

INTERVIEW

Working with Young Children with a Humanistic Ethos – as if Holistic Development Mattered

Judy Barber is interviewed by Richard House

(with a contribution from Sue Palmer)

Richard House [RH]: Judy, you have a long history of working with young children from Steiner Waldorf and holistic perspectives, and I know you have some new insights and reflections to offer stemming from your recent work in a Steiner kindergarten. Can you tell us, first, about your previous history and experience of working with young children?

Judy Barber [JB]: I can thank my daughter for my involvement with young children and Steiner, Richard. I studied English, Education and Psychology at Brighton College of Education and Sussex University, for the secondary and further education age ranges. Most of my career before my daughter arrived was with adults, but we studied child development at all ages. Interestingly, Steiner Waldorf education was never mentioned in my studies, even though we were only 20 miles from Forest Row, the home to England's oldest Steiner School, Michael Hall.

My daughter was born on Waiheke Island in New Zealand, where we were blessed with

sunshine, beaches and bush. I was a mother at

home and was told by a friend about a new playgroup starting in someone's home. I went along with my two year-old. It was love at first sight – baskets of simple toys made of natural materials, and light pastel cloths decorating the room; no plastic toys in sight. The children played inside and outside in the shaded garden, taking scraps to the three pigs in the field next door. It was peaceful, and the children and parents were busy and contented.

Our two hosts were quite new to Steiner themselves, but put so much into the children and into giving us parents a good grounding in a study group. A few months later they returned to England. 'Play circle' for toddlers moved to my home, using my daughter's toys. As the children were growing up, assisted by a friend who later became a Waldorf Kindergarten teacher, I started a group for the over fours without parents. It worked pretty well, especially since we were learning as we went along!

As our group took form, we felt impelled to establish something more permanent, looking for premises and seeking funding. We fumbled along trying to find our way, with our strength of purpose carrying us along. It is heart-warming knowing that at least six of us went on to work as Steiner school and kindergarten teachers or in other ways with Rudolf Steiner's teachings. If you're new to these ways of working with children and looking towards creating and establishing groups, please do take heart from our experience, even though you may have as many struggles, feelings of inadequacy and differences of opinions as we did.

We moved to a church hall, carrying our pastel cloths and playthings with us each week, and then to Fossil Bay Farm. Things developed towards the founding of a formal state-funded Steiner kindergarten and, later, a lower school. Today, Fossil Bay School is flourishing 30 years later!

Meanwhile, my friend and I wanted our girls to have a full experience of Steiner education. Happily we found kindergarten places for them in Hastings New Zealand. I volunteered as a part-time kindergarten assistant, enjoying two happy years with those precious little people. I will be forever grateful for what was given to my daughter and me. Once I led the class alone for two weeks.

When my daughter and I returned to England I worked with all ages in Waldorf schools, enabling her to stay in Steiner education until class eight, aged 14.

A few years ago, I found short-term part-time work as a nursery nurse in various conventional day nurseries before settling into regular work in one particular setting. There, I assumed that wisdom from my Steiner kindergarten experience would stand me in good stead. I only lasted six months, because the ethos was too different from the gentle supportive atmosphere in kindergarten. I felt

unhappy about the culture, not feeling sufficiently seen or valued by some for it to be a healthy and tenable occupation.

Last Christmas I started part-time work in Sunlands Steiner Kindergarten in Stroud, and am very happy there. Thank you, Richard, for this opportunity to share some of the differences between Steiner and conventional early-years education that I believe to be of great importance.

RH: I think it's so important that these biographical journeys with Steiner Waldorf education are faithfully documented, Judy – for they can be viewed as a crucial aspect of the history and 'soul' of this unique education. You remind me of my own journey, co-founding the Steiner Parent & Child groups with Catherine Hall in Norwich in 1998, and the subsequent founding of the Norwich Steiner Kindergarten by Sherrie Bintein in 2003, which then grew into the Norwich Steiner School (which is also thriving today, some 25 years on).

A question that comes to mind is whether you think the kinds of early struggles you describe are an essential and intrinsic aspect of founding a new Steiner Waldorf initiative, or whether a Waldorf setting would be as robust and resilient if these 'growing-pain struggles' were somehow circumvented or short-circuited.

JB: Well done all of you in Norwich! Thank you for asking about struggles and growing-pains, Richard. Perhaps they are inevitable. The poet Anais Nin wrote: 'And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.'

Having worked in two Steiner Schools as well as kindergartens in Hastings NZ, and now Stroud UK, I have been part of uncountable meetings. There is a big difference between top-down mainstream approaches with head teachers and management, and the Waldorf approach with Colleges of Teachers working

together to make decisions, incredibly hard work though that may be! An image I was given early on was of the children at the centre, with the teachers in a circle around them, the parents as a supportive circle around them, and a spiritual, some would say angelic, presence around everyone. In the initial stages of an initiative, in which the teachers and parents are the same people, there will be work to do around understandings and practicalities. Though this may be tough, there is also vitality when people feel empowered and things start to flourish.

Whether attendance in an established setting is state funded or paid for by the parents, it's easier for some parents to be less involved. This may be necessary for many; but to keep things fresh and lively, the supportive presence of a circle of parents, and an awareness of what is greater than us surrounding all of the teachers, parents and children, need to be kept strong. On Waiheke Island we had yeasty discussions when studying together, and from them we developed a shared understanding of what we were up to. That carried us through differences. Perhaps study-groups are key.

Also key was inviting in speakers with valuable experience, including the retired head of Steiner education in New Zealand and a mother of three who had kept her children at home on their farm until they were nine!

RH: I remember the late, great Steiner teacher-trainer, Dr Brien Masters (who generously helped so many new Waldorf initiatives in their early stages), saying and writing about how important study-groups are in founding a new Waldorf initiative, so what you say here coheres exactly with Brien's experience and advice, Judy.

You're in the unusual situation of having recently worked in both 'mainstream' and Waldorf early-years settings. Can you say something about your experience in the non-

Waldorf setting? I'm acutely aware that you won't wish to criticise your former colleagues, so any critical comments you might make will be about *the approach* and the learning ethos of the setting (which will presumably include the pedagogical demands of the Early Years Foundation Stage), and not of the individual teachers working there.

JB: I have plenty to say on this! In my mainstream Early Years Foundation Stage settings, the staff did care about the children, but they were working within the rigidity of the OFSTED school-inspection system; they were poorly paid and all young, many studying online and going on courses alongside their work. There seemed to be quite a big turnover of staff. Perhaps early childhood care and education is not, in the main, a profession that attracts people who can, in their late teens and early twenties, easily question and adapt the system to suit what many might consider to be the real needs of these little people – who have only been alive here for such a short time!

When I arrived, I was surprised to find that I would be endlessly taking photos of children doing things. These would then be printed, cut out and stuck in a booklet for them to take home each day. David enjoying the sand; Anya holding a toy; Elise doing a puzzle. I am not sure what benefit this had, especially since, unrecorded, David may have also been pulled off Anya in a scuffle and Elise might have yelled loudly because she wanted that toy – ad infinitum. I question recording behaviour in that way, let alone selecting for cuteness!

Even more intrusive, I felt, was the necessity of endlessly checking individual children's progress against lists of milestones, including whether they could hop, go upstairs holding a hand-rail or recognise pictorial signs on the wall. A child would be called out to have a go at something while the others stayed playing. For example, this is in stark contrast to what happened one day at Sunlands Kindergarten, when children aged between three and six

were happily mucking around outside, skipping and hopping, at one point of their own volition skipping around in a circle together with no adult instigation or encouragement. They didn't need to be checked! They were checking themselves, choosing how high they wanted the rope to be when it was their turn to jump. They were doing what children have done for ever – minding their own business and getting on with their serious work of play. It should go without saying that kindergarten teachers are nearby as a quiet presence, very aware of individual difference and anything that might flag up actual issues.

With this age-group I am acutely aware of how different each child is. In a supportive setting, individuality can blossom. One may be quietly investigating the movement of a snail, while others rush around brandishing sticks and saucepan-lid shields, or huddle together as baby owls. Some spend forever building and making in the sandpit. Some lead games, some co-operate easily. A mixed-age setting supports and accommodates individual differences. It is better for their social development because they can learn to help younger children, and they gain an understanding of time and their own age in relation to others.

At a parents' meeting in the conventional setting, I recognised a very unfortunate effect of detailed progress measurement. A couple approached me with their daughter's report ('Sally' was nearly three) and were concerned, asking me for advice. It was upsetting to be given that power. I did manage to say something about trusting their own judgement but that she seemed fine to me. I was struggling to take in the extent to which they had outsourced their responsibility and knowledge of their own child.

At home, children know their environment and have some freedom within it. In a conventional day-care setting, of course there has to be structure, but I question the lack of freedom the children had to use the whole

space. Two differences come to mind. One is that the conventional setting's nursery nurses chose which boxes of toys to put out, and piled up specific categories of toys on different tables. Toys such as plastic blocks or 'emotion dolls' (one smiles, one has a tear on its cheek, one looks cross etc.) are tipped out. Later, the children tidy it all back into plastic-box categories that are put away. This is repeated later in the day with random different categories. Compare and contrast this with the Steiner kindergarten, in which the children have a lot less toys, but can reach all of them for indoor play, mixing them as they wish and knowing where to put everything back. They can have a doll, a crown, a wooden plank, a large cloth and a lot of conkers all at once. It is *their* kindergarten. They have ownership of all their play materials.

Another difference is that in the conventional setting, the food was prepared in the kitchen and brought in on a trolley. The children sat round to receive it, often having it pushed across the table at them, not always by name. They put their used cups and plates back on the trolley and it was taken away. In the Sunlands Kindergarten, it is the children themselves who set the tables, counting out numbers of cups etc., and they take everything back to the kitchen. They are given responsibility, meanwhile learning maths in an age-appropriate, practical way. They help with washing up and rinsing dishes, and so the kitchen is part of their space. They have more agency, and there is freedom in agency. They're learning to take responsibility, and that working in an orderly way together paves the way for good play and meals together.

In the conventional setting, songs pretty much always came out of a machine. Is this how we want to introduce children to sound, that it appears and disappears pre-crafted from a machine, rather than being something that people make themselves? In the Steiner kindergarten the teachers sing – a lot – and the children learn to join in. I know a three

year-old who can sing it all back to us at any opportunity. Her talent would be wasted with days spent listening to pre-recorded litanies of children's songs old and new, including earwig ones like 'Baby shark'.

The teachers' voices are the instruments for creating the atmosphere and making transitions. We do our best to model singing and good, kind communication, while saying little much of the time so that the children can feel their own voices sounding out and so gaining confidence in speaking.

RH: It's painful for me to read what you write about mainstream settings, Judy – I totally agree with you when you say 'I question the need to record behaviour in that way'. This coheres closely with everything that the OpenEYE campaign vociferously spoke out about from 2007 till 2012,¹ when we campaigned against the worst excesses of the Early Years Foundation Stage (*aka* 'the nappy curriculum'), and its intended imposition on to Steiner Waldorf settings (which we thankfully helped to head off at the time). This constant monitoring and surveillance are quite insufferable, tacitly assuming a 'normality' in child development that does a violence to the uniqueness of children, and essentially being the unconscious projection by adults on to children of their own unprocessed anxieties.²

JB: I find it heart-breaking, Richard. Outsourcing so much of their children's early childhood to those they assume to have expertise can't be doing much for parents' trust in their children or for their own abilities as parents. We are on the same page with monitoring and surveillance; and no doubt when children start their lives with the experience of being in charge of their active learning, rather than of just being taught stuff, they are set up as life-long learners. Let's remind ourselves of the root of 'education' in Latin – 'educere', to bring forth, and 'educare', to bring up, and of how things have drifted away from respect for the child's innate ability to learn, towards the systematic

inculcation of information and attitudes – a drift that has continued further in my own lifetime. We let them 'bring forth' by letting them make discoveries themselves and finding confidence through their own expression. We 'bring them up' by giving them a nourishing environment in which they can rest in the kindly authority of their teachers, while growing up in their own time. In Sunlands Kindergarten, for example, the children get a slightly longer turn on the swing for each year of their lives. Once they're five, they can use a sharp craft knife (of course under supervision) for whittling, rather than an ordinary kitchen knife. Thus they are recognised for their age, rather than being measured for specific competencies.

The teachers see a natural developmental process rather than constantly checking for the passing or failing of artificial, age-related goals. It's interesting that you say adults project their own unprocessed anxieties on to children and that this violates their uniqueness. I remember a kindly old friend telling me that we have to break a child's will. I am not sure about that! They need *strong* wills to get them through what will hopefully be long, adult lives. Of course, we have to help them to get along with others in a group and in their relationships, but they can learn this by spending their first big chunks of time away from home in a social setting that is functioning well, without creating anxiety or pushing performance.

RH: Even worse, in addition, at a deep unconscious level it also prepares children for a lifetime of being measured against alleged 'norms' for the rest of their lives. As we used to say way back when, 'A pig doesn't get any heavier by constantly weighing it!'

JB: Hear hear, Richard! Of course, we want measures of education so that, for example, we can trust our surgeons. But things have gone so far that many adults are not only worrying about how they'll do in the interview, but also how they do in endless reviews and assessments of how they're doing

in the job. I'm reminded that in the 50 years since I started teaching, I have never been inspected, only occasionally observed with positive, affirming intent. It's been considered enough that I reached a good level of education at university, that I have been a good colleague, that people have shown up to my classes and that they've achieved the results they wanted!

Teaching is very personal. It is a natural human process between real people. I don't know how the brilliant influence of particularly important teachers in my life could have been measured in any meaningful way. Teaching doesn't need to be standardised across countries to the extent that it now is. I rather doubt that Shakespeare's teachers faced inspections, or that it would have made a positive difference if they had. Quite likely it was his unsung granny telling him fairy tales that set him on his creative path.

RH: The children in the Waldorf setting are also learning deeply, unconsciously and experientially about freedom, volition and self-efficacy – which you point out at several points. I know that generalising has its dangers, especially when there are many variables involved; but I wonder if, as a mother, grandmother and Steiner educator, you have a view on the lifelong impact on attitudes to freedom, creativity and self-reliance that these two very different early-years settings might generate in children.

JB: As a Steiner educator at each age stage, I have seen how children develop over time towards Steiner's intention that, through this curriculum starting with kindergarten, they leave school feeling ready and free to fulfil their own destinies. With life-long learning at all levels now available as a norm, and more credence given to neurodiversity including autism and ADHD, young people leaving school shouldn't be feeling they have hit certain ceilings and can't expect more for themselves than the school system has measured them for. This is ultra-important in

the age of mobile phones and social media, with children and young adults being subject to far too much judgement from all directions – looks, image, movement, ability to be perfectly cool, and to keep up with what that currently involves. No wonder so many young people have mental health issues! I like your words 'freedom, creativity and self-reliance', Richard. These are the antidotes to conformity, to being pushed and to living to fit the expectations of others.

Dr Jean Houston – leading pioneer in human development whose work is grounded in myth, stories and imagination, has taken her to over 100 countries, working with heads of state, heads of companies and projects for whole countries – remembers going with her class to meet Albert Einstein when she was seven or eight. One child asked him how they could become as intelligent as him. He answered, 'Read fairy tales'. When another asked how they could become *more* intelligent than him, he replied: 'Read *more* fairy tales'. This is about nourishing imagination as a priority; and a lively inner world can then develop, and the children will have liveliness of their own to bring to the words when they start reading.

At Steiner kindergarten, children are fed good stories, told to them orally as has been humanity's way since prehistory, along with being given the space to develop their own conversations, free from adult control and correction of their use of language. They hear stories, learn them in songs and act them out in costume. They aren't schooled to perform in one role but take on different characters on different days so that they have the experience of being all the characters, and sharing the story between them. Back to the image of children encircled by their teachers, with the parents in a larger circle around them, all within a palpable sense of something greater and benevolent.

This was my felt experience at their recent festival. By the time they shared 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in the presence of their parents at

their festival, these three to seven year-olds were confidently moving, gesturing, singing and speaking out together, entranced in their story and entrancing the parents. Compare this with the average mainstream Christmas play, in which a child only experiences one role chosen by an adult, and room is left for anxiety and competition. That is a process of rehearsals followed by performance, rather than of lively learning culminating in an enjoyable occasion.

The challenge to early-years Steiner Waldorf education that's been levelled at me most often is that it shuns early literacy. I remember my father getting cross with me because I asked him to point to the pictures in story books rather than to the words: 'You're stunting my grand-daughter's intellectual development!'. Thankfully, he lived long enough to know that she became an avid reader soon enough, and then thrived academically. He would have been impressed with all she is now achieving in her 30s. Though they might have had many books read to them, ideally the focus for small children has been on the pictures rather than the words. I think this helps them to build their pictorial imaginations for future life. Later on they can get into picking out words and letters when it's an easy game, rather than an adult-lead push.

For my daughter, that all seemed to happen at the right times, and at a certain point her interest in books caught fire and she was then unstoppable. She didn't get bored of the whole thing before discovering the point of it for herself. That isn't always the case with mainstream schooling, in which children are chivvied into peaking too soon, including through dry teaching systems such as phonics and formal testing. I'm not alone in being very concerned that this may have deleterious effects on people's lives, especially those with neuro-diverse ways of learning and experiencing life. I do wonder whether this feeds into the cataclysmic rise in mental-health issues amongst young people.

As a mother I have plenty of views, and don't pretend to objectivity. I didn't go to Steiner school, although I did have two happy formative years in a Froebel school; but I am creative, though not always with enough confidence. I know what I want to achieve but don't easily perfect it, often dithering, fussing and stalling over my work. I notice that my daughter can better put her creativity into action than me. She has creative confidence. Her work is beautiful, individual and she can get the results she wants. She thinks for herself with no qualms about speaking in front of any number of people. Academically she has done well, in no way held back by the more relaxed Steiner early-years approach to literacy. She has built an interesting and evolving career.

As a grandmother? My grandson has been brought up by a mother who had Steiner education to the end of class eight and who naturally brings this influence into her parenting. What saddens me most was that, after he had rocked up happily every day at Steiner kindergarten for a year, OFSTED chose to close his state-funded Steiner school so that instead of continuing with kindergarten, he and his buddies went back into the same buildings every day in black-and-white uniform for the state curriculum. He went from being happy to the opposite, and did his five and six year-old best to refuse to go. This even has a title these days – 'school refusal'. I looked it up. It's also referred to as 'school anxiety' or phobia. My hunch is that he hated school, and that this feeling was not phobia but anger, so that refusal was a sensible approach. His anxiety seemed to be a reasonable response to an unpleasant situation. 'Anxiety' and 'phobia' suggest that the children are seen as having issues, rather than schools entertaining the possibility that *they* might not be creating school environments conducive to contented learning. I believe his change from Steiner Waldorf to mainstream was damaging.

When parents are seen as at fault and are punished financially for a child's refusal

behaviour, I think it's rather nasty. My grandson has settled in and makes the best of it, but I don't think he gets all his real needs met. I believe they would have been if, instead of OFSTED choosing to close Steiner schools, there was a kinder and more transparent system of helping schools to develop in good ways. I'm sad for all the young families who moved their lives to be near that school, only for it to be taken away from them. Long term, I hope something better will evolve from initiatives amongst the parents, but a whole age group of children are suffering.

RH: I know of a number of English Waldorf schools where this quasi-violence has been perpetrated against the families who were freely, enthusiastically and informedly choosing Waldorf education for their children. I write about this at length in my book *Pushing Back to Ofsted* (InterActions, 2020), which was reviewed in *S&S* by the late Faysal Mikdadi.³ In my view it is nothing short of a cultural outrage; and it speaks resoundingly to just how right Rudolf Steiner was in maintaining that schooling should be located in the *cultural* sphere of society, relatively autonomous from both the state/government and economic spheres (or 'threefolding', as this approach to societal organisation is labelled).⁴ My heart bleeds for the children and families who have been subjected to such disgraceful treatment by the State.

Rudolf Steiner had much of great wisdom to say about what he evocatively called 'the imponderables' of (early) learning – by which I've understood him to mean those vital dimensions of learning that aren't measurable, or even visible through the conventional five senses that mainstream thinking recognises. And woe betide the child if the unspecifiable imponderables are more important for a child's learning than what is crassly measurable! – and especially if those doing the measuring ('weighing the pig') have no idea that this is the case.⁵

Relatedly, I'm interested in the extent to which you were able to bring a Waldorf sensibility and practice to your work when you were in the mainstream setting – or did the setting itself, and its audit-culture demands that are routinely obsessed with measurement and documentation,⁶ make it difficult to bring a Waldorf approach to your work and way-of-being with the children?

JB: Where do I start? With examples.

I've already described having to observe and record small details of behaviour such as climbing stairs and hopping. When I could, I would say things like, 'Let's go upstairs and see the babies. You first!', to give some point to the thing. If the challenge was hopping, I would hop around during outside play till some started imitating and we made a game of it. Imagine what a ridiculous waste of time recording through photography was. I would be fuming inside at the pointlessness and intrusion into privacy. These pictures were only of individuals, not children relating to each other in the social play that's crucial for social development – though I grant those pictures would have been equally pointless.

The staff were much younger than me – daughter and even grand-daughter age. I don't think they all credited me with wisdom or experience of any kind, let alone Waldorf experience. I had instructions barked at me. One memory that is burnt into my mind is of coming into a room to find a three year-old boy shaking with tears. I scooped him up to comfort him, only for the room leader to sternly tell me to stop because the child had started it! It's not just that this wasn't a Waldorf approach; it was frequently an uncaring, unfriendly and thoughtless approach.

An example of an extreme difference between the two kinds of settings was when the room leader proudly brought in a small box and revealed a plastic device with a small red light. She explained that this was Santa's camera, and that he would be watching to see

who was being good before Christmas. This was the antithesis of the gentle festival moods created in Waldorf settings, with stories, different displays and circle activities. The festivals are general enough for families of different faiths, or none, to find connection.

I did find it difficult to bring my Waldorf approach in so many ways. I could hardly have sung messages such as ‘*Tidy time, tidy time*’ or quietly worked on practical tasks near the children, ready to be available to them as needed. Instead, it was ordinary speaking and being seen to be engaged with the children all the time, alternating with endless record-making, that made it difficult to stay aware of the children. There wasn’t the same sense of rhythm, in-breaths of gathering the children followed by out-breaths of play. It’s not just what the OFSTED settings do that’s the problem, but what they *don’t* encourage that would be normal and natural for child development. In a sense, it feels as if control of development has been taken from the children. In most societies throughout history, development has been respected as what children do themselves, amongst their peers, with caring adults around creating a healthy setting for them.

RH: The now comprehensively (and predictably) buried, government-sponsored Woods Report of 2005, which looked at what mainstream education might be able to learn from the Steiner Waldorf approach,⁷ tried to make the case that there is indeed much for the mainstream to learn from Waldorf – but this was before the advent of the EYFS – the Early Years Foundation Stage! Would you say that the two approaches are essentially incompatible? Or are there any ways at all in which Steiner Waldorf and mainstream schooling approaches might cross-fertilise in the current audit-obsessed culture we live in?

JB: Golly, Richard, that’s a very big question! I liked the woman who was managing my mainstream childcare setting. I had conversations in which I felt I was bringing ways to cross-fertilise to her, but nothing

came of it. I engineered and encouraged her to take up an opportunity to visit the nearest Steiner kindergarten, but she pleaded lack of time. She did make quite nice displays on particular topics that she set up in the play area so that the children could tinker with them. Sometimes these included natural materials such as leaves and flowers. I would love her to have seen the inside of a Steiner kindergarten as a way of exciting her creativity. Perhaps I wasn’t clever enough to foster her curiosity, even though she was wanting to foster the children’s curiosity by her example.

I wouldn’t say that there is total incompatibility, but with so much time and energy going into meeting ‘Early Learning Goals’ and measuring progress through assessment, my sense is that potential innovators in mainstream settings might genuinely not have sufficient time to look over their fences at other approaches! That’s a great pity. It reminds me of a time when a mainstream primary school teacher friend was looking with envy at my daughter’s Steiner education, and bemoaning not having time to take her six year-olds for a walk or to ‘do Easter’.

Mainstream teachers’ work is so shaped-up by prescribed expectations. For example, in the EYFS, ‘providers must help children work towards the language, skills and understanding children should have at the end of the academic year in which they turn five’. Who makes this stuff up? Is it really necessary to ‘shape activities and experiences (*aka* educational programmes) for all children in all early-years settings’ when we’re talking about such tiny people who already work so diligently out of themselves to foster their own development?

In the personal and professional coaching world, we talk about ‘cookie-cutter coaches’, who follow set ways of working with whomever it is they’re coaching, as opposed to coaches like me who let their clients bring their own agendas, using professional skills

within a supportive framework as things emerge for individual clients. Is all we want for our children that they have cookie-cutter educations, and lives?

One popular theory dating back to Aristotle is that a child is born as a *tabula rasa*, a wax tablet scraped smooth ready for the imprints of life experience. The Greek opposite is the Platonic understanding of an already-formed entity coming into a human body to continue its development. This distinction can be seen in the nurture/nature argument between upbringing and innate nature. It's interesting pondering these questions, and it's good for teachers to muse on them too, as we did during my education degree. But I feel it's wrong to have constructed an early-years framework that has ended up very much on the 'tabula rasa' side, ignoring the sense of fully human individual children on their own journeys. This isn't fair because it leaves out the latter and hugely important point of view. This feels like the State serving its need for a compliant, subservient work-force at the expense of supporting – as you put it, Richard – freedom, creativity and self-reliance. It's also at the expense of the spiritual understanding of the sacredness of life that people of many faiths, and none, have.

On a more encouraging note, I do know of a hugely successful 'cross-fertilisation' of approaches in New Zealand, no doubt made possible because Waldorf education there is state-funded. In the 1980s when Maori communities were starting Kohanga Reos, language nests, early-years provision with Maori as the language and culture for children up to six years of age, there were significant supportive discussions with Waldorf kindergarten teachers that were, I understand, a positive influence. This is an instance of a people with a vibrant, shared spiritual tradition and culture who were happy to make use of what the Waldorf teachers could share with them, even if mainly to affirm what felt right to them as their Kohanga Reos evolved. There are now more than 460 state-funded

Kohanga Reos across the country. If you want cheering up, do look it up.⁸

Not exactly cross-pollination, although there has been good Waldorf influence, the *Upstart* movement is making waves in Scottish education. If they can make sufficient headway there, I hope the rest of the UK will have to take notice and up-end its current EYFS structuring. Our mutual good friend, Richard, Sue Palmer (ex-state primary school head-teacher and author of the book *Toxic Childhood* and other good books on childhood) pioneered *Upstart* as a campaign group for a play-based kindergarten stage for 3–7 year-olds based on the Nordic model. She has been their director for the last eight years, and compiled and edited *Play is the Way*,⁹ a brilliant book of contributions by wise professionals with much experience, described by one reviewer as 'a vital manual for any and all parents and all school teachers'. I would add, '...for all kindergarten teachers and nursery nurses, home-schooling parents and those who want to start new initiatives for young children'.

In particular, the Waldorf kindergartens need all the support they can get so they stay strong, and provide an alternative option. We can only hope that in time, more people are drawn to giving children this kind of start in life. Repeating myself for effect, I ask you whether, if our little group of parent and friend buddies on a small island in New Zealand were able to start something from a rickety and under-resourced start and to set it towards it being the flourishing kindergarten and school it still is 30 years later (with a positive transformative effect in the development of the local community, I might add), might *you* play some supportive or active part in creating a new initiative too? Please?

RH: Another 'hear hear', this time from me! You also mentioned play earlier, Judy. I remember how the OpenEYE campaign¹⁰ railed against the grotesquely named 'directed' or 'structured' play as being the

very antithesis of what genuinely free, creative play consists of. Can you say something about the differences you experienced in play in the mainstream setting compared with Waldorf settings?

JB: Well, the physical space both outside and inside was impoverished in the mainstream setting. Outside, they only had asphalt and not much of it, hardly any plants, and rather restricted conventional play materials such as plastic people and a plastic toy-house. They circled around on scooters and trikes; but since these days children spend so much time being transported to places, that didn't seem to add anything worth having, and it created an unsettled atmosphere not conducive to imaginative or sensory play. It didn't add to physical play either, because it left little space for running and jumping or anything else of a high-energy nature.

You *could* say that my Waldorf setting doesn't have much either – just a large, muddy sand-pit, old cooking pots, plants and dirt paths, rather than a 'proper' all-weather surfaced playground, a rope swing instead of a 'proper' swing, logs and rather tatty-looking old wooden shed 'houses'. Looking at it from a small child's perspective, though, it's just right – rakes and spades just the right size for real work alongside the adults when they feel like it, bushes for making dens, trees to climb (up to an age-set height, of course), child-sized wheel-barrow for moving stuff, and each other, around. No actual toys – just sticks and leaves.

There's enough space for high-energy physical play and for social play between ever-changing combinations of children. The children are free to do their essential work of creating strongly experienced realities, and they do this outside in nature. This is lived experience of our natural environment. Some might be unicorns, some take others on train rides on a log. Chocolate cakes get made in the sandpit. Pebbles are valued as crystals, leaves as wrappers, covers and plates. A

dying dragonfly is watched over and protected with reverence.

How do I measure the differences? It's harder to, ever so gently, call the children in from playing in the Waldorf setting, because they are so busy in their imaginary realities. It's more interesting listening to their conversations when playing. The dynamics are enhanced because there is a mixture of ages.

Though of course children do what they can to play anywhere, in the Steiner setting I see joy and purposefulness, a depth of experience I never witnessed in the mainstream setting, with its plastic dinosaurs and stacking puzzles. How might OFSTED measure that? Perhaps they can't. Are these Steiner's 'imponderables'? Structured, adult-led play can be good sometimes, perhaps like seasoning for good 'meals' of imaginative play – nice to have, but not to be over-done.

RH: A therapist colleague told me only yesterday how the latest neuroscience is at last catching up with understanding precisely what it is about child-initiated imaginative play that is so essential for young children's healthy development.¹¹ It's just so tragic that it takes mainstream policy-makers and audit-and control-obsessed bureaucracies so long to get the message! Or might there be darker forces at work that actually don't want our children to grow into being imaginative and creative free thinkers?

JB: That's a big question, Richard. Imagination and creativity are frequently portrayed as fluffy stuff when, given how much societies change in a generation or two, these capacities are essential for thriving and coping with change in long and fulfilling lives. It shouldn't be either/or, imagination and creativity as opposed to structured activities and instilling how to work with facts and figures. What's important is pacing things so that children are given the right support at the right age. I can't see the point in pushing children to grow up quickly when we can't

speed up how long it takes their bodies, including their brains, to develop.

In the early years I feel that Steiner kindergartens or, depending on family circumstances and the personality of the child, staying home for longer before starting school, perhaps before continuing with home schooling, can best support children without hurrying them. Their self-initiated imaginative play is *ipso facto* at the right pace for them. Among many benefits, it enables them to process real events in their lives in healthy ways, to reach out to each other without too much control of their behaviour by adults, and to expand their understanding of life through self-directed exploration.

What might those ‘darker forces’ be, Richard? Throughout history there have been people who’ve enjoyed controlling others, to the point that they want to regulate behaviour through schooling/conditioning. This has been terrible for some children and not so bad for others; but these days, now that much more social control is possible, I feel control has got out of control, to the point where children may become unstable or unwell from so much control and testing from an early age – hence my earlier example of my having to record, and parents worrying about, when a child can hop! It’s far more important for children to have adults around quietly working in the background, or at least on call, while they find activities and learn out of themselves – precursors to adult autonomy. In that sense, if a ‘darker force’ is that which impedes us growing into free human beings, conscious of our own power and worth and connected to the wonder and magnificence of life, then I agree with you.

RH: You mentioned Sue Palmer’s *Upstart* work earlier, Judy. I know Sue has been valiantly and tirelessly engaging with the entrenched early-education system in Scotland and its political and bureaucratic accoutrements. You know Sue well, and so are well placed to answer this. So, my final question in this fascinating interview is this:

Has Sue made any progress that suggests early-education state bureaucracies might be at all responsive to the kinds of issues we’ve touched on in this interview?

JB: Here is Sue’s answer to this question, which she has kindly provided:

In England, I fear it’s currently a lost cause. Scotland’s a bit more enlightened, and there’s the strong possibility of a bill to introduce a kindergarten stage going before the Scottish Parliament within a couple of years. But politicians up here are horribly susceptible to the pernicious influence of OFSTED control-freakery, so I’m not holding my breath.

Then Richard asks whether, if the answer to that is ‘no’, what Sue might advise to today’s parents who are determined to keep their young children out of the grad-grind conformity of mainstream education and all that goes with it.

JB: Before I quizzed Sue on this issue, I wrote my own advice to today’s parents of young children:

Let children spend plenty of time with grandparents, or borrow other older people. We older ones tend to be good at slowing down, letting children know we appreciate their presence and respect their play. We know good songs and stories or the names of plants and animals. We can make plasticene people, paint, listen, calm tempers, bring cheer and create peacefulness.

Find parent friends with good hearts and somewhat compatible values. Set up play dates, when possible with more than one other child, to replicate the companionship children in large families take for granted.

Read good books on childhood early education.¹²

Network to find families who might want to form informal playgroups.

Check out Steiner-based schools, groups and initiatives for young children – or start one, regardless of how totally inadequate and ignorant you are! There are good initiatives around that combine being at home/home-schooling with up to 16 hours a week in which the children come together, gently led by parents or a teacher with Steiner Waldorf experience.

Trust yourself to ‘home school’ for as long as you like. Of course, you won’t be perfect teachers, but local conventional day nurseries and schools may be further from perfect. Trust that you can figure out what is right for your child and your family.

Delete concern about how well your child is doing or whether they are ‘behind’. Instead, let them play and bask in the awareness that you trust and appreciate them.

After she listened to my list, Sue’s advice in response to your question was as follows:

I agree with all the stuff you said on the phone, Judy. Build your own village of like-minded families, focus on supporting your child’s well-being and don’t let the ba*****s grind you down!

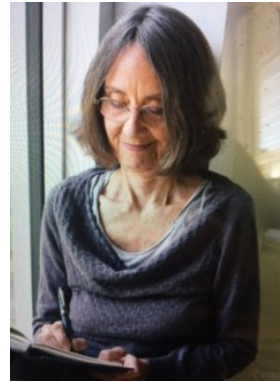
RH: Thank you so much, Judy (and Sue), for sharing your wisdom on such a vital issue for the development of our human future.

Notes and References

- 1 See <https://openeyecampaign.wordpress.com/>.
- 2 See, for example, R. House, ‘Psychoanalytic ideas for early childhood’, *The Mother* magazine, 45 (March–April), 2011, pp. 30–2; and The Open EYE Campaign (M. Edgington, G. Hooper Hansen, R. House, K. Simpson and W. Ellyatt), ‘The Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage: an “Open EYE” dialogue’, in R. House (ed.), *Too Much, Too Soon? Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2011, pp. 83–97.
- 3 Faysal Mikdadi, Review essay: ‘Beneath the sky’, *AHPb Magazine for Self & Society*, 5, 2020, 5pp; available at <http://tinyurl.com/mtmn5msn> (accessed 26 December 2023); also reproduced in this issue.
- 4 See, for example, Richard Masters, *Rudolf Steiner and Social Reform: Threefolding and Other Proposals*, Rudolf Steiner Press, Forest Row, East Sussex, 2022.
- 5 These ‘imponderables’ are written about in the *Too Much Too Soon?* book – see note 2, above.
- 6 See, for example, R. House, ‘Schooling, the state and children’s psychological well-being: a psychosocial critique’, *Journal of Psychosocial Research*, 2 (July–Dec), 2007, pp. 49–62 (available from the author on request).
- 7 See P.A. Woods, M. Ashley and G. Woods, *Steiner Schools in England*, Department for Education and Skills, Annesley, Nottingham; Research Report 645, ISBN 1 84478 495 9, January 2005; available in full at <http://tinyurl.com/mry67dbv> (accessed 26 December 2023).
- 8 See <https://www.kohanga.ac.nz/>.
- 9 S. Palmer (ed.), *Play Is the Way: Child Development, Early Years and the Future of Scottish Education*, 2nd edn, CCWB Press, Paisley, 2021; reviewed in this issue of the magazine by Richard Brinton (a member of the OpenEYE campaign, 2007–11).
- 10 See note 1; here can be found a full archive of the OpenEYE campaign’s work between 2007 and 2011.
- 11 See, for example, ‘Neuroscience and learning through play: a review of the evidence’ by Claire Liu & 7 others, The Lego Foundation, 2017; available free online at <https://tinyurl.com/2p9wtuyj>. See also S. Rushton, A. Juola-Rushton and E. Larkin, ‘Neuroscience, play and early childhood education: connections, implications and assessment’, *Early Childhood Education*, 37, 2010, pp. 351–61; available online at <https://tinyurl.com/2zmd76rv>.

12 See, for example: Sue Palmer's *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World Is Damaging Our Children and what We Can Do about It*, 2nd edn, Orion, London, 2015; S. Palmer, *Upstart: The Case for Raising the School Starting Age and Providing what the Under-Sevens Really Need*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2016; S. Palmer, *Detoxing Childhood: What Parents Need to Know to Raise Happy, Successful Children*, Orion, London, 2008; Carl Honoré, *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting*, Orion, London, 2009; Sally Goddard Blythe, *The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2005; Caroline Penney, *The Parenting Toolkit: Simple Steps to Happy and Confident Children*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2019; Kim John Payne, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Power of Less to Raise Happy, Secure Children*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2019; R. House (ed.), *Too Much, Too Soon?* (see note 2); Rahima Baldwin, *You Are Your Child's First Teacher: Encouraging Your Child's Natural Development from Birth to Age Six*, 3rd edn, Ten Speed Press / Crown Publ., London, 2012; Barbara J. Patterson and Pamela Bradley, *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing Our Children from Birth to Seven*, Michaelmas Press, Amesbury, Mass., 2000; John Thomson and others, *Natural Childhood: The First Practical and Holistic Guide for Parents of the Developing Child*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995; R. House and D. Loewenthal (eds), *Childhood, Well-being and a Therapeutic Ethos*, Karnac, London, 2009; Del Loewenthal (ed.), *Toxic Young Adulthood*, Routledge, London, 2023; Ben Kingston-Hughes, *Why Children Need Joy: The Fundamental Truth about Childhood*, Corwin UK / Sage, London, 2023; and Steve and Sharon Biddulph, *The Complete Secrets of Happy Children*, Thorsons, London, 2023.

About the contributors



Judy Barber's parents let her play in the woods and sent her at age 9 to a Froebel school for two years to recover from a stutter caused by mistreatment by a state primary school teacher. She has taught in Adult and Further education, in the community including in prisons, in state secondary school, and at every age in Steiner schools from kindergarten to Upper School. She is a speaker, coach, facilitator and the author of three books, the latest being *The Slow Coach Approach: How Good-hearted Leaders Can Bring about Positive Change*. Judy currently does personal and professional coaching, including around spirituality and wellness in times of change. Based in Stroud, Gloucestershire, she would love to speak with groups of interested parents. Contact: www.theslowcoachapproach.com.

Sue Palmer founded the *Upstart* early-years movement in Scotland (see her book *Upstart* – see note 12), was a prominent member of the OpenEYE campaign in England (2007–11), and is an eminent writer who coined and developed the influential notion of 'toxic childhood', about which she has written extensively, including her best-selling book *Toxic Childhood* (see note 12).

Richard House is a trained Steiner Waldorf class and kindergarten teacher, co-founding the Steiner Norwich Parent & Child groups in 1998 and the Norwich Steiner Kindergarten in 2003, and co-founding the OpenEYE campaign in 2007. Formerly senior lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, University of Winchester, he now writes and campaigns in Stroud. With Sue, Richard co-organised the influential *Daily Telegraph* Open Letters on the state of modern childhood in 2006 and 2007 (see <http://tinyurl.com/m9khmcv> and <http://tinyurl.com/ymr36fm3>).