

EDUCATION AND HEALTH - Can educational practices foster physical, psychological and social health?

Friday 6 May 2011 in Paris

Organised by ECSWE with the support of the Jean Monnet Programme of the European Union and in collaboration with the Fédération des écoles Steiner Waldorf en France.

During this Conference we explored the pedagogical evolution necessary to respond to the change in the physical and mental well-being of children. Parents and teachers are increasingly becoming confronted with the symptoms of stress in children and the recent OECD report *'Improving Health and Social Cohesion through Education'* underlines the necessity to address important issues such as health and engaging with social and civil society. The report emphasizes the fundamental role of education in preventative public health. Therefore we looked at how education can develop resilience – can it teach ways to overcome fears and failures? Can education contribute to physical psychological and social health by a holistic and integrated approach?

Scrabble players take note: the words *'ethnopsychiatry'*, *'chronobiology'*, *'spasmophilia'*, *'idiopathic'* and *'psychoanthropology'* offer rich rewards, at least if you can get them to fit on the board! In a hot and dusty Paris at the start of May all these words and their related contexts, backgrounds and practitioner/experts took centre stage at a one day conference organized jointly by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education and the French Federation of Steiner-Waldorf schools. The conference was far more than a parade of impressive words and devoted academics, it was an opportunity to witness a distinctively French approach to understanding the human being and addressing the central issue: what is the relationship between education and health? In many ways the connection should be self-evident: both are related to human well-being and potential; yet the professional crossover between the two worlds has often been limited. Our coming together acknowledged the growing need for integration of the two areas: health and education are two sides of the same coin.

Christopher Clouder of ECSWE opened the conference by reminding us of the work that has



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

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been done to recognise the concept of *'resilience'* and ways in which it can be cultivated. From what the Americans call *'turn-around'* teachers, through the *'dandelion children'* who flower through the rubble of their damaged lives, via the *'The Song Room'* work in Australia with traumatized and disadvantaged children, we heard that having high expectations of such children, coupled with opportunities for their active involvement, especially in caring for others fostered a resilience that belied the abused and confused backgrounds from which many of them came.

Yvan Touitou - Professor from the French Commission for *'Academic rhythms'* (*les rythmes scolaires*) made clear the frustrations of trying to foster well-being and health in French school children give the a-rhythmic nature of their lives. The *'inner time'* that all of us observe is severely disrupted by many aspects of the French school week, not least the school-free Wednesday. Pressures from tourism, agriculture and trade unions make it almost impossible to negotiate any improvement for French scholars who are, in a sense, permanently *'jet-lagged'*.

Francoise Lecuyer, an eminent school psychologist picked up the theme of well-being and the need to highlight the positive in the 'problematic' pupil, rather than only emphasising the dysfunctional. At the same time there is a need to create a community of people who are going to witness and observe all aspects of the child's life, including the cultural context.

Henri Dahan, representing the Fédération des écoles Steiner Waldorf in France talked about the invasive role that assessment and testing can have on child development. Conventional evaluation fails to highlight the positive aspects of the child and instead focuses on the gaps, deficits and shortcomings. So many valuable educational activities, such as group work, cannot be assessed in a conventional way and are at risk of not being used as a consequence. In addition the morality of testing, or at least the impact it can have on our scholars is a cause for alarm: 'if you want to win, cheat' is the cynical view that can prevail in an atmosphere of competitive evaluation. There are alternatives including formative assessment and the portfolio approach, either would enable a shift from 'busy time' to 'sacramental time', from the urgent to the essential. Celine Gaillard, also of the French Fédération gave an over-view of Steiner education in the host nation. She spoke of the breathing that is central to our pedagogy and how the flux between outer and inner is essential to create a sacred space.

Education academic Fadila Dib went beyond assessment to labelling, what purpose does it play? Its advantages and disadvantages are familiar to many, but in multi-cultural France it is becoming an increasingly complex issue. She gave the example of a boy who's apparent 'dyspraxia' may have had as much to do with his cultural background as with any genuine physical difficulty. In addition an increasing number of problems presented by school children are idiopathic, of unknown medical origin, they simply cannot be labelled.

Eminent academic Jean-Louis Le Grand picked up on Henri Dahan's theme: there are many more ways to learn (and assess learning) than the formal and summative. In French 'training' is 'formation': giving form; it is what is done to cheese to force it into shape! Is this what training has become, a method of making people fit? Alternatives include

apprenticeships, learning through sharing, talking, story-telling, and self-constructed pathways. It also necessary to acknowledge the reversal of roles: the patient helps to train the doctor, the pupil helps to train the teacher. There are so many ways in which life-long learning can happen across a broad spectrum of human activities, and not just in schools and colleges.

Arnaud Tiercelin, Director of the Education Sector of La Ligue de l'Enseignement, whose premises were hosting the conference and many of the delegates, gave an historical perspective of his organization and its link, via humanism, to pluralism. Concerns over the impact of the 'society of the four screens' (TV, computer, DVD and cinema) were placed alongside commitment to the Republican ideal of equality of access. A central dilemma in modern life is that the 'fairness' of formal learning can be managed but the 'unfairness' of informal learning, meaning primarily family and community, is largely beyond the remit of educators. In the Q and A follow-up it became clear that many of the perceived differences between 'La Ligue' and the French Steiner-Waldorf schools' movement were based on misconceptions.

In conclusion Christopher Clouder presented the picture of people 'gathering around the cradle'. As health or education practitioners but also as human beings we do exactly that when we try and protect the future by serving the present. It is a difficult gesture to hold in the midst of cultural, social, political and individual fragmentation, but it is in that diversity that we find ourselves and our humanity.

Excellently hosted by Babeth Johnson and the French Federation, this conference and its wide array of speakers certainly allowed us all to 'gather around the cradle'. From the range of perspectives came a common experience of something that lived beyond the formal, the measurable and the familiar. Forgetting ourselves as health or educational practitioners, we were put in touch with that which is common to both professions: commitment and compassion born out of deep interest in our fellow human being.

Alan Swindell - Member of the Executive Group, Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship

WOW-Day - Shaping the world we would like to live in.

The idea of a higher profile WOW-Day campaign was born three years ago during a school visit in Germany. A high school student asked me why the WOW-Day could not be a common day for all instead of isolated schools doing isolated activities. Soon it became a big project and started to achieve results and motivate more and more schools.

As a former Waldorf student I dream of a world where many children can have the privilege that I experienced in a Waldorf school. I work at the Berlin office of the Friends of Waldorf Education since 2008 and I can say that this is a daily experience of fulfilling my ideal: doing something concrete to change the world.

The aim of the Friends of Waldorf Education (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiner e.V.) is fostering Waldorf pedagogy worldwide by giving financial support but also through counselling and development aid. Through public relations and fundraising, I represent the Friends of Waldorf Education within the German and European Waldorf movement, creating awareness of the current situation of Waldorf education worldwide and also of our work. We aim to create awareness about the needs of developing Waldorf schools around the world and we ensure 100% of the donations are passed on to the initiatives. This is only possible due to the support of all member schools, especially the German Waldorf schools, and our friends who finance our work sharing with us the vision of a world in which children can learn out of love and to shape the future of our society in a more human way. The WOW-Day is a campaign in which students from Waldorf schools all over Europe raise money doing many activities such as volunteering, taking on one day jobs, organizing sponsored walks, making and selling crafts, putting on circus performances in the pedestrian zone or other activities, in order to support disadvantaged children in Waldorf initiatives around the world. Each year, students of all grades, as well as teachers and parents, work together to organise the WOW-Day as a curricular activity, devoting one day of school to it.

Founded in 1994, WOW-Day started in a meeting of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education

in Bologna. In this meeting, the Norwegian Waldorf teacher, Astrid Bjønness, reported on the "Operasjon Dagsverk" tradition. On this day the students from all Norwegian high schools earn money for charity. The Colleagues at the meeting were very enthusiastic and Astrid and representatives from de Freunde were given the task straight away of organizing a campaign for the European Waldorf schools and a small ECSWE/DF working group was formed. Since then, the Friends of Waldorf Education have been promoting and administering WOW-Day, choosing the projects and ensuring that the money raised by the children is passed on to Waldorf initiatives in need. The high level of cooperation between de Freunde, ECSWE and the Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen contributes to the success of the campaign.



**Educare Centre, Cape Town, South Africa
Freunde der Erziehungskunst**

In the townships of Cape Town every day about 50 Educare Centres open their doors and dedicated women, the mothers, as they are called, collect the children from the streets, and give them space to play and learn in a world without drugs, crime and violence. WOW-Day revenues allow more teachers' training.

In the first years an average of 30 Waldorf Schools Europe-wide participated at WOW-Day. Through the efforts of these committed Waldorf students and their teachers a substantial amount of money was raised each year and later on, WOW-Day became a Europe-wide event.

Since the beginning of the campaign, Waldorf students from all over Europe have raised about 1.8

million Euros for Waldorf projects and other projects in the realm of education all over the world. In many countries Waldorf schools, Waldorf kindergartens and curative education institutions are not supported by the government. Many struggle to survive from day to day, while trying to provide an education accessible to children that is in accordance with human dignity. This often means providing them with a warm meal!



School on the Road, Pro Humanas, Chincha, Peru

Due to my concentration over the past two years the WOW-Day campaigns have been very successful and are constantly growing. In 2010 students from 150 Waldorf schools from 15 countries raised more than €315,000 through their commitment, from which more than 40 initiatives benefited in over 20 countries. This help ensures that schools, kindergartens and social projects receive vital aid, enable children in Kenya to attend school, provide opportunities in the favelas in Brazil, and allow people with disabilities in Georgia to live a dignified life. The gifted money is managed by the Friends of Waldorf Education and they pass 100% of the funds on to the projects all over the world.

The next European WOW-Day campaign will take place on 29 September 2011 and it will be on a much wider European scale than hitherto with the involvement of the national federations of ECSWE. Furthermore it is part of this year's events for the 150th Anniversary of Rudolf Steiner, as well as the European Year of Volunteering. Applications are open to all students from grades 1 to 13. All Waldorf schools in Europe will make a difference, joining

forces in all cardinal points to raise money to support Waldorf and other educational initiatives around the globe.

The WOW-Day is a powerful way to put ideals in practice and enable children and students to have a commitment to social development in a pedagogical meaningful way. WOW-Day is a vehicle to enable them to put their ideals into practice and fulfil their need and expectation to make a difference and help others. To take initiative and to do something good for the world gives the students an experience of autonomy, assuming responsibility and having an active commitment to the social development in the world, which is essential in preparing for their adult life as active and participative citizens. Furthermore it fosters in a concrete way their sense of the importance and satisfaction that voluntary effort to help others can bring.

As a sign of our times WOW-Day wants to widen the sight of the pupils across the world, to enable them to have a deep experience, that goes beyond school and has a great importance for life as well. WOW-Day wants to contribute to a new way of dealing with social resources, for a different world.

Waldorf schools in Europe! Everybody on board? Please join us on 29 September this year and help us to help children everywhere.

Olivia Girard

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