

**THE STEINER WALDORF FOUNDATION STAGE –Lynne Oldfield  
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**An unhurried approach**

The first Waldorf kindergarten opened in Stuttgart in 1926, and the first kindergarten teacher produced a book outlining her practice. In the foreword of the first edition the question was given ‘As the human lifespan becomes longer, why is childhood becoming ever shortened?’

Eighty years on it is still a question we should be asking.

Towards the end of the book she stated that the Waldorf kindergarten teacher’s responsibilities should include resisting premature intellectuality and over stimulation in the early years of childhood and making all decisions as to practice out of a deep understanding of child development.

These three points give a concise yet fairly comprehensive definition of a Steiner kindergarten teacher’s intention:

-to protect and respect the boundaries of early childhood, which we define as extending to the seventh birthday

-to develop practice based on an understanding of child development in those sensitive years

-to be awake to the possible damage caused by too early intellectuality

With these intentions, and in the light of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the Steiner approach is notably UNHURRIED. The unhurried mood surrounds everything that we do-how we present activities, the structure of our day, the attention to detail, the caring for child and environment. It minimises stress in both child and teacher (and children are particularly sensitive to stress in adults).It also gives the educator the time to establish a strong foundation for later formal schooling. In a Waldorf kindergarten we have time –and the young developing child senses that at the deepest level.

Our Foundation Stage extends to the 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, with children in mixed age groups, three to six years of age, and remaining, ideally, with the one teacher throughout the three years before entering school. There are seldom more than 16 children in a group.

This GIFT OF TIME together allows a valuable connection to be made between child and teacher, child and child, which finds its resonance in attachment theory.

**IT IS A HAND FIRST, NOT HEAD START, APPROACH**

**A LANGUAGE RICH, RATHER THAN PRINT FILLED ENVIRONMENT**

**AN ACTIVITY RICH EXPERIENCE AND AUTHENTICALLY PLAY BASED**

**IT IS A CALM, EMOTION-REGULATING AND NURTURING EXPERIENCE.**

**An activity rich, hands on, approach**

In the Waldorf kindergarten the child experiences a sense of freedom, but importantly, is not limit deprived as boundaries are established by a rhythmical, repetitive, habit-forming experience, and the conscious use of example.

It is essentially AN ACTIVE EXPERIENCE, what we call a Will-first pedagogy. This is led by a practitioner who is informed, reflective, responsible, yet relatively un-intrusive.

The naturally active nature of the young child finds many outlets for initiative –taking initiative becomes habit for Waldorf children –and he discovers as the instigator of his learning ‘I can do it!’ rather than ‘Am I good enough?’ He is an empowered learner rather than being set up for failure to meet targets which are asking him to stretch into the next stage of development.

We understand that movement establishes neural pathways and makes sense of sensory experience. The Waldorf kindergarten teacher is familiar with the senses of balance, touch and movement and develops her practice to support their development and understands their significance as foundation for formal learning.

1/3 of primary school have been reported as having poor balance and motor skills which have significance for eye and hand movements necessary for reading and writing.

This possibility for positive activity –welcoming rather than suppressing movement – has implications for socialisation and ADHD (which is virtually unknown in Waldorf schools-also asthma) Children need to move beyond instinctive/impulsive behaviour, and towards self management, by the age of 5, certainly before they can be ready for reading and writing.

The active, repetitive, habit forming environment of the Waldorf kindergarten, together with the trained example of the teacher, enables this progress.

Our day is a balance between child initiated and teacher led activity (with child led activity having the longer proportion of time) and indoor and outdoor experience. Baking, bread-making, weaving, sewing, gardening, woodwork painting, sand, mud, water play, den building, soup making, construction, free play. We are a community of ‘do-ers’ and unashamedly risk taking.

(Neuroscience has confirmed the connection between speech and motor skills, particularly hand based motor skills and the significance of the senses of balance and movement for language and speech development and the making of neurological connections)

### A Word Rich Environment

The Waldorf early childhood teacher is engaged in LINGUISTIC MOTHERING.

The child’s experience of language in the kindergarten is that of human speech as opposed to the false substitutes offered by technology e.g. story tapes, television, computer software have no place in our kindergartens

Our Foundation Stage for literacy (which extends to the 6<sup>th</sup> birthday) involves phonological awareness, fine motor skills, the development of speech and

communication skills, the ability to listen and be attentive, perseverance, self-management of behaviour, opportunities for mark making, and love of stories.

Our programme is rich with songs, verses, finger games, puppet shows, speech practice in free play, circle times, story time –all repeated over a number of days so that children can memorise them without anxiety and language is enriched.

The EYFS goal states LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION, LITERACY. We would agree wholeheartedly with this sequence although add MOVEMENT before language, but for us the literacy stage in the sense of reading and writing belong to the 6 yr old and beyond.

Literacy of this nature is both A GAIN AND A LOSS. We need to be also aware of what the child loses when introduced to phonics. Literacy changes everything. It represents a significant shift in consciousness for the child –away from an unselfconscious state of being that is normal to the child below 5 and which is necessary for authentic play.

It also takes the child away from his natural concrete reality –the alphabet has only a very tenuous link to the concrete reality of the young child and he can become anxious when pulled too early away from this experience.

The EYFS goals for literacy belong to the next phase of development from our viewpoint of child development. The goals represent an acceleration of intellectuality, self consciousness and awakefulness and do not allow time to establish a physiological foundation for reading and writing.

The intellectual, analytical consciousness required for phonics, reading and writing – together with the constant instruction, direction, questioning outlined in the EYFS Guidance, will inhibit the genius of imitation and play and result in the loss of their rewards.

### Authentically Play Based

From our early beginnings we have stated our intention to offer a play based experience for children to the age of 6.

For over 80 years we have refined our definition of play and developed our ability to create an enabling environment in which play can flourish.

The rewards which arise from play are well documented so I will limit myself to 3 less well documented points in regard to play:

-our definition would exclude descriptions such as ‘directed play’ ‘structured play’ ‘purposeful play’ but would embrace descriptions such as ‘free, child initiated, creative, imaginative play’

For the Waldorf educator the concept of play instigated by a practitioner for the purpose of acquiring a particular concept is a contradiction in terms. In our view this is actually playful teaching rather than authentic play which always requires the child to be both instigator and navigator of the experience.

-an even less well understood fact –the ‘enabling environment’ which would need to be created for phonic, reading, writing and ICT skills as outlined in the EYFS Profile

would in time actually **DISABLE TRUE PLAY**. One requires a new self consciousness, a separating, analysing, awakened, state of being. Whilst the other requires that a child acts out of an unselfconscious, un-separated, non analytical, state of being. **THEY ARE INCOMPATIBLE ENVIRONMENTS.**

-the peak time for authentic play is between four and five years when the demands of the EYFS reading and writing goals will begin to be felt in order for the literacy targets to be met by the June after the 5<sup>th</sup> birthday (and to appease demands from the Local Authority Outcome Duties).

Once the window of opportunity for play is lost it cannot be re opened.

But this will only make sense for educators and politicians if play is understood, defined and valued.

(We now know that interactive play is essential for optimal brain development in the frontal lobes, with a subsequent relationship to reasoning, reflecting, empathy and creativity. Play releases well being chemicals which are also anti anxiety, anti aggression. Play deprivation has a correlation to ADHD and, in reverse, is as effective as low doses of Ritalin in addressing ADHD. We welcome a recent shift to behavioural explanations for ADHD)

### Dedicated Care of the Nerve Sense System

Rudolf Steiner described the child before 7 as **WHOLLY SENSE ORGAN** and this description underpins one of our main principles.

The young child is open, utterly, to the environment.

At the same time we can now begin to know the extent to which the brain is experience dependent, formed by experience which leave their neuron footprint.

I want to borrow a wonderful description from the policy report from The Centre for Social Justice, chaired by Dr Callan.

That the nerve sense system in early childhood is ‘both a critical window of vulnerability and also a critical window of opportunity’.

The report also refers to the stress which can arise when children are over stimulated through early anxiety for the child ‘to achieve’

The Waldorf early years educator would stand behind these findings totally. The environment we prepare is calm, unhurried, stress free, yet demanding in a healthy way.

In relation to the vulnerability of the nerve sense system in the early years we have a **PROTECTIVE** approach, shielding children from screen viewing, precocious intellectuality, negative sense impressions.

In relation to the window of opportunity, we accept the openness of the child as an opportunity for **SENSORY NOURISHMENT** –carefully chosen stories, natural materials, direct experience of nature, organic food, colour, touch, smell, sounds –all

are chosen for their integrity, beauty and truthfulness. Young children need a real rather than virtual reality.

(The vulnerability of young children to screen viewing is now documented. Visual electronic media halts development of the frontal lobe and its ability to control anti-social behaviour. Once introduced screen viewing quickly becomes addictive. Screen viewing makes real world experience uninteresting and weakens play. Screen viewing stimulates impulsive behaviour and weakens attentiveness.)

### Imitation and Example

Perhaps one of our most enigmatic principles is that of imitation and the power of example. Steiner gave imitation a central place in the child's transition from being a creature of instinct and impulse to being capable of self direction. This transition is a prime task for the Waldorf kindergarten teacher, and a key principle in laying a foundation for formal learning.

The overcoming of impulsiveness is a major problem in Gt Britain with the heartbreaking behaviour of many of our children.

Children have a natural biological predisposition to imitate.

They unconsciously look for the human example to model. They seek the human image and this is a great responsibility for adults and one which Waldorf kindergarten teachers take very seriously but also one which they view as another window of opportunity.

By allowing children to imitate our example, rather than directing or instructing them, we allow them an unconscious process of learning, without anxiety, and appropriate behaviour can also be developed.

Our kindergarten teachers are trained to be examples worthy of imitation. We view ourselves as a significant part of the environment.

In our training we study speech, movement, music, artistic activities as preparation for this responsibility.

We recognise that the act of imitation, when used intensely, can strengthen attachment and develop empathy. In fact neuroscience has confirmed a link between mirror neurons which are activated by the act of imitation, and the quality of empathy which is enabled by the same neurons.

Imitation also sustains the child's sense of freedom. It strengthens attachment.

### Conclusion

These Steiner principles when contrasted with the principles of the EYFS leave us with certain questions:

-What is the rationale for ever earlier introduction of reading, writing, ICT?

**-Why is it assumed that 'quality pre school experience' necessitates this ever earlier introduction to literacy targets?**

**- Why is it also assumed that this will benefit disadvantaged children in particular? Surely reading and writing are the least of their problems at this early age? Surely they are just the group which will most benefit from the unhurried pathway? With socialisation, speech, attentiveness, perseverance, self management, fine and gross motor skills, healthy relational experience, and the healing power of play as central to their preparation for school entry?**

**We need to define more clearly what we mean by 'a foundation stage.'**

**Lynne Oldfield, Director, London Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Training Course**