

Under the Stars: The Foundation of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education

by Renate Long-Breipohl (Hawthorn Press, 2012)

This is a very thoughtful book of essays that provide a stimulating journey through the phenomena of early childhood development. The introduction includes an interesting historical overview of how Steiner/Waldorf early childhood work developed purely through oral and experiential tutoring for twenty-five years before any publications on the subject or formal training courses appeared. Then some of Rudolf Steiner's own words on the child under seven were compiled for the use of the growing number of kindergarten teachers, and guides to the practicalities of kindergarten work slowly began to appear. More recently there have been deeper works going beyond the practical, alongside the development of more formal trainings. This book is an important addition at a time when the tremendous international growth of Waldorf early childhood education requires research and consideration of the quality that it offers.

The author is not only an experienced early childhood practitioner and international adult educator, she is also an admirable researcher and thinker, and the essay format chosen here has allowed her to develop and weave her thoughts across the principal themes of Waldorf early childhood education. Her method is to look in depth at the child development picture behind each theme, what Rudolf Steiner had to say about it, how his ideas have been developed and how they stand alongside modern research. Bringing these together has been a considerable project and provides a valuable synthesis for anyone working in this area.

Renate is not afraid to explain the difference between spiritual scientific and natural scientific research and to explain how she has endeavored to bring these together in this book. She presents "intuitional cognition" as her method of investigation and as the unique contribution of Rudolf Steiner, pointing out that by this method, an investigation is never complete.

Her statement of her purpose and aims in this book is an example of her clarity:

This book is written by an early childhood educa-

tor for teacher trainers, educators and parents who are interested in the deeper aspects of Steiner early childhood education. It originated as much from my own experiences with young children as from Steiner's insights. It is about incarnation, the influences of spiritual forces in the child's development and the appropriate steps the educator can take to support this process, be it through forming relationships, supporting the development of movement and thinking in the child, play, child observation or working on one's inner development. In order to progress further in improving and refining early education, and thus contribute to the future evolution of humanity, a deeper understanding of human existence is needed. Studying the incarnation process of the child is a good way of gaining a picture of the underlying spiritual reality of human existence.

Essay by essay, she applies herself to this task with thoroughness that can be challenging. The first three essays all have sections which I shall have to work on further for myself if I am to fully grasp the complex pictures developed. But these areas, the life forces, thinking and the will, are long going to be at the boundaries of intellectual comprehension and one can benefit from the work of others without gaining a complete understanding oneself. I particularly value the way in these essays and in others in the book, the distinctive nature of the child under the age of three is discussed, and also the detailed exploration of the nature of the child in that transitional age between five and seven. I find it wonderful that towards the end of each essay, when it comes down to the practical outcomes that will best support the child, she returns again and again to the twin powers of the self-education of the adult and the natural strength of imitation in the young child.

Attachment to the prime carer is now acknowledged by "child experts" as deeply formative for the child under three years old, and the fourth essay, under the theme of "Relationships in Early Childhood," usefully looks at this in the light of Steiner's picture of human development. Renate suggests that it is the early awakening of the "I" that is the danger when the young child and mother figure are separated too soon. The question of how we support children and parents pressurized into this too early separation, by econom-

ic, social and other factors, is one that we have to develop further within Waldorf early childhood education.

The next essay also tackles a modern idea, that of the Indigo or Star child. Has there been an evolutionary shift that has brought a new kind of child into the world now, or is it just environmental pressures that have caused children to bring so many new challenges to those who try to care for and educate them? Whatever the answer to that question, we are called on to find new responses to these changing challenges and to recreate education so that it fits children, rather than trying to force children to fit traditional educational forms. Again, Renate is able to show how Waldorf education, with its emphasis on relationship and its awareness that premature intellectual awakening is harmful to young children, has much to offer to this task.

In an essay on movement (Chapter 6) Rudolf Steiner's profound indications from a hundred years ago are brought together with the recent and contrasting work of Sally Goddard Blythe and Wilma Ellersiek. Renate explores the interwoven nature of the development of physical and soul movement alongside the much bigger picture of the spiritual evolution of humanity. Currently there is much discussion of the ideas of Emmi Pikler about the movement development of very young children in particular, and it would be interesting to hear this author's views on that.

The self-initiated play of the young child is something that this author has published on before and the essay on this theme is full of rich analysis. The statement that "becoming a play facilitator is a path of learning" is one of those that indicates a deep source of further study. Renate gives her "six dimensions of play" and compares this model with the analyses of others, and the chapter ends with the extremely practical "five indications for play facilitators" that would make a very good pedagogical discussion subject for a group of early childhood colleagues or a kindergarten parents evening.

Essay eight looks at art experience for the young child and its developmental significance. I enjoyed the exploration of the importance of practitioner's aesthetic sense and artistic practice. The quality of simplicity is emphasized as the best foundation for the young child's imitation; this is sometimes a lesson that students and new practitioners struggle to learn. The essay ends with the thought that the artistic activities we provide in the kindergarten are the bridge from play

to formal learning.

The short essay on child observation, or what one might call the search for the hidden child, focuses our attention on learning to read the code of the messages that the child gives us or "letting the child speak." We are reminded that intellectual and sensory faculties alone will never be enough and that, again, the core is in self-education. In this case it is the inner schooling that allows us not to jump to conclusions but to work thought the qualities of wonder, reverence, feeling and lastly surrender, in order to make space for the phenomena to speak for themselves.

In the final essay, Renate shares with her readers a personal exploration of eight of the twelve virtues indicated by Rudolf Steiner through their connection with the circle of the zodiac. These are discussed in relation to both the child and the adult, which I believe is an original contribution of the author's to this subject. The essential truth is arrived at again, as it has been so often in these essays, that it is through our own self-development that we might come both to understand the incarnation of the child more deeply and to bring this knowledge into our work through the education of our own will for the child to imitate this inner gesture.

These essays combine to provide a source of much future study for those already engaged in the practice of working with young children in Steiner Waldorf settings. It is not an introductory book, but one for those with the experience to know that there is so much more to be known. It benefits from fine research, including access to German texts which are not available in English. There is a good index and thorough referencing (with a minor muddle in the reference section of the first essay). This makes it valuable for those engaged in academic study in this area.

It is a shame that the photographs in books such as this are not printed in color. Color photographs can bring such a lot to books about the young child in particular. I also note that the photos in this book are mostly of girls rather than boys. There is a current popular feeling that Waldorf education, especially in the early years, is more appropriate for girls than for boys. It is often boys who seem to provide the most challenges to teachers and practitioners. Perhaps this may be a stimulating topic for a future essay. ♦

—Jill Tina Taplin