

Education and Integrity of Self

New Zealand Kolisko Conference Opening,
July 10th, 2010, N.Z.

Margaret Snowdon,
Christchurch, New Zealand

"*Self-worth is a predicator of learning*"— this is the theme that stood out for me, from all the varied and high quality opening addresses of our Australia-N.Z. Kolisko Conference.

Dr David Ritchie stated that amongst the socio-economic factors which are known to influence learning, the most important is found to be the dependability of a child's home life and environment. From a huge study of children numbering in the thousands, socio-economic factors are found to be crucial, as well as natural (genetic) endowments.

At 12 months of age, most children in this study could be described as having reached a similar stage of development. But by 4 years of age, most had diverged a lot, according to their socio-economic circumstances. Above all, the criterion was: 'Did they have care that was safe and predictable, at home, and/or at school, depending on their age?'

David said that teachers' pearls of wisdom have to fall on this preliminary base of loving care. Children need to feel they are of some value within the class, in order to actually learn. The conclusion to be drawn from this is we need to strive to truly individualise our teaching practice, FOR EACH CHILD.

For me, the aim of the Steiner curriculum then became clearer; in as much as we can tell the story of the great universe and all its elements, as a human story, interrelated and connected in its different parts to the human being, then each individual child can relate to it in their own way,

out of the human element. This would be the art of teaching. Further, the opportunity to get to know each child and thus to understand each one, is promoted by the structure of the Steiner schools, where teaching one group of children over several years is the norm. But to truly individualise needs a conscious liveliness at every step, an aim to strive for, rather than merely a claim.

David said in his talk that predicators for child development and education are the same as for salutogenesis¹

- Is the world comprehensible?
- Can they manage the world?
- Is the world meaningful for them?

The relevance of these findings from salutogenesis is reinforced by the successful results of a programme with children and parents from the severely deprived neighbourhoods of Echo Park, Los Angeles.² Running this cutting-edge "Centre for Non-Violent Education and Parenting", Ruth Beaglehole, (a former New Zealander), said they have now conclusively demonstrated that a youngster who has had an abusive/dysfunctional upbringing, does not have to repeat any of the same offensive behaviour. The key to being able to do it differently is being able to find meaning in their life stories. The mechanism is through empathy and mirror neurones³. She said that while the default position is a struggle to comprehend one's life of pain, and to take it out on one's children, that we have mirror neurones in our higher brain, which are in particular changed through experiencing empathy.

1 Salutogenesis is a term coined by Aaron Antonovsky, a Professor of Medical Sociology. The term describes an approach focusing on factors that support human health and well-being, rather than on factors that cause disease. More specifically, the "salutogenic model" is concerned with the relationship between health, stress and coping.

'Learning predicates self worth' or vice versa—"predicate" verb = 1 to proclaim; declare; affirm; assert. 2 To connote, imply 3 To base

2 Ruth Beaglehole, M.A., Founder of CNVEP: Centre for Non-Violent Education and Parenting, Echo Park, Los Angeles, Southern California. www.cnevp.org/new/english/ruth.html. Radio New Zealand National: Nine to Noon 5th August 2010. www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetonoon/20100805

3 see for example: <http://www.mindpowernews.com/MirrorNeurons.htm>

In such work, we can enable, for instance, teen mothers or violent youths, to tell their story, sometimes over and over again, in support groups, giving them words, a language, concepts which they lack, with which to make meaning of what has happened to them. The key is to make meaning of their pain, and this then, if repeated through empathetic speaking and listening, activates their mirror neurones to re-wire the brain, changing the cycle of poor parenting/violence.

Beaglehole claimed strongly that parenting issues are never about the child, they are about the parent. Lone parent/s cannot possibly be expected to manage the task all by themselves. Support, support, to the extent that she felt sure that it takes three adults to raise one child. As she said, imagine how many for three children - 9!

She felt it would be better, where possible, instead of taking children away from parents into welfare, to send support into the home, to model better ways, and to above all exercise empathy.

This research supports David Ritchie's statement about the "end of Darwinism". It is not the survival of the fittest genes only - genes are not the whole story. The environment is just as important for development. What switches the genes on and off has now become the great question. Relatively new neurobiological research, he said, shows that mirror neurones do not fire only when something is being done, as in motor neurones - when we act - but also when we are just watching, and even imagining, that, e.g., we are putting the cup over there. They develop otherwise in the same way as motor neurones, but mirror neurones are what bonds us with our parents, teachers, caregivers. They are involved in our social learning. Certainty and predictability (dependability), of the environment play a big part in the development of mirror neurones. I interpret that as paying attention to rhythm. David stressed

that awareness of the importance of all of our senses, of the 12 senses, is highlighted in this regard. Children need time to watch, to observe, to repeat. There is a social deficit now, represented by insufficient development of the higher senses, so that a child for instance may not notice - and even fall over another, on the way to their own goal. It would be therapeutic to do more of having half the class watch, while the other half do. Perhaps there is too much "doing" today?

I think that the balance would be in more "being" - in this connection of wholeness of being as the ground of learning. I wondered about the developmental delays of ASD (autism spectrum disorder), ADD/ADHD, plus anxiety, which we concentrated on for the bulk of the conference. I wondered what these diagnosed sensory-processing, neural-behavioural conditions; have to do with being able to learn from a basis of experiencing self-worth? I realised that the fact that these conditions do share digestive problems and nutritional deficiencies reveals here a link on the most unconscious and underlying physiological level - the link of leaky gut and dysbiosis syndrome⁴ challenging the integrity of being. David introduced this bio-medical approach, that when children's bio-chemistry goes wrong (e.g. antibiotics given early), the whole gut becomes inflamed; the child can't absorb its nutrition, and toxins develop. The integrity is breached. David said further that American research now reveals that the controversial MMR vaccine can disturb the gut and affect the brain⁵.

I found mention of this in a special research report on ASD and ADD/AHDD, in the Australia-N.Z. magazine Wellness⁶. "Parents of children on the autistic spectrum often talk about an obvious single event occurring before the child regressed. Some suspect a round of vaccines, pesticide exposure, heavy metal exposure, or

⁴ "an imbalance in the intestinal bacteria that precipitates changes in the normal activities of the gastrointestinal tract or vagina, possibly resulting in health problems"

⁵ See for example: <http://www.autism-help.org/autism-causes-detailed.htm>

⁶ Wellness Magazine, April 2010; Special Report: Childhood Behavioural Disorders by Lucy Cannings, naturopath at Northern Beaches Care Centre, the practice focusing on autistic spectrum disorders, chronic fatigue, auto-immune conditions, allergies, and chronic gut issues. reception@nbcc.net.au

some type of toxic factor the child has been exposed to. This supports the theory that something is interfering with the normal function of their cellular biochemistry.” The article first gives an example of how exposure to one heavy metal, lead, can affect virtually every system in the body, and produce symptoms which are strikingly similar to those found in the ASD spectrum and ADD/ADHD. Lead affects the central and peripheral nervous systems, the kidneys and blood. “Epidemiological studies have shown that even low levels of lead (blood levels of 10-25 micrograms per decilitre) can have serious affects on children...There are usually no obvious signs of symptoms of lead poisoning, so its easy to miss. Symptoms that may be recognised are:

- Subtle behaviour changes such as irritability and a shortened attention span.
- Suppression of appetite with resulting weight loss.
- Sleep disturbance.
- Hyperactivity.
- Reduction in intelligence and short-term memory.

Children with moderate exposures, i.e. blood lead levels of 30-50 micrograms per decilitre, are at an even greater risk of requiring special education, dropping out of school, and having reading disabilities as a young adult.”

Having described how a particular heavy metal has known and verified effects, the article went on to discuss the role of vaccines. “Biomedical practitioners in the ASD field believe the biochemistry of some children is not able to deal with vaccines. However the debate still rages. February 2010, The Lancet formally retracted an article it had published in 1998 that linked the three-in-one vaccine with autism. Health authorities in Australia deny any links between autism and vaccination.

Yet according to Generation Rescue⁷, a U.S. based non-profit organisation headed by Jenny

McCarthy and her partner, well-known actor Jim Carrey, vaccinated children have an increased chance of having a neurological disorder. They carried out the largest-ever health survey of vaccinated versus unvaccinated children. The results were chilling, though not surprising among the ASD community. ‘We surveyed over 9,000 boys in California and Oregon and found that vaccinated boys had a 155 per cent greater chance of having a neurological disorder like ADHD or autism than unvaccinated boys “Generation Rescue”. The article goes on to discuss and describe how some or all these symptoms; leaky gut and dysbiosis, failure to digest and detoxify, chronic inflammation, metabolic problems, nutritional deficiencies, and finally, abnormal immune systems, are implicated in the spectrum of sensory processing and neurological conditions that we were dealing with in the conference.

* * * * *

The opening address by **Sue Simpson** (former Principal of Taikura Rudolf Steiner School and General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in N.Z.), brought, for me, the quality of self-worth by a different route. She concentrated on how do I, as a practitioner/ teacher, recognise, view and value a child’s individuality among the many? Sue quoted from Rudolf Steiner’s 1920 lectures “Balance in Teaching”⁸; “The College of Teachers must become aware that it is the teacher who must have a deep feeling for the esoteric”. Do I, as a busy teacher, actually really see the other, this child, beyond appearances, “beyond the sense-perceptible?” What is it, in every single child, which draws my interest, in wanting to guide and care for this child? She asked, “What is the esoteric?” in this context, and suggested, on a practical level, it equates to having the deepest respect for each person who stands before me. That when I am not there for my own personal needs, and when I can create a “temple” space wherever I am, creating the right space to converse

⁷ <http://www.generationrescue.org/>

⁸ Steiner R. *Balance in Teaching* 4 lectures, Stuttgart, Sept. 1920

helpfully together with one another, that is the esoteric.

Sue also questioned what kind of thinking lies behind the controversial National Standards now being inserted by the government into N.Z. primary schools in top-down fashion. "Are they about enhancing childhood, or are they about cultivating the very bright and intelligent children who can make this country rich? What is childhood about?"

* * * * *

John Angus, New Zealand's official Children's Commissioner, in his opening address to our conference made the passionate plea: "Why, when we treasure children in our private lives, are their interests given less weight in the public domain?" He posed the great and challenging question about the worth of a child in this country. "Why, when we know poverty harms children, in particular young children, do they remain the group in our country living in the greatest material hardship? He reminded us, movingly, of that great, fresh sense of renewal and wonder that we experience when a young child comes into the world/family. But three paradoxes can swamp this special openness.

1. Poverty . Children, as an age cohort in N.Z., are the most likely sector to be in poverty. They are twice as likely to live in poverty as the over 65s. It is clear from the statistics that they bore the biggest impact from the controversial benefit (welfare) cuts in the early 90s.
2. Parental Time Poverty; Day Care Increasing. We have changed our family circumstances dramatically in the last decade or two. Although we have smaller families now, with fewer children needing our time investment, they are getting less of it in the crucial younger years. The fastest growth in child care is in the under twos sector. Mothers have to work more. Children are in care longer; over the past 4 years, the number of hours children spend there has increased 17%. There is a trend to increasing market based and corporate child care centres.

3. Social Disparities Persist in health and education, despite our knowledge of its deleterious effects. Up to one fifth of N.Z. children are too ill too often, or too far behind their peers educationally, or are poorly nurtured by families.

The disparities are quite persistent; in hardship, or deprived and neglected, or stressed. Children may be private treasures, said John Angus, but why are they public dross? Amongst various streams of thought which end up subsuming the true quality of childhood (including, he said, the ideas behind the National Standards!), John distinguished three ways adults think of childhood - and queried them. We at the conference found these a bit challenging at first, being a bit close to home, but found them rich food for thought, upon reflection.

Three Common Adult Perceptions of Children.

1. Children as "human becomings" a developmental view. The focus is on how children will turn out as adults.
2. Children as "innocents" - the Romantic view, still a common Western perspective, stemming from the 18th century Enlightenment. (Rousseau et al) This movement has made significant contributions to child protection movements.
3. Children as "sinners" - children as souls in need of salvation or redemption. Children in need of moral guidance.

I can see ourselves reflected in each of these schools of thought, and can see their contributions. But John Angus went further: "could we, in addition to the above, see our role as partners with children, not as in charge over passive recipients?"

And thus I was brought back to that idea of self-worth as the fundamental basis of all education. To allow the being of the child to appear, but also, as **Dr Simon Bednarek** added, to know that in the end it is also about ourselves as educators.

To know thyself, as in when we ourselves sometimes become withdrawn/anxious, impatient/hyperactive/overwhelmed/stressed, is to know the children. ♦