

## High Quality in Waldorf Child Care Programs !

### Who Stands For This?

By Luna Wiedemann

As an early childhood educator from Eckernfoerde, Germany, I attended the Birth to Three Conference at the Goetheanum in June with great interest and enthusiasm. I was delighted to meet many educators from the North, who were freed from work to attend this conference. This demonstrated the need to discuss the themes of the conference.

Mrs Grah-Wittich's statement at the beginning of her first lecture, "Waldorf needs to catch up in the area of birth to three" is something I can only agree with from my own experience. We are just beginning, as we engage in research out of spiritual science, work and observe as practitioners, to explore what the little child under three really is and what it needs for its soul and psychological development. Each individual who works with the child under three in Waldorf early childhood education, whether in a family group, mixed-age group, child care center or day nursery, is a pioneer in Waldorf education and is responsible toward the child for the quality and the review of the work.



One problem is that the educators who care for the little children and are therefore responsible hardly have time for reflection or necessary parent work. A high percentage of the necessary additional

work is done on a voluntary basis. And these educators have neither the space nor the energy to exchange with colleagues from other centers on a regular basis or to participate in professional development courses. And in many centers the financial means needed to care for and transform the quality through regular supervision and professional development are lacking.

The highest quality in early childhood care, as called for by the German Birth to Three Working Group (AKK), the Medical Section under Dr. Gloeckler, the GAIMH, the Institute for Educational Sciences, neurologists engaged in modern brain research and further experts, as well as the professional level that parents should expect, is still in its earliest stages, explored in the thinking, feeling and will of those responsible for each child care center.

It is often questioned whether it is possible to achieve highest quality in the early stages of an initiative. I believe that this can only be generated over years or even decades. Since the number of staff needed in relation to the number of children in a group and the resulting costs are very high, the achievability of high quality is questioned not only from outside but also from inside by educators and members of the boards of trustees.

**Is the highest quality in early childhood an ideal?**

**Is it not affordable?**

**What kinds of organs of perception and ideas do we need to develop in order to make it possible?**

### Realities

Health, sustainability and economic viability show themselves in direct conflict with one another. And the victims of this conflict are the children under three and those who provide "high quality".

- o In some locations, the right of parents to choose has been questioned because of financial difficulties! Space in a child care center is dependent on the municipality where the parents live. This brings the Waldorf families in the surrounding area and also the child care centers themselves in absurdly unfree situation.
- o Many early childhood educators are striving to offer high quality and sustainability – however this effort is not always appreciated and instead may be perceived as exaggerated or even annoying. Conferences for birth to three educators help to create a growing acceptance, however.
- o Reliable health insurance and vacation time are often missing.
- o Most child care providers work all year. It is not seen as pedagogically acceptable to have special "vacation groups" of children. Overtime work cannot be financially remunerated or replaced by additional vacation time. Therefore those who care for the child under three are often in a worse situation than their colleagues in the kindergarten.
- o It is very difficult to bring about team meetings and also participate in weekly faculty meetings.

When at the Birth to Three Conference, neurologist Prof. Dr. Bauer mentioned the absolute necessity of weekly supervision visits for a healthy birth to three group, we politely smiled or turned red with embarrassment.

## What works?

The work with the young child – the immediacy of the encounter; authenticity; wonder; constant development; enthusiasm for practicing and learning; warmth of heart; joy for one's own development and for the challenges; working in a team of equals; meaningfulness in one's own activity; the constant forming of a beautiful, worthy, authentic world in whose middle the young child stands, with its earthly development and its connection to the spiritual world.

## Visions

Education and care for the child under three needs the following:

Open human beings

Contemporary, spiritually present THINKING

Interest in FEELING one's way into this special educational approach

Those who have courage and WILL for the future.

This is what needs to be made possible:

The results below arise out of the experiences of my six years of working with young children. They were confirmed by the results of the work in workshops of professionals at the Birth to Three conference.

High quality attachment and relationship require a healthy adult: child ratio (1:3).

A stress-free child care environment needs fewer children (8 are the maximum in a group of children under three) and sufficient space.

Healthy child development also requires an approach to nutrition that is suited to the needs of the young child (time of meals, preparation, quality of products used)

The ways of working of the staff, the program, rhythm and schedule of the day, etc. need to be explored and developed independent of traditions in the Waldorf kindergarten.

Education and care of the child before three is an independent educational form with its own lawfulness and content, and thus requires specially trained educators.

Early childhood educators have an immediate influence on the organs of the child through their whole being, their sensibility, their biography, their health, their behavior, and their capacity for self-reflection. They need the sheath of an institution around them in order to bestow the attentiveness and warmth of heart that is needed for the healthy development of the young child.

Further training and courses on early childhood education in the first three years (development, attachment and bonding, care, creation of health-giving environments, professional love).

Further training on aspects of work with the parents – developing and sustaining the relationship between the educator and the parents.

The dignity of the education of the very young child is strengthened by being viewed positively and supported by the Waldorf community (kindergarten collegium, board, advisory circles, and the German and international associations of Waldorf kindergartens).

It was wonderful to experience how the Medical, Pedagogical and Agricultural Sections, the eurythmy and the conference participants at the Birth to Three Conference all devoted their attention to the young child.

We remember the beginning. We remember the source of our joy. We remember living life. With this remembering we create the future.

At the next conference, I look forward to having the economic realm actively step forward to take responsibility for the child and to offer a strengthening column of support for this new realm.

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