MEETING THE CHILD
Approaches to Observation and Assessment in Steiner Kindergartens

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A report from the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth and the Steiner Waldorf Early Years Research Group.

Introduction by Trevor Mepham
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE KINDERGARTEN ENVIRONMENT:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A TIME AND PLACE FOR LIVING TOGETHER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT HAPPENS IN THE KINDERGARTEN:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A SELECTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WORK OF THE TEACHER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 4</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE INNER WORK OF THE TEACHER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN RELATION TO CHILD OBSERVATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AND CHILD STUDY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 5</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHILD DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 6</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBSERVING, ASSESSING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AND UNDERSTANDING LEARNING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FURTHER READING</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX: The Interview Schedule</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION

The background to the report

In April 2005, the DfES announced a feasibility study into the public funding of a Steiner school in England. A key aspect of this study was the negotiation of mutually agreed terms that would safeguard the Steiner ethos and curriculum and Ministers’ requirements for accountability. In July 2008, a Funding Agreement was signed for a Steiner school to be included in the Academies Programme, and the Steiner Academy Hereford opened in September 2008. The predecessor school, which had opened in 1983 as an independent school committed to providing education in accordance with the ideas and principles of Steiner Waldorf education, sits in the village of Much Dewchurch, a few miles south of Hereford.

This research report was initiated following a seminar on the theme ‘Assessment that Values Children’s Learning’, held in London in July 2007. A proposal for a school-based research project was discussed and agreed by a team comprising members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Plymouth, in partnership with colleagues from the Steiner Academy Hereford. Professor David Reynolds with Mary Jane Drummond as project consultant led the research team who brought together a blend of ‘outsiders’ – academics with little experience of Steiner early years practice – and ‘insiders’ – Steiner educators with many years working knowledge and theoretical understanding. Their research question – What underpins the Steiner kindergarten teacher’s approach to observation and assessment? – was defined early in the process. The professional dialogue between the members of the team, with their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, was a strength of the research process, particularly during the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The research team conducted observations in eight kindergarten classes in five Steiner schools in England. Vivid, detailed accounts were written up, interlaced with reflective commentary, and circulated to the whole team. Ten kindergarten teachers were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview schedule prepared by the team: these were transcribed and circulated. Throughout this period of the enquiry, Sarah Rees took a leading role. The two data sets were discussed at length during project meetings, chaired by John Burnett from the Plymouth team, and a detailed analysis was carried out by Mary Jane Drummond and Sally Jenkinson, supported by Janni Nicol. The analysis was structured in response to the questions that arose for observers as they sat writing notes (or finger-knitting) in a corner of the kindergarten setting for the length of the four-hour morning session. Many of the questions were framed by researchers unfamiliar with the pedagogy and curriculum of Steiner Waldorf kindergarten practice, and the ‘insider’ research team members contributed challenging questions of their own.

The report authors have attempted to answer all these questions by drawing extensively on the observation and interview data, using the actual words of the teachers wherever possible. The report identifies many significant differences between pedagogy and curriculum in the kindergarten and aspects of mainstream Foundation Stage practice.
However, the purpose of the report is not to critique other approaches; where comparisons are made, the intention is to illuminate and explain aspects of Steiner kindergarten practice that might be unfamiliar, puzzling or challenging to mainstream professionals.

The report is intended to do more than simply describe some aspects of Steiner kindergarten practice; it is appreciative rather than critical, an invitation to learn, not a piece of advocacy or rhetoric. The intention is to engage the reader in an imaginary internal dialogue with the teachers whose work is recorded in these pages.

**The significance of the report**

Learning is the most wonderful human capacity and the greatest human opportunity. We learn and therefore we become. In the literacy of being and the oracy of doing, we learn. From the dawning moments of our lives, we meet the world, each other and ourselves in streams of development that water many fields. On a metaphysical level, notions such as these are widely held. In the heat and dust of day-to-day life, the applications of such universal principles can lead to considerable differences in practice. Here is not the place to begin an examination of such differences. Suffice to say that Steiner pedagogy offers another way of looking at childhood, learning and human development. Few would dispute this, whether advocates or critics.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to describe the human condition in the following terms: as we live, we eat; we partake of the world and all that is in it – whether by looking, by breathing, by meeting, playing or working. As we encounter the world and all that life has to offer we are nourished. Immersed as we are in this process of engagement and nourishment, the steps that follow are transformation, assimilation and expression. The task of ‘eating’ the world leads from universality to individualization, the shaping of the particular from the general. This is the journey of learning and the story of the human being; nowhere is it more tender or potent than in early childhood.

This report, which focuses on early childhood, follows on the heels of the final report of the Nuffield Review (2009). Richard Pring and his colleagues addressed the question: *What counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?* It is striking how closely the demands made in the Nuffield Review are echoed, implicitly, by the work presented here. Standards are generally regarded as fundamental, yet in themselves, standards are abstract and one has to ask “Standards – yes, but whose?” Standards are not self-evident or uniform and, in practice, are closely related to values. In an age characterised, supposedly, by pluralism, localism and choice, the standardisation of standards in the educational field is a cause for concern, especially to those who might have another way of looking. The strains of educational reductionism, highlighted by continual reference to the language of the battlefield and the factory – strategies, targets, outcomes and performativity – ring uncomfortably in the ears of educators who have a different starting point and a contrasting picture of childhood and learning.
To attend to a child’s growth and development; to sit by and sit with the learning child; to bear witness to the child’s immersion in the life-long learning processes of encounter, transformation, assimilation and expression – all these are channels of assessment; but assessment that is respectful, helpful and transformative. This kind of assessment is not dominated by the constant monitoring of the dials of skills acquisition and does not require a clipboard approach to learning. Such assessment has a more reflective, intuitive, meditative quality and could be said to be founded on a ‘belief’ in childhood, rather than a mistrust or doubt in its efficacy or innate authenticity. ‘Belief’ is used here in the sense outlined by Karen Armstrong (2009), deriving from love and commitment, rather than simply accepting propositions that might be either robust or dubious. Love and commitment to children and childhood is a universal principle and however we help, guide, live and work with young children, it is a huge and worthy belief to hold and to nurture.

With the advent of Steiner education into the ‘public’ sphere, one of the intentions of the Steiner education movement in this country is to find a voice to make a more direct contribution to the educational discourse. There is a pressing need to share insights and ideas which, at times, may be regarded as unconventional or radical, although at other times, might be seen rather as the articulation of shared questions from a different perspective or vantage point. The hope is that this initial piece of research will act as a catalyst and prompt for the continued probing and exploration of Steiner’s ideas on education – both the theory and the practice.

Trevor Mepham
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CHAPTER 1

THE KINDERGARTEN ENVIRONMENT:
A TIME AND PLACE FOR LIVING TOGETHER

Order, routine, rhythm and ritual

*Why is a sense of order, routine, rhythm and ritual so important in the child’s environment? How is it created?*

Observers experienced a sense of order and routine in all kindergartens, and although actual practice varied in detail from setting to setting there was an overall awareness that ‘there’s a place for everything and everything has its place.’ This sense of order applies to the daily, weekly and yearly rhythms and routines, as well as to the physical environment as a whole. An observer describes one of the kindergarten rooms in the Hereford school as ‘a consciously worked-through environment, one that is safe, predictable and ritualistic.’

Next to the home corner are some shelves holding two baskets of hand-made soft woolen ropes, each of a different colour and neatly coiled into a spiral ... There is a large rocking chair in the next corner with a knitted shawl draped over its back and a tall lamp dimly lighting what is known as ‘the story corner’ ... Next to the story corner is a seasonal table [reflecting the rhythms of the year] ... this week depicting autumn’s descent into winter.

The group’s handwork or craft activities are also housed here whilst in progress, so what is seen on this shelf depends on the time of the year and the activity associated with that time. Further along there are cupboards housing baskets of wool, cotton thread and other handwork items. Painting equipment is kept on the high shelves above the kitchen area.

None of this order comes about by accident. Karen, the teacher in another Hereford kindergarten, describes the process of preparing the room, ‘making everything as beautiful as you can really’, and the point at which she feels it is complete:

> It [the room] tells you when it's done ... it just shines when everything is in its place and it sounds ridiculous I know ... but – the room speaks. If something is out of place it jars ... keeping the place clean and just the care of it, it speaks, it sings.

An observer describes the experience of being in Karen’s room before the children arrive.

When I arrived in the morning and all the Kindergarten play materials were still occupying their overnight ‘resting’ places, I noticed how this rocking horse had been ‘put to bed’. It stood on its own in the corner of the room and had been covered by a specially adapted blanket with a buckle that fastened around its chest. ... As the rocking horse is dressed in a cosy rug, so the dolls are wrapped carefully in blankets and laid to sleep in their beds ... It is noticeable that both the teacher and the children appear to carry out these tasks with all the consideration (and love even) of somebody putting a real horse or baby to bed.
In this ‘consciously worked-through environment’ there are deep levels of care and thoughtfulness, which are subtly but significantly perceptible to the children, and in which they submerge themselves. The lessons of care and responsibility are not taught by admonition and reproof, but by quiet practice and example. Children are involved in all aspects of living together and, gradually, they move from appreciating the safety and reassurance of an ordered environment to being able to take responsibility for ordering and caring for it themselves. For example, the children in the third Hereford kindergarten know the routine to follow when they come into school:

All the children place their outdoor shoes neatly below their pegs and replace them with slippers, before they enter the kindergarten. There is a strong sense of order and well-rehearsed routine.

Everything counts

Every structure and activity is accorded equal emphasis, including those activities such as tidying up which might be regarded as irrelevant to the real business of the day. But to Steiner teachers, nothing in the child’s environment is without educational significance (good or bad); indeed, caring for the kindergarten world creates a disposition – the confidence in one’s power to effect change – which extends far beyond it.

Jill, a kindergarten teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School, South Devon, explains this process:

Children’s lives can be very complex, can't they, in all sorts of ways and [it is important] for them to see things sorted and ordered. They know that order can come out of chaos, because we have chaos every time, by the time they've played there’s chaos ... and then we tidy up. And every day you see things being sorted and that’s a wonderful picture for children.

Ordering and re-ordering the world to make meaning are what all human beings do, young and old. At the Elmfield kindergarten, the observer notes the children’s eagerness at tidy-up-time – to bring order again after a lively morning’s play. ‘The overwhelming feeling with this group was one of sheer enthusiasm ... and they showed this in all parts of the morning, including the work tasks.’ After playing (enthusiastically) together, the group begins tidying up: ‘Once again the atmosphere in the room was busy, noisy and the pace ... fast!’

Jill comments on the environment she tries to create. She explains that the adults are an essential part of the ‘living environment’ and that children learn from life as it actually happens around them:

It’s very important that children see adults engaged in purposeful activity that they can understand, so that they see adults washing clothes, making bread, chopping vegetables, sweeping the floor, digging the garden, things that make sense to them... to enable them to get a picture of how the world works. One important lesson it teaches them, is that things don’t come without effort, that you have to put yourself into it, we have to make the bread –
and then we eat the bread. And it doesn't matter if they never make bread again, when they buy a loaf of bread something inside them knows that bread doesn't fall out of the sky, somebody's made it, because they've seen the process. So it's very important that the environment contains those purposeful adults.

It is striking how Jill, like the other teachers, consistently takes a long-term view of the value of kindergarten activity: she is more concerned with the future lives of the children, than with their day-by-day achievements. This is a theme that will reappear in several later chapters.

**Engaging in rhythm and ritual**

Rhythm plays an important but unobtrusive part in kindergarten life. The observer in the second Hereford kindergarten notices a subtle but definite change in the rhythm when tidy-up time begins:

Something is about to happen. There's a definite sense of change ... The table has been straightened and the assistant spreads table cloths. The children, unprompted, begin stacking the clothes horses and putting away the cushions and pillows. The assistant takes plates and cups from a basket and begins laying the table. The whole room is filled with a mood of clearing up and preparation. There were no apparent prompts and all the children are engaged ... two boys are folding a large pink cloth, corner to corner. This is well done and the cloth is put away ... the boys around the woodwork bench sweep up around the bench. Their aprons are hung on the pegs.

A child steps onto a pile of sweepings “Hey! You're stepping on my pile!” says one sweeper.” “Let’s put the sweepings over here,” the teacher says ... There is no hurry, no driving. It’s all happening in a calm, very efficient way, supported by deep habits.

These ‘deep habits’ are part of the familiar, flowing, daily rhythm, which is punctuated by equally familiar rituals: the beginning of snack time, for example, is marked by the lighting of a candle and the recital of a blessing and at the end, a group ‘thank you for the meal’ whilst holding hands; then the snuffing of the candle. There are similar rituals around story time and ring time.

In the third Hereford kindergarten, the observer recorded an incident in which this kind of conscious, deliberate activity - which gives a sense of moment to regular events - reappeared, delicately ‘re-presented’ in play.

Two girls laid a muslin cloth on the floor as a table and filled bowls with a selection of ‘vegetables’ and ‘meats’ using shells, fir cones and conkers to represent the food.

They took places around the table, held hands before reciting slowly together the verse, “Blessings on the Meal and Peace upon the Earth.” They took a long time to prepare and lay out their food (at least fifteen minutes) and their attention to detail and sense of care in carrying out the ceremonial meal was impressive.
A sense of time

*There is a sense in Steiner kindergartens that ‘the clock belongs to the children’. How does this unhurried approach work? Why is it important?*

One of the observers in the Bristol kindergartens noticed a ‘slowing, a kind of protecting from hurry’ and asked if it was something a teacher would consciously do. The teacher’s answer embodies the approach:

> There’s no need to hurry really, they haven’t got anything urgent to do, you’re just in your rhythm aren’t you?

In the second Hereford kindergarten, the observer records an interaction between the teacher, Donatella, and a boy at the weaving table:

> “I’ve done more than Mandy!” he called. The teacher stroked a finger down his cheek and replied slowly in a soft and calming tone; “It doesn’t matter, we are not racing, Samuel, are we? We take our time; we take our time.”

And at another point in the morning the observer notes:

> Great care and attention to detail is taken with personal care. I noticed the assistant did not hurry the children washing their hands but took time in checking if each hand was completely dry and everybody’s shirt and vest was properly tucked in.

There is variation in practice: not all children are helped by their educators in this way but they are all given plenty of time to do what is necessary.

Later, on a walk, the same observer writes:

> What struck me about the children’s walk was that there was time here for the children to simply be and play imaginatively without being constantly rushed along into another activity.

Karen speaks of providing an environment that gives children ‘the time as well, the time to play, to unfold in their own time without an agenda.’ She suggests that there should also be time for teachers to observe children, ‘what’s coming from them, authentically from them.’ She sees this abundance of time as one of the main differences between the kindergarten and the mainstream experience of children of the same age:

> Just... that our children are still in, you know, in their work as in play – our children are playing, are doing, are experiencing - but not in formal learning, they are living being a four year old, a five year old, a six year old to the absolute brim.

There is time for thought too, for wonder and wondering. Children are not fed ready-made, bite-sized nuggets of information but are given time to reflect.

The observer at the second Hereford kindergarten writes:
Penny, four and a half, reflected on how her gloves had got wet; it was not a complaint but merely an observation. “These gloves are wet inside,” she said. The teacher replied: “I wonder how they got wet inside?”... Pausing for a moment, the teacher continued in a thoughtful tone: “Mmm, my gloves didn't get wet inside,” and she continued dragging branches from the bank.

Comments of this nature from Steiner teachers encourage children to consider and decide upon their actions themselves rather than wait to be directed or influenced by an external party. In this case the teacher chose not to say: “Don’t put your gloves in the water or your hands will get wet”.

Protection from the world

Interviewers asked the educators about the ways in which the kindergarten seems to protect the children from the outside world. Is it a protective bubble? Is this a good thing?

Karen responds to these questions with an intriguing contrast:

I think it’s quite ironic that people say that, you know, because - (although) there aren’t interactive white boards here and I.T. - there isn’t that kind of sensory stimulation. But then at the same time, on a walk day... you know they're out, they're exposed to all the elements – and today was a beautiful day but we go out come rain or shine, snow, wind and so ... are we sheltering them? If we were sheltering them we wouldn’t be taking them out in that.

The interviewer replies: ‘I think perhaps it’s more in relation to the outside world as in the modern technological,’ and Karen emphasises her view of the ‘real’ world:

Yes, but I think that is what I am saying though, Sarah, what is the real world? To me, wind on your face and your hair and feeling snow: that is the real world. So ... who's to say “oh that's not really the real world.”

Observers saw children encountering the ‘real’ world of nature in all its messy and perilous glory, They were seen braving the elements in most weathers, playing with mud, with sharpened sticks, digging, gardening, sitting beside smoky fires. Indoors, they handled knives for vegetable chopping, used rasps for woodwork, and both indoors and out, played games that teetered at the very edge of danger.

Paradoxically, it would seem that children are both exposed and protected. Carolyn, the third kindergarten teacher at Hereford, speaks of children being pressured into growing up too soon, being drawn into the material world. She describes the child's experience in kindergarten and its relation to life outside it.

... they [the children] are so sensitive in their senses and ... they need a lot of nourishment in their sensory development; (the) bombardment that’s around them in what you might call the outside world has a hardening effect on them that you want to protect children from ... For example, when you see little babies being taken into
supermarkets, and you can see the shock on them, or often they will just close down and be sleeping and trying to retreat.

The kindergarten is that protective environment, it is that gesture of protection that ... contains them and lets them experience just the beauty and the wonder and the joy of life and of each moment.

Steiner teachers sometimes refer to the overall effect of the kindergarten environment as a warm, living ‘mantle’. It is created by the soft pastel colours, natural materials and gentleness of the teacher’s way of being; and it is there for a reason, as an observer notes.

In the practice I observed there seemed to be special attention paid to the education of the child’s senses. It became apparent that there is deep thought and pedagogical rationale behind everything the child comes into contact with in the Steiner Kindergarten.

Freya Jaffke, a Steiner educator and author, compares the concept of the mantle with the walls of a medieval city: they provide a refuge for those within, but are also broken at intervals by gates through which people stream in and out. Within the safety of those walls, life teems. The teacher creates a mantle of warmth and activity to enfold, nourish and protect the child, not quite as the closed womb did before birth — but in a way that mediates between the inner and outer environments. [1]  

**The world of the senses**

*There were many references in the interviews to the importance of educating the child’s senses. What does this term mean to a Steiner teacher? What is the significance of attending so deliberately to the world of the senses?*

Steiner teachers are familiar with twelve senses, including the five commonly recognised ones. The twelve are grouped into sets of four: life, movement, touch and balance; smell, taste, vision and warmth; hearing, language, the conceptual sense and the sense of the other. These categories stimulate reflection, about both child and teacher. For example, when observing the child’s sense of hearing, the teacher might ask: ‘How is this child’s hearing? Is there glue-ear, perhaps? What action should I take?’ Or, in self-reflection: ‘How best can the sense of sound be developed in my kindergarten? Do I articulate well? Do I provide a balance of loud and soft sounds? Is there music, song to tune the ear?’ Or, when thinking about the sense of balance, the teacher might ask: ‘How is this child’s sense of balance? Does she stumble often, or is she a sure-footed climber?’ ‘How is the balance of my day? Have I planned too much activity, or too little?’

The senses play an important role in physical development, and many enjoyable sensory experiences are offered to the children. Sometimes the pleasure of the experience depends on perseverance by the child. For example, one wintery morning, the observer in Karen’s kindergarten sees that the children have been given beeswax to model with - and to warm them up. This is not easy work as the coloured beeswax is fairly solid to begin with and has to be made malleable by the warmth-generating action of the hands.
“Mine is cold!” says one four-year-old girl. The teacher replies, “Mine was cold too, I just held it and pressed it into my hand like this and it became really warm.” In the interview Karen explains that the significance of modelling beeswax lies not in what children model with it, but in ‘bringing the children into their hands’, strengthening their senses of movement, touch and the life of the physical body.

All of the child’s twelve senses are deliberately nurtured through the carefully prepared physical environment, the warmth of relationships, and the careful preparation of the adult self. For example, Karen describes her conscious attention to the sense of touch:

How you are with the child when you are dressing, when you are supporting the child in dressing, your touch is soft... how you speak around the child, move around the child, you know just ... self-awareness.

The teachers in the Bristol kindergarten, Jan and Maria, speak about the world of the senses and the ‘mantle’ from a developmental perspective:

Because they are building up their physical being at this age and all their major organs, the sense impressions that are streaming in actually have an impact on how they grow, including how their organs develop. So we are trying to protect them to make it a healthy growth.

While it is true to say that Steiner children are protected from particular experiences with technology, such as using computers and watching television, it is also true that in activities such as sewing, cooking and gardening, as well as in their energetic and lively play, they are continuously exposed to the real, physical world, indoors and out, through the immediacy of their senses.

The family model

The educators often describe the kindergarten as a home and its occupants as a family. Why is this? Why is it important?

Steiner practice and pedagogy are based on the view that the kindergarten family is a living network in which educating, care and upbringing are deliberately and inextricably interwoven. As in most families, children in kindergartens are usually of mixed ages: typically, each child will remain with the same teacher for two to three years. The Bristol kindergarten teachers comment on this:

It helps a lot that the child is with us for longer than a year, that we have them for two or three years in the same class and we really deepen our relationship with the child.

Teachers frequently use the pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’. The deliberate choice of these inclusive personal pronouns expresses the idea of the group as a whole: a family of which the teacher, akin to a parent or guardian, is also a member, one who leads by example: she changes her shoes and puts on her apron and the children are thus quietly invited to do the same.
Rudolf Steiner frequently spoke and wrote about the importance of warmth for young children – both physical warmth and the warmth of relationships. He felt strongly that, ‘children who live in an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who have around them truly good examples to imitate, are living in their proper element.’ The family model creates affinities of warmth between individual children and with the adults in the kindergarten. [2]

In the Elmfield kindergarten, the teacher has a motherly way of restoring well-being to a child in distress.

A little girl who had just fallen over quite dramatically limped painfully up to (the observer and the teacher) and through her sobs, showed us a bloody and bruised knee. The teacher took the little girl in her arms and holding a hand lightly above the damaged area sung a German song slowly and softly; other children gathered to watch in silence ... (for the other children) it was a moment of reflection in which they were learning a sense of respect and empathy for one another.

In the Bristol kindergarten, the observer noted: ‘Overall, the impression is of slightly worn but cared-for surroundings – like a well run home.’ Jill corroborates this observation in more general terms:

And kindergarten is a continuation of home ... it’s a place for the child to explore safely and make sense of things. And the kind of values that you absorb in your first seven years and the picture of the world that you gain are going to be with you forever. It’s very hard to change that. So you want to give the children a picture that the world is good and beautiful and true. And later on, of course, it’s not always good and beautiful and true, but we have the will to make it so. So we know we can go back to that foundation.

At Hereford, the observer sees this sense of a family group in action when the children come indoors at the end of the morning:

When back in the cloakroom, the children were ready to go home. The older children tended to help the youngest ones and then everybody was expected to sit back down in their places, which they mostly did.

The observer in Beate’s kindergarten in Cambridge noticed a strong sense of family, demonstrated by an act of brotherly inclusion in ‘lovely caring behaviour from the older boys towards four year-old Joe.’ Mixed age groups make this kind of behaviour possible and children of all ages are encouraged to take care of each other.

Conclusion

It is clear the kindergarten environment is a very particular place, with a culture all its own, like a home, but not a home, and very different from the hurly-burly of what more than one teacher called ‘the modern world’. In an extended reply to a question about the child’s movement between different worlds (home, kindergarten and the rest of the world) Francesca, the teacher in the Beechtree kindergarten, elaborates on how the key themes of this chapter – order, rhythm and security – work together:
I understand that of course there is a difference between what is happening in the kindergarten ... (and the world outside) but I feel the children here, they often come in, and you can see them, just breathing and sighing a relief. I've seen children come in and literally just (- she sighs heavily -) their shoulders go down and they relax ... From what I have seen they don't have a problem between those two worlds, because they feel so safe and secure, and it really meets their needs, because they are not getting the rhythm we are providing ... in their lives any more. There's order and there's boundaries and there's structure and they know where they are and everything makes sense and they feel very safe.

Imaginative development and play

The kindergarten session invariably includes a long uninterrupted period of child-initiated play, which is typically sustained, complex and often highly imaginative. What is distinctive about imaginative play in the kindergarten? How is the children's play affected by the simple, unformed or natural materials available to them?

A few examples from the observations will demonstrate the intense engagement that is one characteristic of imaginative play in the kindergarten.

First, an observation of Andrew, playing on his own in one of the Rowan Tree kindergartens. He has created what he tells his teacher is a ‘racing tractor’: a small pram full to overflowing with stuff from the shelves around the room – veils, blankets, dolls and logs piled high. Balanced across the top is a short wooden plank. A few minutes later the observer notes some ‘technical additions’ to the tractor:

Andrew has collected a whole load of shells and stones in a basket, which now sits precariously on top of the pile of clothes. There are also several scarves tied together, hanging down from the vehicle, pointing to the floor. They looked to me like the arm of a JCB type tractor and, sure enough, Andrew began slowly, rhythmically and methodically, shaking the shells onto the floor as a digger might shake out gravel or sand from its bucket onto a road. He replicated the motion precisely and the shells falling on the floor created a surprisingly similar noise to a real digger at work. Andrew carefully represented the ‘tracks’ made by the digger by arranging several planks in straight lines behind the pram wheels.

This is not a lonely child who has no one to play with, but a purposeful player, travelling alone but with intense concentration across the landscape of his imagination. Later in the session, other children join Andrew’s play:

Up on the wooden platform overlooking the room, Andrew has continued his theme of building sites, and created a long pulley system with several scarves and veils tied together. He has attached a basket to one end of the rope, and hung it over the wooden rails at the top of the platform. One boy stood at the bottom, filling the basket with stones and shells, and two girls have become Andrew’s fellow builders, high up on the scaffolding. Andrew produced impressive building site sound effects, as he hoisted up the container of ‘concrete blocks’ and ‘sausages’. The basket travelled up and down several times.

In the same kindergarten, the observer records the play of a group of girls who are following the lead of one of their number, an imperious Easter Rabbit.

A ‘baby’ has been born and was lying on some blankets on the floor, with four girls crowded around her. The girl playing the part of the baby squirmed and mewed, stretching her arms and legs momentarily outwards, before drawing them back to a foetal position in a manner
absolutely true to that of a real newborn baby. Her eyes were half closed, her fingers tightly closed into fists and she responded to the Easter Rabbit’s vigorous rubs along her back and sides with small whimpering noises. “When you grow up, you'll be a very nice little girl,” the Easter Rabbit told the baby. Another girl began feeding the baby ‘milk’ from a large pine cone: the baby made loud sucking noises as she drank her fill. After she had finished another carer stuck a round piece of wood in her mouth (clearly a dummy!) ... Then the atmosphere changed as the situation suddenly became dangerous.

“Pretend it wasn’t safe cos tractors were coming, yeah?” one girl said. “Quick, move her to safety.” Loud gurgling sounds came from the baby as she was dragged across the floor to safety. The whole group of five or six girls huddled around the baby, ensuring that she was protected from the fleet of tractors that were now clearly roaring at high speed down the road towards them. The girls all simultaneously looked nervously behind them, seemingly experiencing the alarm that such a situation might evoke in a group of protective mothers.

Contrast the energetic pace of that passage of sustained, complex play with this dreamy scene out of doors, in Hereford, by the side of a stream. A group of children move down to the banks of the stream and begin splashing their sticks in the water – they are catching fish. Two of them, a boy and a girl, sit by the stream and discuss who has the longest hands, and so who can reach the fish that live on the far side of the stream.

“I want to stay here. I want to live in the river, do you Rowan?” asked the girl. “Yeah, live and be fish” he replied. [A little later] the ‘fisherman and woman’ had been joined by several other children and they were still dreaming about fish. “This is what Cameron did ALL day once” commented a five-year-old boy. The group were silent for a moment, perhaps reflecting on this possibility.

Another example of companionable ‘paired play’ was recorded in the third Hereford kindergarten.

Two five year old boys set up an elaborate game of ‘cards’, using plates, conkers, pegs and small pieces of wood. The game seemed to involve swapping one item for another. The rules appeared to be along the lines of ‘If I give you this item of mine, I am entitled to that item of yours’. One of the boys was definitely in charge of the game, and explained the complex rules several times to his opponent. During the game he periodically declared who was winning, or when it was a draw. The boys remained completely engrossed in this play for a period of 20 minutes, before the boy in charge declared its end and exclaimed in a satisfied tone of voice “That was a good game of cards, wasn’t it!”

The observer comments on some of the elements in their play: the desire for competition, clear leadership, organisation, and playing fairly by the rules. And, perhaps, learning to be friends, who trust and are trusted.

In the Elmfield kindergarten the observer made notes of a group of children who played together for almost the whole session. Extracts from the observer’s notes, below (with some of her comments given in italics), beautifully illustrate the way that play themes ebb and flow, as the children’s imaginative powers transform their worlds – the inner world of make-believe and the outer world, with its dressing-up materials, capes, crowns and veils.
A group of girls and a five year old boy, busy in the ‘dressing up’ corner, were discussing who was to play which role in their game of fairies and angels. They were kindly helping each other to get dressed in capes and crowns.

... It was difficult to hear but the fairies and angels now appeared to be exploring the weighty matters of death and hate in their game. The leader of this play was a six year old girl ... she waved her arms up and down, back and forth as she said “Molly, pretend you knew I was going to fly away because I lifted my wings like this ... pretend when I came back you were sound asleep.” This group’s game came across like a well-rehearsed theatre production; they seemed just like actors on a stage ... with tremendous attention to detail in the organisation of roles, creation of props and planning of story lines.

... The angels and fairies had now covered themselves over with veils and sat all in a row along one wall. They said they had made themselves invisible, but their leader now brought them all ‘to life again’ as she ceremoniously unveiled them.

... The lead angel announced, “I own the world”. Another said: “I’m scared of fire,” and added quickly “in the game”.

... The five year old boy fairy was now wrapping one of the girls in veils. She finished up fully bound from head to foot; he went on to bind his own arm in another veil, saying he had broken it.

... The fairies and angels had now become ‘stars’, which later became ‘little girls’. One ‘little girl’ said, “Pretend I saw a hedgehog”. The others immediately droned “Noo,” unanimously. “Pretend I saw a horrible scary monster?” “YEAH!” the others all cried, clearly a much more desirable option. In writing this observation up, I am aware of the depth of this play sequence. Perhaps the children were addressing some of life’s greatest questions through this seemingly light-hearted fantasy.

All good things come to an end, including the extended free play period in the kindergarten. But sometimes the imperative to play is so strong that it can transform even the task of tidying up, at the moment of transition into the next phase of the session. In the third Hereford kindergarten, the observer writes:

Tidy-up time had arrived, yet ... it was simply a continuation of play. The teacher asked if the ‘collecting machine’ had visited the village yet. The children immediately created a clever construction using two long poles held by four members of the group. On the poles hung several baskets that were to be filled with the play materials now scattered around the room. The boys particularly seemed to enjoy the organising side of the process and quickly formed a team of helpers. A ‘shop’ was set up displaying all the ‘wares’ that the machine was to collect and so items were gathered. ‘Shopkeepers’ helped to fill the baskets in the collecting machine. The teacher exclaimed “This collection machine has been so busy, it has already been round the village twice today!” Each tidying task was somehow immersed in the play.

Further extracts from extended play episodes can be found in Chapter 3, The Work of the Teacher, in the discussion of how teachers sometimes intervene to support and sustain children’s play. These extracts too emphasise the qualities of freedom, concentration, slowliness, energy and engagement, so richly illustrated above.
The role of the teacher in play

*How do teachers support and encourage this sustained complex play? What do they actually do? Why is imaginative play so important?*

Jill makes it very clear that the adult’s presence is a key factor in the quality of the play: she describes the way that adults are engaged in purposeful activity that the children can understand:

They see adults washing clothes, making bread, chopping vegetables, and digging the garden, things that make sense to them. ... And purposeful adults create purposeful play, because the children are imitators ... and play is a serious business to a child.

Francesca chooses the word ‘facilitate’ to describe her part in the children’s play; ‘the word teacher doesn’t really describe what we do, it’s more like a facilitator for their play, for their social interaction and for their learning’. She goes on to describe what this term entails:

To have the equipment there for them, the equipment that has the ability for children to put their own imaginations into it, and freedom to use it.

Elisabeth emphasises that she does not get involved in the play:

I try to be as static as possible, I like to sit down to mend something, or do whatever little job needs doing ... I leave them as much as possible. Even (when) sometimes it makes my toes cringe! (She refers to a spectacularly high building erected during the morning session).

The Rowan Tree teachers are asked how they support play, and one of them replies:

I think by giving the space for it more than anything. If the child is playing out of their own imagination they don’t actually need a great deal of input from the adult, so I think providing a safe space with some materials – but they don’t have an awful lot – and a respect for what the child is doing And if they want to be private in their play, to do that, so they don’t have to feel that there’s people looking over their shoulder and seeing what they are doing all the time ... If you are watching the children, it means they become more self-conscious, and they won’t play in the same way ... the more engaged the teacher is with what he or she is doing, the more engaged the children are in their play ... They will play more creatively if you are not involved in what they are doing.

Carolyn sees her role as ‘bringing in experiences that nourish the children’s imaginative play ... (in particular) the telling of traditional fairy stories, having them as rich as possible, and embellished with rich imagery and language.’ She explains the effect of these stories, which are chosen for their profound moral meaning:

They beckon the children towards doing the right thing, the right path forward, and I think that inspires the imaginative powers within them ... it’s in line with their truest calling.
For all the care and attention that the teachers give to the provision for imaginative play, there is never any doubt about who is in charge. The periods of play really are ‘free play’, freely initiated and directed by the children. There are no prepared scenarios, no ready-made dramatic play areas – shop, airport or hairdresser; there are no prescribed goals or planned learning outcomes. Indeed, the teachers rarely comment on any learning that might take place during the free play period. They take a different view of what is happening in play: the children are simply being – and becoming – themselves. The teacher is ‘a witness, who doesn’t interfere with the play,’ says Carolyn. Donatella puts it very strongly: ‘it is just one of the best gifts you can give to the children, to nourish themselves through that imagination.’ This is not an off-the-cuff remark; it is anchored in principle, as Donatella makes plain:

The principle is, the child is growing, harmoniously and happy and serene.

Natural, physical activities

The kindergarten routine also includes, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, many other activities in which children engage with the natural, physical world. They chop fruit, and prepare vegetables for soup; they knead dough and bake bread; they model with beeswax; they sew and weave; they make wooden models and toys, using authentic tools; they explore streams and woods; they climb trees and build fires.

These physical activities, indoors and out, share many of the qualities observed in their imaginative play: concentration, slowness, engagement, freedom, purposefulness, rhythm.

The educators are calmly engaged alongside the children, often silently supporting the children’s freedom to explore the materials and the environment; sometimes they make spontaneous offerings at judicious moments. Describing the brook where the children play at fishing, Donatella comments: ‘We always have string in our pockets, at a touch...’ Later, she is observed pulling a penknife from the same pocket to strip the ‘pale and beautiful’ willow wands (her description) that the children will use in their play. Above all, these physical experiences are worthwhile in themselves: they embody what Carolyn calls ‘the beauty and the wonder and the joy of life and of each moment’.

Organised group activities: painting, ring-time, story-time

Group activities of this kind are staple, familiar elements of any and every early childhood curriculum, but in the kindergarten they are organised and carried out in distinctively different ways. What is the significance of these differences? What underpins them?

Many of the key features of the kindergarten environment discussed in Chapter 1 are also characteristic of the organised group activities: routine, rhythm and repetition. For example, a familiar routine, a particular song, or the sound of a lyre, signalling ring-time or story-time, marks the start of a group activity. Out of doors, on ‘Walk Day’ as the children
are playing, Karen quietly sings her ‘story-time’ song; the children gather round the fire and the story-time starts with a rhyming verse with gestures: ‘Chop, chop, choppity chop. We cut off the bottom and cut off the top; when it’s all done, we put it in the pot’. The observer notes: ‘the teacher’s voice then softened and she said: “And so...once upon a time...” and went on with her story’ as the children gazed into the fire.

On ‘Painting Day’, the same day of every week, like the Walk Day, the observer at the first Hereford kindergarten notices that great attention is paid to the preparation and presentation of the materials, which are all set out ready for the children when they arrive.

The pots of paint and water are always placed in the same positions and the teacher or assistant is careful to ensure the colours are absolutely pure. The jars of water are replaced many times during the session and if the paints are found to be the slightest bit contaminated they will be discarded and the pots filled with fresh paint. The children stand to carry out this activity and are not directed to paint actual form, although if they choose to, this is fine.

When children are sewing in Donatella’s kindergarten, the repetition of ritualised expressions supports their growing confidence with the needle:

I noticed how the teacher always referred to the needle as ‘Jack’, and (described) what ‘Jack’ might be doing as the sewing was carried out. “Oops, Jack must jump over the wall” to encourage the thread to be taken over the edge of the material; “Now Jack must go back in his bed,” pointing to the tiny felt bag the needle had come from.

Ring-time is a daily communal event; the circle of people, large and small, contains everyone and everyone is contained by it. At their own level, children sing and move their way through stories and songs about nature, the world and the people in it. Gestures are freely made in imitation of those of the teacher, who will be a builder laying bricks one minute, a mother gently holding a child the next, or even the golden sun in the sky. The child’s imitative gestures create a physical form of empathy with the world of ‘not me’, as, through the body’s movements and accompanying words, the world of the other also becomes my world. All children are included, whatever their needs, and both genders participate in all roles.

**The cycle of the seasons**

The interview schedule we used (given in the Appendix) did not include questions about how Steiner educators work with the seasonal cycle of the year, and how they introduce children to the rich cultural heritage of a variety of festivals. We accordingly include at this point a short commentary on seasonal and religious celebrations, written by an experienced Steiner teacher and advisor, in order to make up for this omission.
The children experience the cycle of the year through a changing series of songs, ring-games, festivals and crafts. We choose these activities for their seasonal significance, as summer gives way to autumn and winter thaws into spring. The ripeness of summer is reflected in the berries and fruits with which we decorate the nature table in September, when we thresh and grind some ears of newly harvested wheat to add to the flour for bread making. As the leaves change colour, Mother Earth appears in songs and stories, as she puts her baby seeds under the Earth’s blanket for their winter sleep.

In November, we celebrate the festival of St. Martin, whose story exemplifies the principle of sharing, (indeed, sharing half you possess). The traditional practice in one kindergarten, where I spent many hours, was for the children to knead the dough for fresh bread rolls first thing in the morning. While the rolls are baking, the children play outdoors and then gather for a story in the spirit of St. Martin. At snack time, each child is encouraged to pass half her own little roll to the child on her right. An inner struggle may ensue, but the gift of another half roll from the child on her left soon brings a delightful resolution. The unspoken gesture, the enactment, speaks louder than any words.

When it's icy outside, the children learn that King Winter stalks the land and that Jack Frost is about. In December, children polish their shoes, ready for a simple gift from St. Nicholas. Later, at the turn of the year, the (very) young farmers will use gestures to plough imaginary land and to celebrate planting in their ring games. Many of these games reflect earlier traditions, such as Plough Sunday, when the plough was drawn through the streets and blessed in church, to ensure food for the coming year. This kind of communal activity gives children, even in urban environments, the opportunity to mark the passage of time, develop a relationship with the land and cultivate a feeling for its stewardship.

In spring children plant seeds and decorate eggs ready for Easter. In high summer, we make models of bees from wool or wax; the children wear crowns of flowers and we all prepare festival food for St. John’s tide, which we celebrate with a midsummer bonfire.

Festivals such as Channuka, Ramadan, the Chinese New Year and Diwali are celebrated with children and their families in the kindergarten community. Pumpkin lanterns for autumn, and Divas (little clusters of lights) for Diwali, guide the children through the cycle of the natural and ceremonial year.

**Fit for purpose**

All these various group activities are underpinned by powerful pedagogical purposes, though the teachers do not use words from the mainstream lexicon to elucidate their significance. Their concern is with the growing, developing person, not the pupil, accumulating knowledge or skills. The fairy stories, for example, are chosen to strengthen the individual child: ‘the stories give them such a strong inner picture of the rightness of things, the goodness of things, the beauty’, says Carolyn. The stories speak to each child’s inmost being: Maria, at the Rowan Tree, describes a fairy story, The Donkey Prince [1].
[The story] is about understanding that you have something very special inside you, no matter what the covering is. And Paul, who has got a growth disorder, said at the first telling of that story “that story is about me.”

This strange and surprising story from the brothers Grimm is, at first reading – or hearing in the kindergarten – rather unsettling. But by hearing it again, and again, over a week, the children are able to digest its meaning and absorb its moral messages.

Jill describes how her insight into the individual child and what he or she may be concerned with can show her the way forward:

There might be a child whose life seems very tangled, so you could give them some wool to untangle, for them to see the wool. Or you could just untangle the wool in front of them. To see the knots and tangles being taken out, and the wool made neat, would be helpful: there is a way out of the tangle.

The activity is designed for the living, human child, not for the generic skills it might help to develop.

**Conclusion**

The extracts in this chapter, chosen to illustrate what children actually do within the daily/weekly rhythms of the kindergarten also illustrate some key themes that are explored more fully in the following chapter, *The Work of the Teacher*. These include the importance of imitation, the development of the child’s will forces, and a long term view of the underlying purposes of what the teachers provide and what the children do. The teachers look far into the future when they explain the value of particular activities.

Short-term gains in physical skill are welcomed and respectfully acknowledged, but the more important ‘outcomes’, as a mainstream teacher might call them, are still to come, as the children grow into adulthood. In the kindergarten they are, as Jill puts it ‘getting a picture of how the world works’. And the lessons they will learn from this picture have a long-term impact. In Chapter 1, for example, we saw how Jill explains the significance of making bread; even if the children never make bread again, they will always know that ‘bread doesn't fall out of the sky’. They have had their hands in the dough, for themselves, and so now they know, and always will, how that part of the world works.

[1] In this story, the King and Queen give birth, not to a human child, but to a little donkey. Despite the different treatment such a special child would obviously require, the donkey prince is full of initiative and good will, with gentlemanly behaviour. He confounds expectations by learning to play the lyre with exquisite skill. Ultimately, because of his charming personality, he marries a lovely princess, who discovers that under the shaggy hide is an enchanted king’s son.
CHAPTER 3

THE WORK OF THE TEACHER

In this chapter, we examine four aspects of the teachers’ practice that were observed across all eight kindergartens: the teachers’ use of modelling and imitation; their ways of being with children, in relationship; their use of praise and reprimand, and the distinctive approach to talk between adults and children, in particular the absence of question and answer routines.

The use of modelling and imitation

How and why do Steiner educators use imitation and modelling in their pedagogy? What is the effect on children’s development?

Explicit descriptions

The interviewers asked all the teachers to describe their role in the child’s developmental process. Karen replied succinctly: ‘To be the model, the role model worthy of imitation.’ To the same question, Jan gave an almost identical response: ‘Well, I hope as a good role model, as a sort of guide.’ As did Francesca, at greater length:

We’re very much there as a role model, for the children to be seeing us and taking everything from us. They take it in very deeply, and they are imitating what we are doing, so we’re not really a teacher – ‘teacher’ doesn’t really describe what we do.

Carolyn reiterates the theme:

My primary role is being a model worthy of imitation...[if] you are not truly being that model worthy of imitation, you are just putting on a bit of a facade, and obviously, on some level, children will see through that.

Specific practices

Elisabeth explains one of the ways in which she puts this aspiration into practice:

I think we live in a throwaway society, so I’d like the children to learn that if you look after our things they last longer and if it is broken we can mend it ... so I like to sit down to mend something, or do whatever little job that needs doing, and then they can come and ask questions...

Donatella gives a very similar explanation: ‘we know from experience that the children inspire themselves through natural imitation ... they naturally want to imitate what you
are doing’. So when Donatella and her children discover a dead mouse by the stream, she acts as she would wish them to act, with tenderness and reverence:

We decided to do a funeral for it, and it was lovely because they had to dig, with nothing, because we didn’t have anything, except the pieces of willow, the branches or whatever we find in the ground. And then the children put a stone and flowers that they found around, whatever was pretty. And it was a situation where the reverence for life, for any life, was present really. Very, very simple, very calming, but it was a lovely opportunity - I mean we didn’t look for it, it was better for the mouse not to be dead, but it was there!

In Donatella’s kindergarten, the observer (a researcher with no background in Steiner education) was very struck by the ‘quiet presence and work activity of the teacher and assistant’. As the children entered the room,

The assistant was slowly and rhythmically cutting apples at her table ... the teacher was weaving coloured wool on a wooden frame ... As they enter the kindergarten space, the children experience a sense of ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ including the adults who are already steadily working at meaningful tasks.

In another room at the same school, the observer describes the children working with wax:

One five year old boy began to lose focus on the activity. The teacher approached him and touched his shoulders, then held her own ball of wax out in front of her and clearly began to mould it. “Who can make a window?” she asked, “A shining window”... “Mine is cold!” said one four year old girl. The teacher replied “Mine was cold too, I just pressed it into my hand like this and it became really warm.”

The effect on the children

The Rowan Tree teachers explain that their own chosen activities have a particular purpose: modelling engagement, concentration, and attention.

It’s very important that the teachers in the room are doing something [rather than just watching the children play] ... The more engaged the teacher is with what she or he is doing, the more engaged the children are in their play.

They also describe the use of stories in the modelling process, especially as the children come to trust the world:

We want the children to feel that the world is a good place to be, that there is goodness around, and through stories, the way ... (they show that) good overcomes evil, and the world is essentially good, so they can trust the world.

Carolyn explains how it is the whole kindergarten environment as well as the teacher that must be worthy of imitation:
The environment that you are in, that you are putting them in, is one worthy for them to absorb and imitate ... and the experiences they are experiencing are nourishing and worthy of absorbing and imitating.

She is very clear about how much children can learn in this way, and what important learning it is.

They learn empathy for example ... through what the teacher models for them, so in time that desire to do the right thing, becomes so strong in them. But it is a true desire, rather than a kind of grafted on ‘this is what good behaviour is about’.

Jill, too, emphasises the importance of the teacher’s engagement with authentic, real world tasks, and the impact this has on children:

It gives them a sense of how to manage things in the world; it gives them something to control. A vegetable knife is something you need to be in control of, and three and a half year olds can use sharp vegetable knives safely as long as you've given them a bit of a picture about how a master chef works ... and you're there beside them. It enables them (to understand) ‘I can use tools; I can make changes to the world that are positive, like making soup. I don't have to smash the windows and telephone boxes, I can make other kinds of changes.’ Because children want to change things ... so let’s give them positive pictures of how they can make changes.

**Agency, mastery and the will**

In thinking about this aspect of development, mainstream teachers might use the terms ‘agency’ or ‘mastery’; the Steiner educators tend to talk about the child’s will, and the forces of the will, which it is the teacher’s task to work with. Carolyn, for example, speaks of ‘supporting them in honing their will in order that they can push through a struggle and actually achieve something.’ Karen explains that these will forces are strengthened through doing, through activity. She contrasts this emphasis on physical activity with a child in an imaginary mainstream setting, using the whiteboard, or making a card for another child on a laptop; she asks, bluntly, ‘What is the reality in that? ... The child has to be operating from the neck upwards!' Donatella talks about the life forces and the energy that will later be used in academic work, but in the kindergarten ‘they should be in the will of the child, in doing things, not in the head, in the feeling and in the will.’

Each of these explanations affirms the underlying principle: in the act of imitation, the children are not ineffectual pale shadows of the adult. They are intensely engaged in realising their own powers to act on the world, for good, in ways of their own invention; they are exploring their capacity to struggle - and to achieve, all in their own individual ways. Imitation is by no means synonymous with blind conformity.

Carolyn describes this part of the teacher’s work with some passion:

I think it is one of the gifts of being in this work, to be there to witness those moments when they push through a struggle ... and their will really blossoms – it’s wonderful!
Being with children

One of the teachers in the Rowan Tree kindergarten picked out this aspect of the teacher’s work as the most significant difference between Steiner settings and others:

I think people like the natural products, and they like the colours and the crafts that we do, and that's all very nice as well – but actually the key difference is how we are with the children.

Her perception is echoed by others: Carolyn puts it like this: ‘I can best support them by walking alongside them, rather than trying to teach them.’ Karen says almost the same thing:

Just the kind of sitting by them, with them on their journey, and observing them, aware of where they are ... rather than wanting them to be somewhere they are not.’

One of the Rowan Tree teacher’s comments:

You know, we’ve got this thing about being present with the children, and that's a gift isn’t it, when someone is fully present with you?

Praise and reprimand

The observers with a background in mainstream education were surprised at the rarity of teachers making explicit judgements, either negative or positive, about what children did or said. Why do teachers rarely use praise in the kindergarten? How do the children know when they have done well? How do the teachers draw boundaries when children exhibit challenging behaviour?

Challenging children

When issues of challenging behaviour are discussed, a common theme is the big idea of acceptance. For example, at the Rowan Tree kindergarten, one teacher says:

It’s about acceptance, I suppose, accepting that ... the child is doing that for a particular reason, it’s not to annoy you, but it’s because of something in them, and getting cross or irritated doesn't actually help the situation.

Carolyn explains more fully:

That’s a kind of constancy that’s with me all the time, that where there is a difficulty arising, just seeing right through that, try and see through to the heart of the child, and actually what they are truly asking, what they are truly needing ... If you really see to the heart of where the child is, what is going on for them, and respond in a caring and loving way, often what’s really going on, starts to bubble up ... And so it’s about holding
boundaries in a very loving way ... It’s amazing how they just respond so well to boundaries, but loving boundaries, not a boundary where you’re reacting.

Negative concepts of blame, punishment, admonition, criticism or reprimand are entirely absent from the interviews and the observations. It seems that whatever the children do, the teacher responds with love.

The needs of children

Carolyn uses the complementary concepts of need and support to describe how she responds when, as she puts it, ‘the children can be quite mean to each other’:

The natural tendency [is] to warm to the one that’s being picked on, and so I have immediately to come in with an observation myself on that moment in order to really feel I can support the child. Because obviously, although the child who is being picked on is in need, the one that is picking on is also in great need; there is some pain there in terms of why that is happening and they really need you to be there in that way.

In a discussion of an incident when two children were arguing, Elisabeth describes her intervention as a way of reminding children, not reproving them, reminding them of how to be:

It’s one of these things where, because we don’t want to tell them what to do, [we] somehow call on their feelings, to remember that we are kind to each other.

Reminders

There are many instances in the observations of such gentle and sensitive reminders: for example, in one of the Hereford kindergartens, the observer heard a child telling on another.

“Lucas said ‘boobs’ again, Karen,” one five year old boy informed the teacher. “Some of us are still learning which words we use in kindergarten. Some of us are still learning.” The teacher gave no extra attention to Lucas and did not tell him he was not to use rude or inappropriate words, but seemed to emphasise the need for him to imitate the behaviour of the group in order to become more part of the group.

Donatella responds in a similar way to a child who is seeking approval for his achievements, reminding him, in a most loving and gentle manner, of the way to be in the kindergarten:

A four year old boy called to the teacher “I’ve done more than Mandy!” The teacher stroked a finger down his cheek and replied slowly, in a soft and calming tone: “It doesn’t matter, we are not racing, Samuel, are we? We take our time, we take our time.” Samuel appeared to calm down and quietly continued his work.
In the Beechtree kindergarten, the observer records a disruption when a five year old boy pushed a girl over. The teacher held the two children to her closely, and took the boy’s hands in hers, saying “These hands are not for pushing, James, they are for working and playing, aren’t they?” This is a fine example of the concept of the ‘loving boundary’, described by Carolyn above.

Sometimes the adult’s interventions take the form of playful comments, as the teacher seems to come alongside the child in his or her play, and speaks more as a companion than an authority. A child in one of the Rowan Tree kindergartens is observed repeatedly throwing a doll up into the air; Maria, the teacher responds with a gentle suggestion: “I think that baby wants a cradle.” When the Hereford kindergarten children go out of doors for the morning, they are strongly attracted to a flooded area of grass; the observer notes:

The teacher commented to me that she has to find a balance between allowing the children to fulfil their play needs, and keeping them dry enough to last the rest of the morning. [She says to the children] “Do you know, the mole lives just here, so we have to be careful”. The children all immediately tiptoed by the soggy area; giving it a wide berth...[Moments later] the children gathered around a small fir tree growing by the bank of the stream and began pulling on its branches. The teacher touched the tree gently as she said “I don’t think it likes to be pulled, that tree. It’s only a baby tree.”

**In place of praise**

Although there is a striking absence of verbal praise in the adults’ interactions with the children, there is nothing to suggest that the children’s activities pass unremarked, unacknowledged or unappreciated. Quite the reverse. Indeed, sometimes what could have been, in another setting, a stern correction, is framed as an appreciative comment. In one of the Hereford kindergartens, a brother and sister, six and four years old, were sitting together, weaving.

After a minute or two, the boy informed his sister: “Mary, you’re doing it wrong!” The teacher softly called for him to come; she smiled at him and whispered slowly: “Thomas, I’d appreciate it if you’d take care of Mary please, her weaving will be different from yours.” The boy looked thoughtful, said nothing, and returned to his place. He went on to glance periodically at his sister’s work, clearly noting her progress, but refrained from passing comment again. His sister was in fact weaving neatly and carefully ... I noticed that the teacher communicated neither critical comment nor praise on [any] child’s finished piece of work. The fact that the work had taken place was merely acknowledged with a smile and an observation: “Yes, there, you have been working hard today, haven’t you?”

When children perform some act of kindness or generosity, the teacher is sure to thank them, appreciatively, but quietly, without making a public fuss of the incident. When there is a moment of significant achievement, the teacher does not fail to recognise it, but does not exaggerate its importance with a fantastic flourish of words. For example, in one of the Hereford kindergartens, the observer is watching a five year old boy creating a house out of wooden stands and blankets, tied together with ropes.
He suddenly called out delightedly: “I’ve made a bow! Look, I’ve made a bow!” The teacher smiled and quietly acknowledged his achievement: “Ah, yes, - your first bow.” The boy jumped up and down shouting: “My first bow, my first bow!”

The boy’s pride in his achievement does not seem to have been in any way diminished by his teacher’s calm response. Indeed his spontaneous joy seems to confirm that recognition was all he needed; more elaborate praise would have been superfluous.

It is interesting to speculate on the effect of this lack of hyperbole and lavish praise: an incident in the Cambridge kindergarten suggests that the children listen attentively to the adult’s comments, accept them as honest appraisals, and respond to them equally honestly. A group of boys are deeply engaged in building a large construction with chairs and planks to slide on. The observer comments:

The teacher kept a close eye. “This looks a bit risky...” she observed. “It’s not,” they replied authoritatively. “It just looks like it’s not safe, but it is.” The teacher let the boys play to the edge of the ‘danger zone’, and I felt they really benefited from her bravery in doing so.

And, perhaps, they also benefited from being given the opportunity to be the experts in their own play, their own constructions. There is no sense in this exchange that the teacher always knows best.

**Questions and answers**

The absence of exchanges of questions and answers in the kindergarten sounded unfamiliar to the mainstream observers. Why do Steiner teachers so seldom ask children any questions? Why don’t they initiate sustained dialogues about the children’s play and activity?

The absence of sustained passages of dialogue, or questions and answers, is a distinctive element of kindergarten practice; there are many examples in both interview and observation data that demonstrate its significance.

**Making it explicit**

Indeed, this is almost the first topic to be discussed in the interview at the Beech Tree kindergarten; Francesca explains:

When we have visiting parents ... I say to them, we don’t question the child or the children a lot ... we don’t intervene in their play or ask them what they are doing, ask them what they are drawing, that kind of thing.

She goes on to explain why:
I think it is important because the children are living in such a different world when they are playing, they are really so engaged in it, that us asking them a question kind of breaks their bubble really ... we wait for them to tell us something, or ask us something, rather than us questioning them.

The observation at this kindergarten shows this principle in practice, contrasting the teacher’s way of being with the children in a small group, with that of a visiting adult, not a Steiner teacher. The teacher has been sitting drawing quietly at a worktable with some children but has briefly left the room.

As soon as her place at the worktable was free, the [other adult] moved into it and began to chat with the children: “What are you drawing there, then? Oooh, that’s lovely – and what colours are you using?”

The children all immediately engaged with her and started to call out “Do you like mine?” “Look at mine, it’s really good!” “This one’s a picture of a house!”

The [adult] showed great interest and enthusiasm for all the drawings now being thrust towards her: “Oooh, yeess ... and what colour is that? ... And what is your favourite colour then?” “Mine’s blue!” “Mine’s pink!” “I like black!” ... Some children were now standing up, as they all excitedly shouted out their favourite colours to the visitor.

The focussed, industrious atmosphere in which the children began their drawing had now disappeared in just a few minutes with this new interaction. However with the teacher’s reappearance, the children quickly settled again. I surmised that perhaps the visitor felt sorry for the children having so little ‘stimulation’ from the teacher in the form of thought-provoking questions or encouraging comments. On every occasion the teacher left the room throughout the session, the visitor interacted with the children in a similar way.

In another very explicit explanation, Donatella singles out this aspect of the teacher’s role as one of the most important differences between mainstream and Steiner practice.

I would say that the main thing is we don’t make the children conscious of what they are doing ... That is one of the most important things, whatever the activity, the play, we don’t make them conscious of it, we let them be with the activity, and we let them go through the experience ... not interfering with their imaginative play or whatever they are doing ... we are not saying “Oh why don’t you do that?” or “Why did you choose to do that?” or “How would you do that?”

The observer of this same teacher sees this principle enacted in practice; she notes how, throughout the morning, Donatella makes no verbal contact with the actively engaged children who are playing and working near her, while she too is actively engaged, sorting through some lavender stalks (for making scented cushions). Indeed, at the very end of the morning, after a long period out of doors, the observer records the teacher telling the children there will be no story when they get back to the kindergarten, and comments: ‘This is the first overt verbal communication made by the teacher speaking to the whole group.’

In the same school, the observer records the way the way in which Carolyn greets the children:
As these children enter the room, there is a gentle exchange between teacher and child, where the teacher acknowledges the child’s arrival and presence with a quiet “Good morning”, or simply with a smile and a touch. No questioning of the children takes place after the good morning greeting, such as “Did you have a good weekend?” or “How are you today?” If the child offers a comment or story about himself or his home life, the teacher is naturally receptive to him, showing attentiveness and genuine interest, though usually through non-verbal means.

At the Rowan Tree kindergarten, one of the teachers describes a visit she made to a mainstream reception (YR) classroom, and what she saw there.

[The teacher] was often asking the children what they were doing, what they were making, and taking photographs of the children, making them very aware of what they were doing, or asking the children to take photographs of themselves and what they were making and doing. There were a lot of leading questions “What are you doing?” “Why are you doing it?” and a lot of intervention from the teacher in the children’s activities. And I was aware of some children actually trying to avoid the teacher, because they were playing despite the teacher, rather than because of what was going on.

Her colleague picks up the thread and explains the problem, as she sees it:

And the message that gives to the children is that you do stuff so it can be measured, you don’t do it just for the joy of doing it. You know, if there’s a teacher sitting there, observing you, writing stuff down about what you are doing the whole time, it makes you really self-conscious and makes you think “well everything I do is being measured and assessed and I just can’t be free and do what I want and just do it because I want to do it.”

**There are alternatives**

But the Steiner kindergarten teachers do not maintain a stony, distant silence throughout the session. Far from it: they communicate in a number of different ways, by touch, by gesture, by song and in a variety of tongues. The teacher at Elmfield, Elisabeth, sings in both French and German (as do the children, even in her absence), and explains that she believes the children should know there are different languages, as early as possible in their lives. In the same interview, the observer asks about an incident when two boys were tussling over a basket of bricks; their teacher approached them and began singing a song. Elisabeth explains why:

When I see that they are having a bit of a problem that they can’t share, I just sit and I sing the song, and usually ... that would put them in the frame of mind that they would remember that we do have to share, and so I don’t have to say “we share”. So it’s one of those things, because we don’t want to tell them what to do, we somehow call on their feelings, to remember that we are kind to each other.

Donatella, emphasising the principle of minimising verbal instruction or direction, explains that instead ‘we try to use very much of the gesture’. And, in addition, in many of the observations, there are moments of calm, companionable conversation, which is somehow more like conversation in a family home than in a classroom. At the Rowan
Tree kindergarten, for example, Patrick is working with card and tissue paper to make a stained glass window, while sitting at a long table with his teacher, Jan. He says to her “Today you’re coming to my house!” She replies, “I know, I’m very excited.” He goes on: “You’re not going to your house, you’re coming to my house”. A moment later Patrick asks when the children are going to open their paper slippers, which St. Nicholas has filled with good things: the teacher replies, explaining when and why. The give-and-take of quiet conversation continues; ‘the atmosphere is very calm and concentrated’, comments the observer. Jan tells Patrick “You look like the donkey, all shaggy and brown”, referring to his shaggy top; Patrick replies “No, it’s grey – the donkey all shaggy and grey.”

These simple exchanges (and there are many more like them) seem to corroborate the importance for the teacher of just being with children, a principle that we have already discussed.

A different kind of question

The teachers do not entirely refrain from asking questions; rather, they use a different kind of question, for a different purpose, compared to many mainstream teachers. Their questions are most often open invitations, sensitively attuned to what is going on in the children’s play. For example, in Karen’s kindergarten, some children have transformed their chairs (not physically, but imaginatively) first into racing cars, and then into lawn mowers. The noise level is rising and the teacher intervenes, asking “Can we knock on the doors of the houses please,” (an imaginary village has also been created) “to see if the people want their grass cut? Sometimes they might need their grass rolling.” But the lawn mowing continues until:

“Oh No! The lawn mower’s broken” called out a five year old boy. “THE LAWN MOWER’S BROKEN!!” rang out from every corner of the room, as all the ‘mowers’ failed at once. “Do we have someone here who mends lawn mowers?” the teacher asked gently...

Suddenly the lawn mowers were mended. And the play continued; at least five children were mowing up and down. The teacher interrupted the noise with “Do you do hedge-trimming too?” A five year old boy asked her in return “Do you have a hedge trimmer?” “No, I don’t have one, but maybe you could find one?”

And sure enough, a girl promptly exclaims, “My mower cuts hedges as well!” suiting her actions to her words. And so the play moves on, with additions and embellishments. The teacher’s refocusing questions have not cut off the play but supported and facilitated the flow.

It is clear that the teacher (with her questions) is there to recognise and support the play, not to control it. Offers of help are made, but there is no pressure to accept. In one of the Rowan Tree kindergarten classes, the observer hears a loud cry from a boy tied up with scarves. Maria’s response is simplicity itself: “Do you need me to rescue you?” A few minutes later, the observer records a group of children walking solemnly past with long
sticks; Maria asks them “Are you going to Bethlehem?” The observer notes: ‘the recognition of their game by the teacher makes their eyes shine.’

The teacher’s capacity simply to be, quietly and calmly, alongside the children in their play, is also expressed non-verbally. At the Beechtree kindergarten, the observer notices a boy disengage from a dangerously exciting construction project (building a diving board and diving from it!) and walk over to his teacher who is sitting drawing at the worktable:

He held an imaginary cat in his hand, and showed it to the teacher who smiled and stroked ‘the cat’ softly. The boy turned, and with a look of satisfaction on his face, gently set ‘the cat’ down on the floor, and watched it walk away.

**Conclusion**

One of the themes of Chapter 2 was that, sometimes, less means more. The way that teachers refrain from being involved in children’s play, remaining on the sidelines, seems to create an enormous area of opportunities for the children; the less that the teachers do, in terms of shaping and directing play, the more that children do for themselves. In this chapter too, we have seen the same principle in action: compared to educators in mainstream settings, Steiner teachers and assistants do less talking, questioning, praising or reprimanding, yet they are by no means inactive. They concentrate their energy on ‘being present with the children’; this attentive presence is the foundation of the teachers’ central task, being a model, worthy of imitation – though the word ‘model’ may not be the most appropriate here. The teachers are in no sense pretending to be what they are; the values and principles they embody are intensely real.
A recurring theme throughout the interviews is the value of the Steiner teachers’ inner preparation, or inner work, which they regard as a prerequisite for working effectively with children. In what ways does the teachers’ daily preparation for work support and strengthen their self-development and stability? In what ways does it deepen their understanding of, and relationship to, the child? How does it support the processes of child observation and child study?

Reflection and response

Through reflection, imagination and deep thought, teachers strive for ‘pedagogical instinct’: the ability to do or say the right thing at the right time, both with the group and the individual child. Most teachers carry out some form of meditation, reading, or study directly connected to their work, in addition to a daily review of what went on during each kindergarten session.

Carolyn, one of the Hereford teachers, comments.

I think reading as much as you can, reading anything that nourishes you in that sense … working with exercises (she refers to six self-development exercises given by Rudolf Steiner) is a useful thing … because it is almost like developing muscles … the more you do, the more something develops and becomes refined.

The process of reflection, of looking back in order to steer a way forward, involves honest self-appraisal. Jill describes how she reflects on the kindergarten day later, during the evening. She finds this a particularly beneficial way to move challenging situations forward.

If one does it quite consciously in the evening, this is the question I’m asking myself tonight, now that child, I really didn’t manage very well, I got into a confrontation with them, that wasn’t what they needed; how else can I work with that child (tomorrow), how can I move things on, can I help that child to move on from a rather stuck place for example?

The morning, Jill says, is wiser than the evening (she is quoting from a Russian fairy tale): it often brings answers to questions posed before sleep. You can’t really make important decisions late at night, she finds, but there are all kinds of possibilities for finding imaginative solutions that are not available in daylight hours.

I have found so often that something comes when you let go. It’s a freedom, isn’t it? You let go in the night and it comes back a different shape.
Donatella explains that she finds it helpful to review her day quietly after the morning, or in the evening before bed.

You have to be ready to review yourself, really assess yourself really – not only the children. It is a continuous assessment of yourself ... ‘Why did I say that?’ ‘Why did I do that gesture?’ ‘Why didn’t I stop more and talk more to that child?’

Karen finds that her reflections remain with her throughout the day.

Well, for a start, the children never leave me. When I finish a morning session I am still digesting it for the rest of the afternoon and evening and pictures come back that when, perhaps I first left the session, were gone ... conversations and observations that I have made with the children, reflections, time to reflect and it’s constantly with me. When I go home I don’t switch off from my teaching.

Being worthy

Carolyn speaks of making sure that the fruit of her inner preparation comes into practice during lived encounters with children. Conscious of herself as a role model, and aspiring to be ‘worthy of imitation’ (a phrase used by many teachers), she tries to be self-aware at all times, an aspect of her role that, she says, ‘is illuminated by doing the inner work.’

I can best support them by walking alongside them rather than ... trying to teach them but also having a reaction to what is going on. So I think all of that informs for me being that model worthy of imitation because it really is a moment-to-moment kind of experience when you are with the children - observing yourself all the time in relation to them.

This is no superficial concept of worthiness; it extends to all aspects of the teacher’s person. Steiner teachers acknowledge that children cannot help but imitate, and so they imitate (and therefore learn) habits of behaviour, good or bad, without discrimination. Therefore it is an important part of the teachers’ job, and their ethical responsibility, not to damage children by lack of self-awareness, by being unworthy of being imitated. Thus careful attention to inner development becomes a critical factor in responsible teaching.

Inner work can also act as a filter against negativity; it can become a method of rejuvenating relationships and creating alternative ways of seeing. One of the Rowan Tree teachers describes the way she deals with potential negativity through her inner work and attitude.

I suppose seeing the children as a riddle to be solved rather than as a problem and when a child presents a certain type of behaviour, why is that? And what can be done to help? So that requires inner work. You know, there’s some children may particularly irritate you, and that requires quite a lot of inner work to overcome it in yourself so that there isn't conflict there.

The conviction that each child must be met as a unique individual informs teachers’ perceptions and reflections. A constant inner questioning (on the part of the teacher),
and a willingness to see each child anew each day, enable the teachers to avoid limiting and possibly damaging labelling.

The interviewers take up this theme, and remark on the importance of the teacher/child relationship in this context, which brings with it a feeling of shared responsibility for problems.

Interviewer: ...you don’t see it as ‘there is a problem in the child’ but as ‘a problem in our relationship’, which you could do something about with yourself, as well as what you provide for the child.

Teacher: Yes, yes. ‘What have I created here?’

The very next question reveals the basis of this feeling of responsibility.

Interviewer: How important do you think inner work is to effective Steiner early-years practice?”

Teacher: I think essential, absolutely essential.

Carolyn describes the link between close observation of the child and her inner work. She speaks of the purpose of observation as being able to ‘grasp more of a hidden picture of the child’ to find out ‘what is going on for them … there’s always something that’s their own particular little struggle.’ These observations are then put to work in the process of the daily review.

Carolyn’s daily review begins with reflection based on her observations of the children during the day.

I always try, some time in the evening, some time before bed, to go through my group and just hold a picture of each [child] and sometimes something will step out, step towards you of what the child is needing that hadn’t occurred to you in a more conscious way. And sometimes that will happen first thing in the morning … and you wake up with an amazing inspiration that you wouldn’t have thought of yourself.

**Child Study**

Teachers also carry out child studies together. At regular meetings in Bristol, they begin by sharing observations of a particular child - what they have noticed, or any incidents they have witnessed. The teachers reflect on these observations over a period of a week and then bring their thoughts back to a second meeting.

We discuss – perhaps we have ideas of how that child can be helped in a particular way. And often just in the discussion, bringing the child and thinking about the child, something changes, and the child moves on in a way and that happens so often ... it’s quite significant that even without a lot of input in a practical way, just thinking about the child and the heightened awareness of that child amongst the teachers can really help.
Francesca draws together elements of inner work, child study, and observation, and highlights their importance in the quest to know, understand, and appreciate the whole child.

I suppose the child study is a very reflective and almost meditative element with working with a child – looking beyond yourself and what you can see - so you might look at the child and look at their physical characteristics and what they are doing and how they are walking and all the different elements that ... build a picture of the child – and allowing that to rest with you and your colleagues and see from a kind of intuitive perspective what comes up.

She details some of the physical characteristics that contribute to this picture of a child: their hair, their eyes, their gaze, whether their hands are hot or cold. She comments that these are:

Things that maybe mainstream practitioners wouldn’t look at so much, but it is very helpful to get a whole picture of the child because that is so important for our work.

But there is more to child study than amassing a heap of observations: the process is conducted in a spirit of caring, loving attention, with patience and reverence. Francesca describes how a child study with a small group of teachers might begin:

We would spend a few minutes just having a quiet time – maybe we’d light a candle, or say a verse, to concentrate our thoughts – then just allow the picture of the child to come up in our minds and think about that child – and see what comes up.

Compare and contrast: a small group of quiet, focussed teachers, thinking together, by the light of a candle - and a mainstream educator, sitting down, probably alone, with paper and pen, to complete the 17 nine-point scales of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. It is hard to imagine two more different scenarios.
CHAPTER 5

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

All the interviews showed that the Steiner teachers’ understanding of child development is a powerful factor in many aspects of their practice. What are the chief characteristics of the Steiner view of child development?

In this chapter we examine aspects of the Steiner teachers’ insights into the process of child development, starting with an overview, which summarises the perceptions they hold in common, and ending with a second overview by an experienced Steiner teacher and adviser.

Overview

All the teachers spoke at length and in detail about their understanding of child development; there was a strongly articulated, shared view of the principal features of the first seven years of children’s lives, with only minor differences in emphasis. The teachers are also clear that although the developmental process of each child is spontaneous, driven from within, the teacher still has an important part to play. Donatella uses an extended metaphor to explain: an image of a young living tree, supported by a pole, so that the tree grows straight, protected from the wind.

And I feel that is very much what we do with the young children: we are in that role really, supporting, so when they are older, in every difficulty they meet, the child can cope with them ... It is like when the tree is grown, it doesn’t need any support ... if there are some strong winds, they don’t blow down the tree.

Karen’s explanation of the whole process starts from the Steiner view of the three-fold nature of human beings: the head, the heart and the hand. She emphasises the corresponding development of children’s thinking, feeling and willing – developments that take place over time – ‘the time to unfold in their own time without an agenda’. The changes in the older child include physical changes, as children become ‘masters of their physical body, from fine motor skills to larger,’ and many other social and intellectual changes. They become more integrated within the group, ‘leading the way for the younger children, keen to do that, looking more towards authority, able to carry out tasks, see tasks through, their focus is longer, they can stay with an activity until it is finished and want to do more’. There are intellectual changes too: they are more interested in words and the pleasure of playing with them; they have a deeper understanding of time and place, of yesterday and tomorrow. There are differences in the older children’s play; Carolyn, for example, says

They are able to come to kindergarten with an idea; they’re beginning more of this thinking-in-pictures sort of play. They come in ... full of excitement and “I know what we can play today, I’ve got an idea.”
She continues to elaborate on these changes, describing the characteristics of five and six year olds:

They’re more conscious somehow, their awareness is beginning to extend outwards, there’s a kind of richness in what they are able to achieve, where their skills are, where their interests are ... it is almost like the Renaissance part of the kindergarten ... The middle part of the kindergarten is that very beautiful time when there is this huge blossoming in their interests, in their skills, in their capabilities, what they can do, what they want to show that they can do ... they can now take ideas and really run with them and create something quite amazing.

Francesca sums it all up: ‘They are never at one point, it’s not a static thing – they are always in movement and always changing.’

Watching and waiting

Running through the teachers’ eloquent descriptions of children being, becoming and changing, is another strong theme: the importance of time, the necessity of waiting, the imperative not to rush children on. Elisabeth talks about ‘the way of life these days, where the children have to get up and rush.’ As a result, she says ‘I had to learn to cut down and just keep it simple in order to allow them just to be ... We have time, we have time to give them time.’ This principle is echoed by Karen: ‘We’re allowing the children time to be, the time to be without the pressure of ticking a box.’

The Rowan Tree teachers discuss how their attentive observations of children might sometimes suggest the need for some kind of intervention; but their priority is waiting, not rushing into action – ‘because you are waiting for the child to develop on [their] own ... so we’re always waiting’. This teacher modifies her claim a little later, but maintains the principle: ‘sometimes it is good to intervene early – and sometimes it is better to wait.’ To be able to wait, patiently, in this way, the teachers have to rely on their sure and certain knowledge of the child; that is why they are so attentive to individual children and the differences between them, as we will see later in this chapter.

Specific changes and activities to match

Within the mixed-age structure of the kindergarten (from three and a half to rising seven) particular activities are provided for children at different stages of development. For example, Francesca explains how the children are not all treated the same way:

We’ll give the older ones responsibilities, things are slightly different for them, we do specific projects with the five/six year olds that the others won’t be doing yet, more skilled work, woodwork projects or sewing projects.

Jill describes a particularly complex project that takes place over several months – making a blanket, embroidering it on a frame; then comes ‘a handkerchief doll with knotted hands and a belly button,’ the putting on of hair, which requires ‘a little bit of finger-
knitting,’ finally making the clothes for the doll, which requires over-sewing. Beate, the teacher in the Cambridge kindergarten, also talks about the special projects that she brings to the oldest children, which help them to develop focus, such as weaving and sewing.

It is striking how these particular age-related activities and skills are not those that loom so large in the lives of mainstream educators: there is simply no discussion of age-related achievements in literacy or numeracy. Indeed, the only time the topic of literacy appears in the transcripts is when the Rowan Tree teachers initiate a fascinating discussion with the interviewers, querying the necessity for ‘milestones’, particularly in relation to learning to read. As one of them says; ‘So what if they don’t reach that milestone? So what if they are not really doing that by then? Does it really matter?’ Her colleague backs her up with her own experience:

My children went through the Steiner school, and my son didn’t learn to read until he was 10, and I kept asking, shouldn’t I be worried that my son isn’t reading yet? And she said, “No, it’s fine, he will, just give him more time.”

Which they did, and he did, and all was well.

**Mixed-age structure: the benefits**

*In mainstream settings, children are commonly organised into year groups from the age of three or four. What are seen as the benefits of the mixed-age structure, from three to rising seven, in most kindergartens?*

There are many incidents in the observations that demonstrate some of the benefits of the mixed-age structure. For example, when the children are out of doors at one of the Hereford kindergartens, the observer sees the children waiting to cross a bridge over a stream. One four year old begins to walk on the bridge, but the older children quickly restrain him, informing him that the teacher must be present before the bridge is crossed. The observer comments: ‘Most of the children are very insistent that the rules are closely adhered to ... They can often be heard ‘helping each other to know’ as a Steiner teacher might put it.’

In the Cambridge kindergarten the observer sees two older boys engaged in a complicated building project:

... an amazing construction with two chairs with planks set up as four sides of a square ... the teacher asked them if they could spare one of their blocks for Joe (the youngest four year old), who did not have enough to build his house. “No, we have just enough,” they replied. “Can Joe use those four over there?” she asked. “Yeah, they’re much gooder” they said and without being asked they helped Joe to carry them over to where he wanted to build his house.

Later in the morning, the observer noted that the older boys were now including Joe in their game. They helped him climb up their construction and slide down the slide they
had created – the whole thing toppled over. Nobody seemed to mind; the older boys rebuilt it and Joe returned for another go.

Francesca is very aware that the age structure of her kindergarten is unusual, with very few five and six year olds, mainly three and four year olds.

Five and six year olds are really expected to be helpers ... (they) really carry things and teach the little ones ... so without that it is difficult ... I would do less things if we had more five and six year olds. (For example) we ask the members of staff to wipe the tables – that would be a job for six year olds.

She goes on to explain how having the full age range is an advantage for everyone, not just the youngest children:

The older ones will have been in the kindergarten since they were three or four and they have seen what the older ones do and they know when it is their time to do something ... and they feel very honoured to have got to that stage and there’s generally a sort of pleasure and – not importance in an arrogant way - but just a kind of feeling special ... a sense of achievement. And they are learning lots from the little ones in terms of cooperation and patience, and helping the younger ones to do things, so they’ve got responsibilities, which they really enjoy.

Carolyn describes the same phenomenon:

You start to see in the older children this picture of this child who is starting to look around and see what they can do to help the teacher, and what can they do to help the needs of the group, the needs of the little ones, and acting on it. So it is a beautiful transformation.

The Rowan Tree teachers identify another related benefit: because the kindergarten classes are not organised in year groups, the children stay in the same class for their whole time in kindergarten, for two or three years, with the same teacher.

It helps a lot that the child is with us for longer than a year, that we have them for two or three years in the same class, and we really deepen our relationship with the child.

**School readiness**

*How do Steiner teachers recognise and respond to signs of readiness for formal school?*

Carolyn makes it clear that school readiness is not measured in terms of intellectual achievement:

Our focus would be very much more on the physical development of the child ... things like the change of teeth, the lengthening of the arms and legs, the appearance of the waist, being able to cross the midline ... their gross motor control, their sense of balance.
Jill, too, emphasises the physical aspects of readiness, with some candour: ‘in order to be able to be in Class 1 you need to be able to sit at the table without falling off your chair’. Finger knitting is important too:

One would want them to be able to finger knit before they go to Class 1, because that’s going to be a good starting point for knitting with knitting needles, which is a big Class 1 excitement. So finger knitting is something we do in kindergarten and I would want to check that all my children going into Class 1 were able to finger knit.

Donatella’s account of the signs of readiness ranges more widely. She includes the speech of the child, the child’s steadiness, or balance, ‘but very much also all the emotional side, in particular the gifts. Each child has a particular gift.’ She goes on to describe a recent experience with an ‘astonishing’ child, with the gift of ‘very deep philosophical thought’: this was a gift that had to be shared with others and passed on to the child’s new teachers in Class 1.

The Rowan Tree educators add one more sign of readiness, which they have learned to welcome and appreciate: the children’s own understanding of their readiness for the next stage in their lives.

Quite often they are ready to leave and they are actually saying, once we’ve taken them over to see Class 1, and they’ve seen where they are going, they say “How much longer do we have to be in kindergarten for?” And that’s really healthy; we really welcome that – for them to say, “We’ve had enough of that.”

The unique child

*Given their shared understanding of the developmental stages common to all children, how do Steiner teachers respond to the unique individuality of every child?*

The Rowan Tree teachers speak for all the others when they articulate their basic assumptions about individuality:

What is most challenging and most rewarding about teaching, each child is a complete individual; every child is a new child, a new experience for you as a teacher.

Jill explains how her daily observations inform her knowledge of each individual:

I’m looking both for the things that confirm the picture of the child I carry, and the things that make me think ‘Oh, that’s something different’... I want to understand how it is to be that child ... (because) I’m trying to support the children in finding their own way to work with who they are.

She goes on to describe some of the ways in which the educators teach themselves to think about ‘who the children are’.
Quite an interesting question (is) if this child was in a fairy tale, which character would they be? Have you got lazy Jack, have you got some earnest hardworking peasant girl, have you got a very proud princess ... have you got a brave prince, have you got a very timid prince, have you got a witch, which is what we can see at the moment, that angry part of us, which we've all got, which in this child is really coming to the fore at this moment.

This exercise is part of the process that Jill calls ‘making as full a picture of the child as you can’. Carolyn starts talking about this same theme by using a metaphor from the social world of humankind, where any interaction can be seen as a meeting place: ‘my principal aim ... would be, with each child, to try and meet them where they are.’ Donatella echoes this aspiration: ‘Each child should be met, that’s the ideal.’

Later in the interview, Carolyn describes what happens when child and teacher meet: ‘I feel more and more that education is about saying to a child ‘Who are you? Hello, who are you? And what can I do to help you?’ The teacher’s task is to create opportunities for the children ‘to find out who they are, to express who they are.’ ‘The teacher, says Carolyn, ‘helps to create an environment in which they learn themselves.’

**Conclusion**

So far in this chapter we have selected extracts from the interview and observation data; this selection represents the perceptions and practices of a small sample of kindergarten teachers. But the Steiner view of child development and its implications for practice are such complex topics that it seems appropriate to conclude the chapter with a second overview, this one written by a Steiner teacher and kindergarten adviser with wide-ranging experience of Steiner practice. This overview clarifies and elaborates some of the themes that emerged from the interviews, adding more detail and depth to an account of development in the first seven years of life, as seen by Steiner educators: an insider’s perspective.

**An insider’s perspective**

Steiner educators take their cue from the child and strive to create a stress-free environment congruent with the key features of the developmental process. Children are given time to mature harmoniously while gradually acquiring a wide range of skills through active, first hand experiences such as baking, gardening, sewing, knitting, imaginative play and ringtime, where children and teacher join together in a communal circle-time, with songs, stories and rhymes. Social skills are developed through the family ethos and through working together. Deep learning happens in a secure, loving setting, in ways that are akin to the child’s own nature and interests; the curriculum is adapted to the child rather than the other way round. There is no pressure to get on, no hurry to get ahead or to compete with others: no one is left behind. Tasks can be performed at the child’s own level so that she is able to gain competence and increasing skill naturally over time as she matures. A four year old, eager to help lay the table, may not yet grasp the
patterning of plate, cup and napkin, or be able to manipulate crockery entirely successfully, whereas a six year old will have mastered the task and will usually perform it efficiently and at speed. Both children take pleasure in their different levels of skill and are happy to have made a valued contribution to the group. Steiner educators try not to make unreasonable or inappropriate demands on their children, although they certainly have high expectations of them.

Steiner educators are skilled and subtle observers of their children. They become familiar with the predictable signs and stages of development on the child’s journey towards readiness for formal teaching, which replaces unconscious imitation and exploration as the principal mode of learning during the seventh year. They observe children closely, trying to understand them at every moment, alert for change but never judging. Drawing on their knowledge of the developmental process, the educators watch, listen and use their intuition to determine their particular response to the changing needs of the individual child. ‘What can I do to help you?’ is the unspoken question they carry: it refers not to the reaching of attainment targets but to the child’s all round well-being, sense of self and individual interests and intentions.

Steiner educators believe that physical and mental changes are interconnected and, conscious of each child’s individual developmental time-line, take note of these changes and new capabilities. For example, they note when the child’s grip (of a spoon or crayon) shifts from being a fist (or whole hand grip), to thumb/finger opposition; they notice when children learn to skip, and stand on one leg; when the S curve appears in the spine and the toddler tummy turns into a waist; when knuckles begin to replace dimples in the hand. They look out for developmental signs across the full spectrum of children’s activities. They notice patterns in children’s drawings, from the first simple spiral forms of the toddler, on to closed circles, crosses and ladders, right through to the complex flag/quadrant motif that appears around the age of six and is one of the indications that children are ready for formal instruction.

Educators also observe important developments in children’s free play. Six year olds, for example, often develop a consuming passion for tying things together. This happens in perfect conjunction with the development of the cognitive ability to tie concepts together. Busy tying their clothes-horses and other objects together to make complicated structures in their play, six year olds are also ‘stringing’ complex thoughts into threads of thin thinking by using conjunctions to link, extend and elaborate their sentences. Educators also note the flurry of animal and master games that usually appear as the child reaches the stage of being ready to accept, and indeed welcome, the formal authority of the teacher.

Predictable developmental signs act as indicators that all is well: should they fail to appear, intervention might be an option. Waiting might be another. The signs of readiness are numerous: as the time for formal schooling approaches, children can tie their shoes and walk in a cross pattern (i.e. swing opposite arm to leg); they are becoming socially aware and demonstrate causal reasoning. The child’s body has changed from the toddler figure, with its disproportionately large, soft-boned (dreamy) head, to the balanced, school-aged child with a relatively smaller (awakened) head,
longer, stronger limbs and clever hands, which can now do his or her bidding. Six year olds can hop and balance on one foot; they can sit happily for long periods, both of their own volition and when asked. Until now, their will forces have been dedicated to achieving physical mastery; now they are alert in their thoughts; they have staying power, concentration, enthusiasm for life and the will to work under instruction.

Filled with nourishment for all aspects of their being, children in their seventh year are ready for school. During their years in the kindergarten their feelings have been gently tutored; their will – their capacity to act on the world – has become used to good habits; they have learned (some) temperance and self-control; they can wait their turn and see things through. They have good social skills of many kinds: they communicate and listen; show empathy, respect and an ability to negotiate. They can sing and re-tell stories from memory. They have lived through the annual cycle of festivals and have met nature in every season of the year. They have gardened and cooked and baked; they have made friends; felt secure; imitated and become skilled; they have learned to listen to stories, and joined in with blessings, graces, poems and ring-games. With so much rich experience behind them, these fine learners are now ready to turn to the authority of the teacher and be taught.
CHAPTER 6

OBSERVING, ASSESSING AND UNDERSTANDING LEARNING

From the start of this enquiry the research group intended to focus on the Steiner approach to observation and assessment in the early years. But it soon became apparent that in order to give a coherent account of this area of practice, it would not be enough to answer narrowly focussed ‘when?’ ‘what?’ and ‘how?’ questions. We realised we also needed to ask ourselves a much more complex question: ‘What underpins the Steiner teachers’ entire pedagogical approach?’ It is to these questions that we now turn, in a chapter that synthesises many of the themes we have already explored.

The practice of observation: when, what and how

Observation is an important part of what Steiner teachers do, every day, every week, all year round. Francesca describes the process:

Throughout the morning we will make discreet observations – we won’t sit or stand near them with a clip-board writing observations – we’ll sit watching discreetly, and maybe jot something down – and we’ll watch them and listen to them and try and observe non-judgementally really.

These observations focus on all aspects of the child, including social skills, physical abilities, possible difficulties, stages of development, interests and achievements. The teachers note changes and progression, rather than looking for precise cut-off points; as Francesca says: ‘the children are always in movement, always changing’.

Jill describes how her daily observations feed into a weekly record:

At the end of the week ... (I write) what have I observed this week about the child that’s new, or that confirms a pattern, or that stands out – what stood out for me about this child this week? And then, what did I do about it? How do I reflect on it?

But, she insists, the teacher must come to the observation with an open mind: ‘There’s a great need for freedom, isn't there, to be free and open to what comes.’ This is not to deny the need for accuracy, for specificity. But there are different ways of being specific, as Francesca points out: ‘We are observing and noting where the child is, at all stages in their day and development, but not necessarily judging it against set criteria. But we do look at children and ‘assess’ the children related to their stages of development.’ For these teachers, the priority is to focus on developmental stages as a way of monitoring children’s growth (social and intellectual growth as well as physical) - not at all the same thing as making judgements against set criteria.

Carolyn gives a specific example of on-going assessment in the domain of physical development:
Sometimes there’s a way of incorporating certain areas of physical development into your normal morning. Such as on our Walk Day we pass a fallen log and the children walk along it as part of their walk, and that gives a chance to make a specific observation regarding balance; or climbing the big fence on the way to the meadow... and that brings up laterality because you have to cross your arm over to get over it.

The Rowan Tree teachers prioritise the observations they make in the domain of human relations – ‘the interactions and the relationships between children and trying to create harmony around that.’ These aspects of the children’s lives are more important to observe than practical physical skills, such as cutting and sticking. And besides, there is no real need to make specific observations of those skills ‘because we have them for three years and we know them really well; a lot of it is, we just know. I certainly wouldn’t want to be out in the playground with a little tick-board.’

Interpretations of assessment

When the Rowan Tree teachers are asked what assessment means to them, they give a straight answer: ‘It’s to do with making sure that the child is on track, and if not, using intervention when it is necessary.’ But it is clear they are not entirely comfortable with the word: ‘we do assess them, but we tend not to call it that.’ Their alternative terms are interesting: ‘I suppose we are trying to be more holistic’, comments one teacher, and her colleague follows up the thought: ‘It’s more of a characterisation than an assessment.’

Donatella endorses these views: she recognises that assessment is a way of finding out which children need some help. But she too knows there is more to it than that: ‘It is really a celebration of each individual life.’

Other teachers resemble these three in their alternative interpretations of the contentious word. They are especially careful about the element of judgement that seems to be implicit in the term. Francesca, for example, describes how she and her colleagues work with the early learning goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage:

> The early learning goals have informed our overall planning, and we use them in our profiles ... but they don’t inform our observations, they don’t get in the way of that. We make observations without those kind of judgements behind them.

The teachers are aware of the goals, certainly, but not as the focus of their observations: ‘we are observing the children.’

We have already seen how Francesca distinguishes between regularly observing children’s development and judging them against set criteria. Donatella makes a very similar distinction. She emphasises the holistic quality of the profiles that she and her colleagues write: ‘the child has been observed, and therefore can be profiled in all aspects of (its) individuality, mentally, emotionally, socially.’ Then she searches for English words to express her anxiety about assessment in mainstream settings, and comes up with the splendid phrase ‘Split the child in ticks.’
Karen has arrived at an interpretation of assessment that beautifully matches her understanding of the role of the teacher in the kindergarten. She has learned that the root of the word ‘assessment’ is the Latin word ‘assidere’ which means ‘to sit by’. She is delighted with this discovery and what it tells her about the practice of assessment:

You just sit by, to travel along with the child on the journey – all the children, sitting by them, with them on their journey, observing them, aware of where they are, but just taking note of that, rather than wanting them to be somewhere they are not.

**Purposes of assessment**

Jill is asked ‘What do you mean by the term ‘assessment’?’ Her answer is clear and emphatic. ‘Well, what I want to do is understand how it is to be that child.’ This bold aspiration is no idle dream; the teachers take a genuine, profound interest in each and every individual child; the outcome of this interest, and of the teacher’s inner work (see Chapter 4), which is an essential part of their practice, is a correspondingly profound understanding of ‘how it is to be that child.’

Jill goes on to quote from Rudolf Steiner, from a verse that says that you have to solve the child’s riddle ‘every day and every hour’. The interviewer picks up on this idea: ‘So assessment is all about solving the riddle then?’ Jill is uneasy with this formulation and finds a way of expressing her understanding that assessment is not a way of sorting children out, or solving all their problems. ‘Well, you don’t necessarily – yes, you solve the riddle, and then you find the next one. I’m not trying to – I’m trying to support the children in finding their own way to work with how they are.’

Carolyn explains most incisively what assessment is for, how it works and its relation to observation:

I would call assessment the analysis of what you have observed. So first would come the observation, when you really just try to observe the children in their normal activities, in their normal play, and glean as much as you can from that. Then I think assessment is then saying to yourself ‘So now what does this tell me about this child? What information have I gathered and what does it mean? And what am I going to do now with this information?’

The fruits of the teacher’s observation, analysis and reflection are, as it were, ploughed back into the nourishing ground of the kindergarten and the teacher’s interactions with individual children. An interesting light is thrown on Carolyn’s description by a question asked by one of the Rowan Tree teachers. ‘I have a question about all this recording that is done in mainstream schools ... does anyone actually read it? How is it used?’ As the discussion continues, the implications of this searching question are made explicit: worthwhile assessment must be useful – it must work in the interests of children.
The bigger picture

As the teachers mull over the interviewers’ questions about observation and assessment, it becomes clear that their answers are often related to another, unspoken, deeper question; they seem to understand that any question about the purposes and practices of assessment is also, in a sense, a question about the purpose and practice of education as a whole. Some of the time the teachers answer this unspoken question (‘What is the kindergarten for?’) as part of their explanation of their assessment practices.

In the interview with the Rowan Tree teachers, for example, they are discussing the challenge of working with the categories of the EYFS Profile. They see the problem in terms of curriculum, not the specific criteria: ‘It’s a different curriculum, we have aims and objectives which are different.’ They have already explained their priorities, earlier in the interview:

To give the children the opportunity to play as much as possible, that is our primary reason for being here, and to compensate for all the things that go on in a child’s life outside the kindergarten that are not so beneficial or healthy for children’s development – and that is largely allowing them to play, and not be hurried, and give them space and time to do all these things.

Karen’s view of the kindergarten, we have already seen, is as a place where ‘our children are playing, are doing, are living being a four year old, a five year old, a six year old, to the absolute brim’. She calls this place ‘an oasis’; there is no place for formal learning in the kindergarten: ‘it’s not right for the young child.’

Jill too is explicit about what she sees as ‘the big difference’ between mainstream and Steiner early childhood education: ‘We’re not filling everything up from the outer of the child, we’re leaving a space for the children to find things within themselves’. She describes the kindergarten as a place where children can build ‘a foundation for life.’

The kindergarten is a place for children to explore safely and make sense of things. And the kind of values you absorb in your first seven years, and the picture of the world that you gain, are going to be with you forever ... So you want to give the children a picture that the world is good and beautiful and true.

The teachers’ understanding of the ‘big picture’ is value-based; every aspect of their practice embodies the value they ascribe to beauty, truth, love, playing, living ‘to the absolute brim’. Their values run through everything that they do; the teachers do not, indeed cannot, lay them aside when they observe, analyse, reflect and put their observations to good use, in the practice of assessment.

The long view

In earlier chapters we have, more than once, drawn attention to the Steiner teachers’ tendency to take a long view of their children’s developmental journey. They prioritise the lives that children will lead in the future over their current achievements in the here
and now. For example, Jill talks about how she tries to teach practical ways of ‘taking care of the world’, not by burdening children with lessons on global warming, but by the little things she does herself: ‘We collect up our scraps, we put them in the bucket, we take them back to mother earth, we don’t leave the tap running...’ What is authentic practice for the adult, becomes a real way of life for the children; with this early experience behind them, they will be able, later in their lives, to face up to the problems of the planet, as Jill describes:

You look at little children out in the street, often their shoulders are already sagging, and that’s not what we want. We want upright children who can say, ‘Yes, this isn’t right, but I can do something about it’ – when they’re grown-ups, when they’re teenagers.

Donatella explains how the harmonious growth of the young child has long-term consequences. Well-being for the child of four, five or six years old, is also

... a gift for when the child is an adult, and also for the community around him. He will be able to participate more socially, and also have more inner wisdom and imagination to face this society, this life.

These teachers are expressing their deeply held belief that part of their task is preparing children to lead a good life; as Carolyn puts it, the teachers are ‘all the time illuminating for (the children) the true path forward ... trusting that they will walk that path.’

With these inspiring, long term aspirations for their children’s futures, it is no real surprise that the teachers find little to commend in the particularised categories of the EYFS Profile, or in the specific details of the early learning goals/scale points. Jill says of the profile: ‘It’s pretty stark, compared with the richness of my day-to-day work with the children.’ ‘Francesca calls the profile ‘quite basic’, without the depth of the profiles that she and her colleagues would want to pass on. She especially objects to the all-or-nothing judgements that it entails; ‘It’s all ‘Can they do this yet? Yes or No’, but there’s not an in between – just yes or no – which is quite shocking really’.

Karen is still more outspoken:

The disadvantages of the EYFS Profile are that it just narrows it down, it’s just so flat and so onerous and – where is the child? Where is the child in that? Whereas, in our education, the child is at the centre; everything comes out from the child. (With the profile) everything comes from this piece of paper, which asks ‘Is this box ticked? ‘Can I fit the child into that box?’

A summary: the underpinning framework of thought

When Steiner teachers set about the process of observing and understanding children’s learning (a phrase they prefer to ‘assessing children’s learning’), they draw on a shared framework of values and beliefs, a framework that became clearer and clearer as the analysis of the data proceeded.
At the centre of their thinking is a particular view of children, children as children, who need the time to be children, to play, to find out who they are, to become themselves, and to follow ‘the true path forward’. But the teachers never forget that these children will one day be teenagers and adults, who will be well-equipped to lead a good life, a life that will benefit everyone. Carolyn’s summary of this view is commanding:

If children grow up with that true picture of themselves, they will automatically go toward what is right for the whole. And then, therefore, they will become grown-up adults who will take things in a direction that is right for us all.

This is the same aspiration that Jill describes: ‘how we can make the world wonderful – each in our own individual way – everybody has a place in it’.

Another part of their shared understanding is a particular view of child development, of the changes that take place in children in the first seven years of life, the steady progression towards readiness for formal learning. Their understanding of ‘readiness for school’ is at odds with mainstream expectations of five and six year olds in Year One of the National Curriculum: early achievements in literacy and numeracy simply do not come into it. Their focus is on physical maturity in movement, balance and touch, and on the child’s growing awareness of his or her membership of a community, with responsibilities to each other, and a desire to contribute, not just to belong to the group.

The Steiner view of children’s development as a dynamic, largely spontaneous process does not exclude the teacher. Their shared understanding of the tasks of the teacher, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, has both outer and inner components. Their daily work of ‘being with the children’, ‘meeting the child’, observing who they are and who they are becoming, has its counterpart in their inner work. The teachers are committed to deep reflection about the meaning of what they have seen and heard, and about the best ways to support the children in their journeys towards the adult lives they will lead, ‘following the true path forward’.

All of these perspectives – on children, on children’s development, on the part that teachers play in that development – are deeply rooted in common assumptions about the values that they seek to transmit from generation to generation. The great ideals of love, beauty and truth, the aspiration to a good life, are always present in the Steiner teachers’ thinking, sometimes just below the surface of their speech, sometimes clearly articulated. We have given many examples of the ways in which Steiner teachers do not preach their values, but live them out, day by day, season by season, exemplifying particular ways of being in the world, trusting that children will follow these ways with all their three-fold powers of willing, feeling and thinking.

If we want to understand how, in Steiner kindergartens, the process of assessment works, or more importantly, how it works for children, we cannot simply document and examine the teachers’ techniques and procedures. We need to understand the teachers’ underpinning insights, theories, assumptions, values and beliefs. This report has been written to help educators of all kinds, from outside the Steiner community, to arrive at such an understanding.
Kindergarten teacher:

The Steiner kindergarten teacher leads by example. Her teaching happens indirectly; she holds back from giving direct instruction but leads out, in the Latin sense of 'educare'. Her intention is to be worthy of the child's imitation. She is conscious that whatever she does and says will be imitated and she takes that responsibility very seriously. [1]

At some point during the session, she tells a story and choreographs the songs and movements at ring-time; she also leads an activity, such as baking and painting, but even during these more formal activities she avoids giving direct instruction.

... In the early school years the teacher is the representative of life itself ... Children meet life through the teacher. The teacher stands before the child as, later, life stands there. Life must be concentrated in the teacher ... an intense interest in life must imbue the teachers.


[1] We have used the pronoun ‘she’ in this description, but acknowledge, respectfully, that there are male kindergarten teachers, although none of them are included in the small sample of teachers who contributed to this enquiry.

Imagination:

The child's imagination is cherished and enlivened by fairy tales and other stories, songs and games. Free, child-directed play forms a major part of every session. Teachers support but do not impose themselves upon the child's imaginative sphere - unless invited, or sometimes where an intervention is necessary. Adults consciously engage in physical tasks, such as chopping vegetables for communal soup, or polishing furniture. An ethos of concentrated activity is created, within which the child's sustained, imaginative play can flourish. Both parties are busy with their own 'work', which sometimes quite naturally overlaps. Teachers observe play as they carry out their tasks and are conscious of, and sensitive to, the imaginative themes being enacted.

Children need truths they can embrace with heart and soul, so that they need not be slaves to what occurs in the outer world. This is why you should tell fairy tales and myths that go into the soul. In this way you can create inner truths that free the soul.

**Imaginative play:**

Free play initiated entirely by the children, which is supported, but not directed by the teachers.

*A homemade doll ... stirs the imagination ... and produces a feeling of well being in the child. Notice how such a child plays in a lively and interested way, throwing body and soul into what the imagination conjures up, while the child with the perfect doll, just sits, unexcited and unamused. [He] has no possibility to add anything through imagination.*

Steiner (ibid) p.57

**Threefold nature of human beings:**

**Willing:** the predominant force in the young child; activity, engagement, drive (the will to walk for example); perseverance, doing, the ability to hold back and delay gratification – leading to purposeful self-directed activity.

**Feeling:** a journey from the bodily feelings of hunger and warmth to empathy and compassion; education to develop the life of feeling into a social force - leading to sensitivity of feeling for others.

**Thinking:** the development of the life of thought from simple to complex ideas; connected with memory and language – leading to clear cognitive faculties.

... The human being in our care ... [should be helped to attain] the fullest clarity of thought, the most loving deepening of feeling, and the greatest possible energy and capacity of will.

FURTHER READING

Burnett, J. ‘A pleasurable path to literacy. Can Steiner contribute to the literacy debate?’ *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 7 (3) 321-31


Nicol, J. (2007) *Bringing the Steiner Approach to your Early Years Practice* Abingdon: Routledge (A David Fulton Book)


Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship website: [http://www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk](http://www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk)
APPENDIX

What underpins the Steiner teacher’s approach to observation and assessment?

TEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The interview is to be conducted after a morning’s observation in the kindergarten. The observer/interviewer selects an incident from the observation to discuss with the teacher as the first step in the interview.

1. **Please could you help me to understand what you feel are the most important points to notice in this incident.**

2. **How has working with the Early Learning Goals affected your aims?**

   Prompt: What are your principal aims/goals for the children in your care as a Steiner Early Years teacher?

3. **Can you give an example of how and why you might carry out individual child observation in the Steiner Kindergarten, particularly in relation to your older (five/six year old) children?**

   Prompt: What are the principles that underpin your observation of children?

4. **What do you understand by assessment?**

   Prompts: What is assessment for in a Steiner setting? What does assessment do in a Steiner KG setting? [Interviewer to clarify the difference between purposes of assessment and outcomes of assessment, the former being well-intentioned and the latter sometimes being unexpected.]

5. **How would you describe your role as a Steiner teacher in the child’s developmental process?**

   Prompts: How would you summarise the key elements of your practice? What would you say is the most important difference between mainstream and Steiner Early Years practice?

6. **How is children’s imaginative play supported in the kindergarten?**

   Prompts: How does the kindergarten environment support imaginative play? What are the adults’ roles in the free play period?
7. **Why is so much importance placed on ‘protecting’ the child in the Steiner environment?**

Prompts: The children appear to move between worlds when they attend the Steiner Kindergarten. How do you think they make sense of this? How do they experience the differences between these worlds?

8. **Can you describe how you might carry out ‘Inner Work’ in your everyday practice?**

Prompt: How important is the ‘Inner Work’ of the teacher to effective Steiner Early Years practice?

9. **What is the purpose of Child Study in Steiner education?**

Prompts: What does the process entail? How is the child seen to benefit from Child Study?

10. **What networks of support do you draw on and share your thinking about practice with?**

Prompts: Do you collaborate with others within and beyond the school or kindergarten? What is the nature of those links?

11. **As you know, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is going to remain a statutory requirement as far as we can see. How do you think this measure compares to what Steiner educators would do for the 'school readiness check'?**

Prompt: What are the main advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches?

12. **Is there anything else you think it is important for us to know about Steiner kindergarten practice, especially in relation to children of five and six years old who would otherwise be in primary school?**