

*Year 1 ASEYS 2001/2002 – Semester One  
Assessment 2 (19<sup>th</sup> October 2001)*

**ROUDOLF STEINER'S IDEAS ON THE EARLY YEARS ENVIRONMENT**

To understand the modern concept of the early years environment it is essential to be aware of the historical development of this concept. No one concerned with the problems of creating the right educational environment can afford to ignore the effect, which an Austro-Hungarian philosopher and practitioner, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), have had on the current understanding of the idea.

Steiner is most widely known for his innovative approach to children's mental, physical and emotional development and as the founder of the Waldorf Schools based on the belief that creative activities are psychologically valuable for educational purposes. The first Waldorf School was opened in Germany in 1919 to serve the needs of Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory workers' children. Considered revolutionary at the time, the methods have proved themselves to be thoroughly practical and effective.

Steiner developed a totally new conception of educational environment where a child is recognized as a being of **body, soul and spirit**, and consequently environmental scheme aimed to attend to all three. Rudolf Steiner believed that children should be given a complete education and not simply some kind of training, which meant that the education was to help each person to find his/her right space in life and to fulfil a personal destiny, and one of the main factors in achieving this aim was creating the right environment. According to Steiner, "not until the age of nine or ten does the child really learn to distinguish himself from his environment" (R.Steiner, 1974, p.44), that's why in the Waldorf Schools the role of the environment in the early years education becomes paramount.

Once we realize how extremely sensitive to **the influences of their surroundings** young children are, then the role of primary education also becomes clear: it has to serve as a protector and a healer so that human beings shall not grow up empty of soul and weak in spirit. (L.Francis Edmunds, 1962, p.13)

The Waldorf School builds its environment mainly around the notion that the earth is the children's first home. Before a child reaches into the sophistications of modern life, the School gives the children a firm foothold in the natural world and opportunity for observation.

In all crafts and handwork the children are provided with natural materials and encouraged to experiment with colour, imagery and form. There is a natural flow of clear, bright colour both in decorating and in the displays of children's work.

Toys and furnishings are also carefully chosen from natural materials and simple handmade items to allow freedom of imagination and a home-like atmosphere. Playing with these toys and with gifts from nature, such as shells, stones and wood, the children strengthen their creativity and their connection to the earth: a beautiful stone can awaken the child's own observation and awareness, a single piece of driftwood can become a castle wall, a hedge, a snake, a tree, a person.

The objects of play are as simple as possible, so that the child can apply to them his own powers of fantasy.

A rough and ready doll made of a piece of material or even out of a table napkin calls out these fantasy forces, for to the little child everything is “alive”; a “perfect” doll may seem to satisfy but in the end it cloy – it leaves no room for the imagination and therefore works against the original and spontaneous forces of childhood. (L. Francis Edmunds, 1962, p. 23)

The observation of nature is integral to the teaching of many aspects of the curriculum, so a corner of each classroom is generally devoted to a nature table reflecting the season, a festival or an aspect of the main lesson: clay sculptures of mythological and historical figures, chalk drawings of the body's internal organs, geometric pattern drawings, wooden flutes and hand-knitted animals.

Substance, colour, texture as well as the form, tone and light combine together to produce nuances that sometimes cannot be articulated verbally.

Respect for the material which nature provided often results in a contemplative mood which surrounds the work produced. We experience the wood, the glass, the pigment, they, having been taken seriously, can speak to us and are not overpowered by the creativity and wilfulness of the artist. (R. Lissau, 1987, p. 115)

The teachers use stories, songs and poems that accompany the rhythm of the seasons and nature. Children make their own textbooks, based on discussions between teacher and students. By participating in meaningful tasks, such as baking, gardening, washing, and building, the children learn to work with joy and devotion to others, and to their environment.

In the Waldorf School children feel themselves at home and they learn better in a warm and cosy atmosphere of colour, movement, repetition, imitation and imagery: “Through imitation of what is beautiful and meaningful a child will learn purpose and initiative.” (R. Steiner, 1971, p.26)

R.Steiner's ideas on the early years environment are still widely used all over the world. My own teaching experience showed me that the environment really matters in the respect of providing the children with the exciting and enjoyable educational process. The point that makes Steiner's method particularly appealing to me is in its power to bring to the children's souls a sense of wonder, which makes the imagination and creativity of the young child to flourish. Today this aspect is becoming vital for the schools where formal education is rapidly taking over. While observing the literacy lesson in year two (school attachment), the deficient classroom atmosphere didn't slip my attention: there were no children's works posted around the classroom, but there were huge prescriptions of the national curriculum. The walls were covered with uninspiring pictures illustrating numbers and the examples of sounds “ng”, “ch”, “bl”. No colour, no space, no exciting use of shape or texture. It is hard to believe that a child can develop any creativity and imagination in such “dry” environment.

However, in some points Steiner's approach seems to me too spiritual, too mystical. Why can't we just offer our children the best we have in nature, science and art without connecting everything with “cosmic spirituality”. Instead of giving such prominence to spiritual aspect of environment I would rather pay more attention to developing the teacher's knowledge and skills in presenting academic subjects in a lively, artistic way bringing warmth, enthusiasm and a deep commitment to their work.

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