

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: Inspiring innovative and creative early childhood practice



This exciting early childhood conference was held at the beginning of October at Michael Hall School in Forest Row. It was organised by Janni Nicol and Sam Greshoff from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and was attended by around 200 people, including many of the IASWECE council members - who came together to celebrate not only Waldorf 100, but to meet and hear different thoughts with one aim, to protect childhood. At this time in the UK and around the world children need advocates to speak up for their right to a healthy childhood and for age appropriate care and education. Early Childhood practitioners are passionate advocates for children and families within schools and settings, working with parents, local authorities, other professionals and government agencies. Working together we are able to develop a more effective and powerful voice that can

influence policy makers.

At this moment, we are celebrating 100 years of Steiner Waldorf education and this conference provided a wonderful opportunity to come together with early childhood colleagues from different disciplines and approaches to explore ideas such as play, school starting age, current research and digital technology. Our hope is that by working together we can develop innovative practice that truly meets the needs of young children now and in the future.

The facilitator, **Christopher Clouder** started by reading the poem by Kahlil Gibran: 'On Children' which set the mood for the day – '*Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself...*'

Each speaker had half an hour, and in this time gave some powerful messages:



Wendy Ellyatt (Flourish Project/The Save Childhood Movement) gave the first lecture. ***The Freedom to be my Self: Creating the Foundations for Flourishing Lives.***

Wendy's work on the *Flourish Project* introduces a new 'Ecology of Wellbeing' that puts lives of meaning, purpose and value back at the core and the natural, healthy development of young children as fundamental to the process. She spoke about the 7 key needs for the child, security, relationship, independence, engagement, fulfilment, contribution, growth. The ecology of well-being can be mapped against these. Compassionate understanding is crucial, not just for the child, family and community, but they are also signing up 'compassionate cities' to work with.

Although there are some good examples globally, the UK, especially England, has terrible policies for children, focusing strongly on academic achievement. She asked; what would make a real difference in this country? What do Montessori and Steiner add to the 7 key areas? www.flourishproject.net, www.savechildhood.net, www.nationalchildrensdayuk.com

Madeleine Holt (More than a Score): ***SATs, Stress and Scientism: why children are More than a Score***

School is a time for self-discovery, building confidence and nourishing potential. But primary school children in England are being let down by a system that cares more about measurement than their education. Our system is obsessed with league tables, turning children into data points and denying them a broad, stimulating education at key stages in their development. Testing (5 tests before 11, starting at 4 years old, puts an unnecessary burden on children, parents and teachers alike.



Parents and professionals are starting to collaborate and take action to protect children from unnecessary testing. There are 19 organisations combining on this topic. Currently there is multiple testing of young

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children and few examples of good education in the UK. All parties, except the conservatives, are opposed to SATs and a book is in process on the alternatives for SATs. Since 2016, SATS results have plateaued with a steady proportion of children 'failing'. Teaching to the test has brought a certain level of 'success' in SATs terms, but politicians cannot explain why the improvement is not continuing.

<https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/>



Sue Palmer: *Upstart: why the under-sevens need a kindergarten stage*

The Upstart Scotland campaign for a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage (3-7 years) was launched in 2016. Researching her book *'Toxic Childhood'* (2006) transformed her into a passionate advocate for play-based kindergarten education for the under-sevens.

<https://www.upstart.scot/>

Play is disappearing from children's lives. How can we put it back? Kindergartens provide a place that acknowledges the well-being of the young child and the value of play. UNESCO defines early childhood as up to the age of 8 years old. This time is not just about preparing for school but has its own value. The kindergarten ethos has an emphasis on child development, being outdoors, and informal, self-directed play. Both the disposition to learn and a child's resilience are undermined by 'schoolification'. As John Bowlby says, 'Life is best organised as a series of daring ventures from a secure base'.

Christopher: In the confusion which afflicts the world today, there is much disrespect. Pablo Casals wrote: *'Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must work, we must all work, to make the world worthy of its children.'*



Philipp Reubke (IASWECE, International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education) spoke about ***Free play - the healthy way of learning for children before six***

More and more, researchers agree that self-initiated play makes an important contribution to the learning outcomes for young children. Many government officials and parents continue to think that the only way of efficient learning is academic, formal learning conducted by adults. It has been wonderful to hear about these groups active in the UK to support the young child and this is not reflected in France. It is a paradox that there is all this political activism for play in the UK, but the politicians will not listen. The evidence is there and has been understood by some for hundreds of years. Rousseau argued that the child can show us what it is to be human, not vice versa. Froebel, Steiner, Montessori and others followed on from this.

Children are always interesting in what is *becoming*, and play is full of becoming situations. This thought provides the background to our work with children both on and inner and outer level. If you want to change the world, you must let the children play!

Christopher then read *The Nurse's Song* by William Blake, all about the play of childhood.



Barbara Isaacs (Montessori Global Ambassador, Montessori St Nicholas): *Montessori education - promoting children's sense of well-being, belonging and resilience*

Traditionally the UK has accepted diversity. Where else would you find a school like Summerhill? But now we must fight to maintain this. Montessori is celebrating 100 years of training teachers in the UK. We share the celebration of the young child as a unique force. This is something that we all need to articulate in ways that everyone can understand. Sometimes we are defending ourselves rather than sharing our joy in our practice.

Maria Montessori said that early childhood is a more significant time than university and a responsibility of society. Respect for the child grows out of diligent observation. We need to think about the consequences of our own actions for the child's development of self-regulation. Our wish for the child is to enjoy life and to know that you are loved. Kindergarten provides the steps towards living outside your immediate family and small families today make this more important not less. Our task is to support children today to build up physical, emotional and intellectual autonomy. We all need resilience to survive and our question is; what can we do to help the child towards this?

Christopher: it is a paradox for us that we are creating the future, but we do not know what it will be. We can all see what is wrong with the world, the social injustice and this awareness creates powerlessness in our souls. We urgently need to find new ways of embracing the world and our fellow human beings.

Clara Aerts (International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education): *Early childhood as a cradle for a humane future*

Despite the dazzling possibilities new technology seem to offer, the social and ecological challenges we are facing are not adequately met with sustainable answers. Where does it stumble and fall? Artificial intelligence is on its way to take over from human intelligent thinking. But at what cost? What is the added human value to find answers for a future that is unknown? What are the capacities that are needed to face this 'new world' and how can they be developed?



Perhaps questions are more important than answers. Images are timeless and powerful, and they can evolve over time. As artificial intelligence expands, remember the heart: what is the potential of the pause between expansion and contraction?

We practice being present to create a held space for the child. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing china with golden lacquer (see last photo). The philosophy behind this values and cherishes the imperfect, the weathered and the perishable. How can we show children how valuable this part of life is? It is an aspect which demonstrates what is unique about being human and beyond AI. We have a prophetic pedagogy based on our power to develop for the human future through time. www.iaswece.org



During the breaks, we met, mingled, shared and enjoyed the many stalls, books and sale items.



After tea, the conference ended with a **Panel discussion** and question and answer session.

The subjects ranged from thoughts about **nursery for children under 3**. The overview is that only the very best care is a positive experience for the very young child, and it must not be institutionalised. How could we help parents cherish this time? Work is needed with young people long before

they become parents, and governments need to support parents at home.

How can we connect with the grandparent generation? There is awareness, firstly of how much childcare is done by grandparents and secondly of how important intergenerational projects are, research shows how being with children improves the symptoms of dementia.

It is powerful to be together, to hear and feel now much we have a common cause. What can we do as activists? Keep up with the websites given in the programme and sign up for updates and newsletters to find information of what you can do. Invite people in the public eye to visit your setting: children can speak powerfully for themselves. Develop relationships with your local community, find commonalities, and keep talking to everyone about what a good education could be.

Christopher: Rudolf Steiner gave two invigorating precepts: be devoted to what you are doing and be interested in what others are doing. We need to have patience in our work, for example work with MEPs has taken many years but is becoming stronger. The Waldorf movement should be part of fighting for pluralism. Christopher then ended with the poem *The Divine Image* by William Blake.



Since the conference, colleagues have fed back that they feel heartened, supported, enlightened and encouraged to engage with outside organisations. They were impressed with the richness brought by the like-minded presenters, and the hard and dedicated work by them and their organisations on behalf of children both in the UK and in the world. The attempt to change the view of society in order to protect childhood resonated with Rudolf Steiner's work on the threefold social order and the intention of Steiner Waldorf education.

Our grateful thanks go to all the speakers, the participants, Jill Taplin and SWEYG members, IASWECE, Kath Bransby, friends and colleagues, and in particular the kindergarten teachers from Michael Hall who gave so generously of their time and shared their school and kindergartens with us.

Janni Nicol and Sam Greshoff

Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship Early Childhood Co-ordinators.



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