Reclaim Early Childhood
by Sebastian and Tamara Suggate
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"No education approach has the right to rest on its laurels, clothed in a mantel of self-congratulation and dogma, but through its deeds it must prove itself again and again, one child at a time..."

While I was casting about my university faculty for someone to supervise my dissertation on Steiner-Waldorf education, I spoke to a member of staff who claimed to disapprove on principle of Waldorf Schools on the grounds that they were "Christian". I was reminded of this conversation on reading the new book by Sebastian and Tamara Suggate, Reclaim Early Childhood: The Philosophy, Psychology and Practice of Steiner-Waldorf Early Years Education. The fact that a lecturer specialising in progressive education could have such a simplistic understanding of Steiner Education shows why the Suggates' contribution is so needed.

It is never easy to write about anthroposophy in an accessible way. The authors attempt to "demystify" the philosophy of Steiner Early Years Education and explain its teaching and learning practices in the light of other contemporary educational theories and systems. Questions about the place of spirituality, religion and overarching aims in modern education are but a few of the many challenging themes that are tackled head on. Embarking on this journey one must necessarily start at the beginning, with Steiner himself and the foundations of his worldview. This is where there is a danger of getting bogged down in Steiner's unique but complex blend of Platonic idealism, Aristotelian empiricism and Goethean phenomenology. The book, however, achieves an admirable balance between depth and succinctness, discussing Steiner's threefold understanding of the human being, the twelve senses and his theory of child development in a style that is scholarly yet readable.

In covering this background the authors communicate not only the core elements of anthroposophy but why a solid, integrated and consistent philosophy of education in itself is important today. We have seen what happens when education systems lurch from one reform to another in response to rapidly changing political and economic priorities. Educators are left scrambling to keep up as both learning models and teaching practices are constantly re-defined in accordance with the latest targets or technologies. In all this the children who are supposed to be at the heart of education tend to disappear from view. The essence of Steiner's phenomenological approach was to regain a clear view - through sensitive and sympathetic observation - of the individual child. The intention was to ensure that the reality of the child and childhood experiences form the basis of teaching methods, instead of abstract ideas about children's capacities in general or what they ought to achieve along a pre-determined schedule. The authors point out that this focus on the needs and temperament of the child is crucial if education is going to be more than a narrow training for the labour market. If not to serve purely economic interests, what then is the purpose of education from a Steiner-Waldorf perspective? It is, in the author's words, "to facilitate the development of freehood". The term "freehood" is used to distinguish Steiner's concept of freedom, as something that can only be realised by each individual inwardly, from the more common interpretation of freedom as an absence of

external control or constraints. Freehood is about "learning to develop the capacity to act freely". The book shows how this distinction at a conceptual level has significant implications for teaching at a practical level. For instance, if a child is not given adequate opportunity and encouragement to strengthen his or her will at an early age, a long-term consequence might be a tendency to self-gratification, compulsive or even addictive behaviour, which one might say is the epitome of a loss of free will. As such, "freehood is compromised by freedom". The discussion of freedom and will are but one example of where the authors succeed in clearly expressing the relationship between philosophical foundations, guiding principles and the day-to-day practices that one might encounter in a Steiner-Waldorf setting.

Turning to those settings, the authors go on to describe the key characteristics of Waldorf kindergartens in terms of the typical environment, forms of social interaction; types of activity and play, materials and toys and the common daily, weekly and yearly rhythms. This picture includes an international perspective to give an idea of how the Waldorf approach has been adapted to, or incorporated within, different cultural and religious traditions. The authors also offer a brief but interesting comparison of Waldorf kindergartens with other settings, both alternative and State institutions. The former is useful in that while other alternatives to the mainstream, such as those inspired by Maria Montessori, do often share certain similarities with Waldorf kindergartens, there are important differences which are not always well understood. Regarding the latter, what most obviously sets Waldorf kindergartens apart from State-run early learning centres is the lack of emphasis on formal academic instruction and standardised assessment.

The final chapter of the book is dedicated to addressing a number of challenges facing Steiner education, both those arising from within the movement and those resulting from external pressures and questions. The authors acknowledge that some criticisms are valid while others are due largely to ongoing misconceptions about what Steiner education is really all about. Where particular kindergartens or schools have become insular or overly dogmatic in their attitudes, perhaps rejecting mainstream culture to the point of causing tensions with parents or local authorities, the authors point to Steiner's original appeal to teachers to be outward looking and responsive to changing times and social circumstances. Similarly, conscious engagement, clear communication and transparency are the key to enhancing public understanding of the aims of Steiner education and dispelling certain illusions or fears that take hold in the public imagination.

One such fear, as indicated at the beginning of this piece, is that given Steiner's spiritual understanding of the human being Waldorf schools will be overtly religious or somehow indoctrinating. The authors suggest it is difficult to see how a daily routine of imaginative play, walking in nature, singing, crafts, baking and other practical tasks could be indoctrinating. If concerns relate to the celebration of Christian festivals, this is likewise no more indoctrinating than other public institutions which follow the Christian calendar and observe its special occasions and rituals. Anthroposophy, as a belief system or worldview, is explicitly not taught or mentioned to children in these settings, but rather informs teachers' own personal and/or professional development.

A further challenge is the perception that Steiner settings will not adequately prepare children for school or enable them to learn the academic and technical skills demanded in today's society. Again, the book makes clear that it is not a question of not teaching literacy, numeracy and information technology but a question of when and how. The early years are considered the time for laying foundations for later academic development. The authors point to growing evidence which supports the notion that working with rather than against the young child's natural inclinations is not only more enjoyable for them but more effective in the long-term. Children are prepared for literacy, for instance, by exposure to a rich and varied language through story-telling and fairy tales, song and theatre. Increasingly connections are being shown to exist between fine motor skills, developed through a child's natural movement in dance and play, and later abilities in writing and maths. Furthermore, international comparisons are showing that early achievements in academic skills not only do not last into later school years, but may come at a cost in other areas such as the child's social, behavioural, physical or emotional development.

The Suggates state that their book is "as much a defence of childhood as it is an advocacy of Steiner education". This is important, as it indicates that it is the child who must be kept in focus at all times and not a system. Their aim is to deepen understanding as well as stimulate thought and they present Steiner-Waldorf not as a definitive solution but as a way forward, so long as it remains "open and self-critical". Their multi- disciplinary approach to the material is helpful in that it demonstrates how many of Steiner's methods and insights have become 'evidenced' by conventional science. Indeed, some principles that have long been part of Waldorf kindergartens, such as the value of creativity, aesthetics and movement, are now widely recognised and promoted by mainstream experts. (See, for instance, Ken Robinson's Out of Our Minds: The Power of Being Creative). Others, such as the significance of imitation in early learning, are wholly under-appreciated, which is precisely why a book that makes them explicit is so welcome.

Beyond that, if one message can and ought to be taken from this book it is that for all the apparent strangeness of Steiner's philosophy and distinctness of Waldorf practices, the ethos of Waldorf education is not radically divergent from mainstream western liberal democratic values. Its ethos is freedom, a freedom which combines personal independence with social responsibility. I doubt even my would-be tutor could disapprove of that.

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