### in his own words

#### Relevance to life

'The task of the early childhood educator is to adapt the practical activities of daily life so that they are suitable for the child's imitation through play... The activities of children in early childhood must be derived directly from life itself rather than being "thought out" by the intellectualised culture of adults... The most important

thing is to give children the opportunity to directly imitate life itself.' *The Child's Changing Consciousness: As the basis of pedagogical practice*

#### An enabling environment

'The essential task of the early childhood educator is to create the proper physical environment around the children. "Physical environment"

must be understood in the widest sense imaginable. It includes not just what happens around the children in the material sense, but everything that occurs in their environment, everything that can be perceived by their senses, that can work on the inner powers of the children from the surrounding physical space.' *The Education of the Child and Early Lectures on Education*

### MORE INFORMATION

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- Jaffe F (2002) *Play and Work in Early Childhood*. Floris Books
- For more on Steiner, Steiner Waldorf education and training in the UK, visit the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship website at: [www.steinerwaldorf.org](http://www.steinerwaldorf.org)
- For more on Steiner Waldorf early childhood education internationally, visit: [www.iaswece.org](http://www.iaswece.org)

useful preparation for reading print from left to right. Persistence and focus are developed through skills such as woodwork or projects. Drawing materials are provided, as well as painting and other creative arts and crafts.

### Social skills

The development of social skills and awareness of ourselves, each other and the world around us are essential for becoming active participants in school and society.

Children share, work together, care for each other and the environment and respect the needs of others. These fundamental human values are embedded in the everyday activities and social environment of the setting. The behaviour of children is moulded by what surrounds them. Kindness is practised by teachers and imitated by the children and they learn to trust the world. Traditional fairytales and nature stories address the feeling realm and gradually awaken a fine moral sense for knowing right from wrong.

### Play – child-led, child-initiated, free play

Learning through play is an essential part of kindergarten life; it is through this

self-directed imaginative play that children develop their human capacities and capabilities. The adults are there to lovingly support, guide and observe the children's self-development, not direct their learning in more formal ways.

The internal motivation that drives children to play arises from their observations of life around them, their biography, family, locality and culture. It awakens the child's interest and independent self-motivated learning, which is a critical foundation for learning to learn.

## Rhythm and repetition

Rhythm provides children with a secure framework, so that learning behaviours can be strengthened. Their habits develop not only in the physical body but also in feeling and thinking. It gives them opportunities to revisit skills, knowledge and attitudes and modify working theories over time.

The children begin to understand and integrate into time through the rhythms of the day, week, seasons and yearly celebrations and birthdays. Through rhythm children gain a sense of security and confidence in the world – they know where they are!

## An enabling environment

The environment, both inside and out, nourishes the senses without overwhelming them and has a formative influence on the child. It is home-like and intimate, a place where the children are comfortable, relaxed and open to learning. Natural materials are used, and toys are generally open-ended and multifunctional. It calls on their fantasy and creativity and provides possibilities for them to relate to the world. An understanding of sustainability comes from cultivating the earth, growing, preparing and eating the food reverently together, recycling and composting what is left in order to grow more in the future. This gives a healthy understanding of the earth as a provider that needs to be cared for.

Mealtimes provide the perfect opportunity to develop all-round skills and capacities. For example, setting the table, the



Clockwise from top left (various settings): ring time; finger knitting; harvest festival;

children count how many places are needed for the children and adults present. They place cutlery and crockery, serviettes and cups, and decorate the centre of the table with flowers and a candle. When hands are washed, the children sit down, and two children fill the glasses with water and hand out the warm soup which they prepared earlier. After the candle is lit, a 'blessings on the food' verse is sung, and they eat together, also enjoying the buttered rolls which they

baked the day before. Conversation, rhymes and riddles abound. When the soup plates are collected, the fruit which they prepared earlier is passed around.

After they have all finished, they say thank you for the meal, stack the plates, collect the crumbs for the birds and compost, and some children stay to clean and wash up while others go outside. Nourishment for the soul and body!

## Respect for the natural environment

Curiosity, gratitude, awe and wonder are nurtured through an appreciation of the beauty of nature, plants, insects and animals. Domestic tasks provide opportunities for experiences that provide the foundation of future scientific exploration and learning. When children make toys from sheep's wool, wood, felt, cotton and other natural materials, they learn about their origin.

Local craftspeople are often invited to visit kindergarten, and local walks provide an opportunity for the children to appreciate their environment and nature's wonders. Children and adults look after the kindergarten equipment, sanding and oiling



washing wool; preparing soup outdoors

wooden furniture and toys, mending things that break, washing cloths, cleaning the windows and other nurturing tasks. They take care of the organic garden, growing nurturing and harvesting fruit. They rake leaves, tend compost and water the plants.

## The kindergarten day

Each kindergarten group usually has 16-18 children. The mixed-age group (generally three to six) creates a family environment where older children can support the younger ones and the youngest children learn from their older peers. Increasingly, the day is extending to meet the needs of families today, offering the option of care from 8.30am to 3.30pm. After-school care is often provided to 5pm or 6pm. This provides consistency of care and respect for the children's relationships with all staff.

The day is structured so there is a varied pace, with periods of teacher-led and child-initiated activities, and a conscious balance between times of activity and rest. This might mean that creative play would be followed by a more concentrated ring time (music and movement), or energetic outdoor activity by a quiet story told (not

## Film

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Steiner Waldorf Education, Waldorf 100, in co-operation with the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE), has created 'Becoming', a film about early childhood today in the mirror of different cultures worldwide.

→ To view it, visit: <https://vimeo.com/330768058> or [www.iaswece.org](http://www.iaswece.org)

## International conference: 5 October 2019

'Working together for children in the 21st Century – Inspiring innovative and

## celebrating Steiner

creative early childhood practice' will offer an opportunity for early childhood colleagues from different disciplines and approaches to come together to explore practice that truly meets the needs of young children now and into the future. Topics for discussion include: movement, play, school starting age and digital technology.

→ It will be held at Michael Hall Steiner Waldorf School, Forest Row, East Sussex.

→ For more information, visit: [www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/working-together-for-children-conference-tickets-61488807679](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/working-together-for-children-conference-tickets-61488807679)

read) by the teacher. The kindergarten day follows consistent and predictable patterns through the week and the children do the same things at regular times, carried through imitation of others.

## The role of the educators Imitation

The ability of the child to absorb every nuance of what they experience allows deep learning to occur. Imitation can take several forms – direct imitation of the adult's actions, or the intent behind the adult's actions – for example, the ability to organise themselves and resources, sustain a task over time, approach problems in a work process and refine a skill. The children may also imitate the inner attitude of the teacher – for example, devotion, care, sense of purpose, engagement, focus, perseverance and attentiveness.

The adults work at being a role model 'worthy of imitation', by providing meaningful activities and being 'in the moment' where the child can join in – such as cutting fruit or kneading bread. The child imitates the outer actions and the inner gesture of the adults. Social interactions – when with parents, staff or children – are filled with reverence, respect and understanding of the other. Creating a beautiful environment and taking care of it with devotion helps the children to see the world with awe and wonder.

## Working with parents and carers

A healthy relationship between parents and teachers is crucial to support the well-being of the child. Parents are invited to share key festivals, encourage similar routines at home, and help within the kindergarten – from crafts to cleaning. In this way, the kindergarten provides a bridge between home and school.

The teachers organise parents' evenings which deepen the parents' understanding of

the education their children receive. Parent consultations are held regularly to talk about the child's development and inform them of any issues. These partnerships support the child through any challenges that they may face. Children with additional needs are encouraged to join in all activities and, when necessary, special individual programmes are developed to support their needs.

## EYFS AND EXEMPTIONS

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) applies to all registered Steiner Early Childhood settings. Through the umbrella organisation the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF), the member kindergartens and Steiner Inspired Childminders have all applied for and received 'Established Principles' exemptions from (or modifications to) those areas of the EYFS Learning and Development requirements and Assessment arrangements which are in conflict with the Steiner Waldorf approach, such as the Literacy, Maths, digital technology and the EYFS Profile.

## HERE WE HAVE TIME

The Steiner Waldorf kindergarten strives to be a haven from the stresses of the outside world. Time for the children to experience themselves and others and grow in peace and harmony, where the child feels safe and not under pressure to perform or compete, where we weave together a tapestry of learning experiences for the child – that is the ideal in a Steiner Waldorf kindergarten. ■

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## IN SUMMARY: STEINER'S MAIN MESSAGES

Early years practitioners should aim to:

- recognise and support each stage of child development
- work with the child's natural inclination to be active
- use imitation and example as an educational approach (rather than instruction and direction)
- support creative child-initiated play
- enable a good sensory experience in the equipment and homely environment provided
- support the child's spiritual, personal,

social and moral development

- work with rhythm and repetition, allowing the child to feel safe and secure
- encourage children to know and love the world through awe and wonder
- support the development of the child in co-operation with the parents
- protect the child's right to a healthy and appropriate childhood
- work continuously on their own self-development and find love and joy in the work.