

## **Fostering Healthy Social Dynamics among the Adults in the Waldorf Early Childhood Classroom**

by Roxanne Anthony, April 2011

The quality of the play and social interaction of the children in the early childhood room is of great importance. Equally or perhaps even more important is the social dynamic of the adults, specifically the lead teacher and assistant(s), who care for these children. If there is tension or lack of respect among the adults, the children absorb this into their beings like the little sponges they are and, consequently, their play and social interactions are detrimentally affected. One of the spiritual exercises recommended for the early childhood teacher is to shed her troubles at the threshold to the classroom, entering there with a blank canvas, to be painted with warmth and joy. This is a worthy exercise indeed, but what if the teacher and assistant(s) have shed their home life issues but harbor resentment among them, some mistrust, some miscommunication? Then the smiles on their faces are merely superficial, there is really not joy, but dread at being stuck in the room with these individuals for the next six hours. All the bedtime meditations about the class children, all the morning verses in the world cannot cancel the negative energy generated by unresolved feelings amongst the caregivers.

If those working together in the classroom are together committed to the study of anthroposophy, that is a great beginning to clearing the air of unnecessary emotional burdens. Studying anthroposophy seems to attract individuals on a path of continuous self-learning. The caregivers, for the good of the children, can find a will to work together, and take intentional steps toward strengthening their relationship and creating a healthy social dynamic amongst them for the children to feel and imitate. While this paper will in no way be prescriptive, it hopefully will provide some new ideas on this topic.

It starts with a word: assistant, aide, lead teacher, co-teacher, paraeducator; and then the question: who are these people? Helle Heckmann is the founder of a Danish children's program called Nokken. Her recently released documentary video, *Das Smal (The Little Ones)*, depicting the smallest children at Nokken, includes a spellbinding segment on the social dynamics of the adult caregivers. Heckmann cares for the children with two other adults and refers to all three of them as teachers. The two younger teachers, though having their Steiner Early Childhood certification, may have much less experience than Heckmann, yet all three are called teachers. All schools or programs are different, of course, in their use of delineating nomenclature, but there is a subtle change in consciousness depending on the titles given to individuals in a group setting. "The term paraeducator was coined by Anna Lou Pickett, director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in New York, and it mirrors titles such as paralegal and paramedic to designate someone who works alongside (para) a professional in the legal, medical or ...educational field" (Morgan and Ashbaker 2). An interesting question arises: would an individual have as much deference for the medical opinion of a paramedic if they were called doctor's aides or emergency room assistants? There is definitely a change in consciousness there. For the sake of clarity, this paper will employ the terms lead teacher and assistant as these terms seem to be generally used in the Steiner School communities.

For the most part, human beings feel more comfortable in a group situation when they know what is expected of them. Morgan and Ashbaker (14-16) suggest that if an assistant in the classroom does not have a formal job description, that one be written. The authors go on to say that perhaps the lead teacher and assistant in one classroom could compose one together and then present it to the administration for school-wide circulation. That seems reasonable and efficient in a public school setting where standardization for various reasons is the norm. But herein lies the difference and the beauty of the Steiner School: each classroom (early childhood or grades) is independent in that the teachers' creativity is sustained through academic freedom. (Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal*) Each teacher uniquely brings the fundamentals of Waldorf Early Childhood Education: gestures worthy of imitation, activity, order, beauty, rhythm, warmth, reverence, imaginative play, into the classroom. Those individuals charged to assist her, must metamorphose to help her meet her goals. This is a very fluid, self-less social dynamic indeed. It can be said to transcend the realms

of the printed word or hierarchical titles. Nonetheless a job description is a good launching point.

To illustrate the fluidity of the lead and assistant roles in Early Childhood settings are the many articles published in the *Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter* (1988) on the theme of "The Kindergarten Teacher-Working Alone or With an Assistant." Four authors, Freya Jaffke, Janet Kellman, Patty Keats -Osburn, and Joan Almon describe the trials and tribulations of working with an assistant and the pros and cons of working alone with the children.

Jaffke was from Reutlingen, Germany and describes the training program of the Early Childhood teacher which at the time was prevalent throughout Germany. She says that, "In Germany, the kindergarten trainee spends one year as an assistant, two years in kindergarten seminar [formal course work], and a final year again as an assistant." These assistants were referred to as student teachers. Built into their days and weeks together was a structured requirement of meetings. The student teacher was required to be present at faculty meetings, the lead teacher and student teacher met every afternoon for two weeks and then at the student's request or in preparation for a festival. During the meetings and during class time the student teacher was corrected when needed to supplement her learning. The daily work of classroom and children's care was shared between them with all activities having equal value.

Kellman was from the Live Oak Waldorf School in Auburn, California. This school kept only two kindergartens and maintained 10 to 15 students in each room. The teachers worked without assistants. The school had made a commitment to keep these classes small and consequently did not make a profit on these classes. The teachers were willing to take a smaller salary and to work without assistants to stay within budgetary constraints. They were obviously not required to follow a mandate of adult to children ratio in the classroom at the time this article was written. Kellman found she developed a very intimate social contact with the children and that she could effectively hold her consciousness over the individuals and the group. She also notes that being the lone adult in the classroom was more physical work and that organization and simplification were key factors.

Keats-Osburn taught at the Calgary Waldorf School in Canada. She states that her formal training in Early Childhood Service and Education taught the method of the teacher having an authoritative role over the assistant. Government regulations required that a certain child/teacher ratio be maintained which forced her to keep an assistant three days out of the week. It seemed she would have rather done without her but was required according to the law. Keats-Osburn described many weekly meetings where she and the assistant struggled to work out the assistant role. The final outcome was this: "She assists me with maintenance – cleaning paint jars, mopping floors, cleaning walls, etc., but she works silently and directs the children to me in the case of conflicts, injury, questions, etc. She assists me in drawing my attention to areas of the classroom which I may not see (as I have 21 children on her working days), and sometimes she sees or hears things children say or do which are helpful to me in my understanding of the child's needs or desires. All information we discuss about the children is strictly confidential. My assistant does not speak with parents about their children, but directs them to me. In this way I have total responsibility for the class."

Almon taught at the Acorn Hill Children's Center in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA. She had varied experience as lead teacher, co-teacher, assistant, and head teacher without an assistant. She mentioned how being the sole adult in the room can lead to an intimate harmonious setting and likened this to the loss of the power struggle once parents divorced and were parenting solo. "Yet the archetypal home is one where the loving relationship between mother and father serves to protect and strengthen the child." She also mentions how Steiner often said that the child brings an untarnished sense of goodness with them from the spiritual world, their pre-earthly existence. It is this dream-state of the child that the teacher seeks to protect. Goodness and beauty allow the child to keep this spiritual bridge intact and "...a good man is one who is able to enter with his own soul into the soul of another." (Steiner, "Truth, Beauty and Goodness"). Almon adds that "...as we strive to bring goodness into our kindergartens through the daily relationship of teacher and assistant, we are offering the children a gift much needed for their own development."

One would be hard-pressed to wrangle a job description for an assistant from the scenarios described above, let alone a set of guidelines for the lead teacher and assistant(s) in the early childhood classroom. There is one underlying theme, however, and it is communication and respect. While communication and respect seem obvious as necessities for a healthy social dynamic, so too seem many of Rudolph Steiner's indications. But what is it that makes followthrough so difficult? Perhaps it is this human sheath, constantly influenced by Ahrimanic and Luciferic forces.

At Nokken social dynamics amongst teachers seems to find a balance. The three teachers meet one hour before the arrival of the children. They greet each other with a handshake looking into each others eyes. They read a Steiner verse together, take up an anthroposophical reading, and discuss what is going on at Nokken that day: is there a birthday, is there a new child, was there a parent's phone call the previous evening? The three also look to the physical preparations of the gardens and napping beds. Now that their spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical preparations together have been made, the three as a cohesive unit may now greet the children freely upon their arrival. Heckmann emphasizes repeatedly that the relationship amongst the three must have mutual respect; no voice goes unheard. Communication of all happenings is conveyed and no one feels left out of the loop. Once again, the balance between Ahriman and Lucifer seems to have been made at Nokken. There is a structure to their sacred time together, yet the time is filled with knowledge, perceptions and responsibilities that are Luciferically fluid, depending on their discussions and inner work. It would not be far-fetched to guess that the three teachers also have their fair share of Ahrimanic type discussions concerning family contracts, tuition, pay raises, and safety procedures, but they still find or rather make time for this balanced nourishing meeting each day.

Morgan and Ashbaker take more of an Ahrimanic approach to communication and respect. It should be noted that their work was written for the larger landscape of public schools and mainstream institutions, but the methods they provide can be tempered or warmed for consciousness-raising work in a Steiner School. They encourage setting time aside every day and one meeting a week among the lead teacher and the assistants. The authors also recommend speaking with administrators to ensure that the assistants' work week includes this review time and that the assistants be compensated for that time. At these reviews, various exercises and worksheets that have been completed during the week by both teacher and assistants are reviewed and discussed. There is an Observation Form that is filled out for a specific area of focus in the classroom, i.e., how often does a shy student volunteer in class, how often does the teacher show positive encouragement, how many girls answer math problems, etc. Then there is another form called an Observation Action Worksheet that provides an opportunity to dissect the data collected from an Observation Form and decide on actions that can be taken to improve the class experience. The Observation Form is also used for the assistant to keep detailed notes on a classroom skill the teacher is trying to impart to the assistant, i.e., how to handle behavioural challenges in the class using positive language. This allows the assistant to focus and collect data on one type of instructional work the teacher wants her to be able to take on. The teacher and assistant would then meet to look over the data collected to make sure the assistant understands what she needs to do and the teacher can self-evaluate to find out if her recorded actions truly reflected what she was trying to convey.

A third form discussed is the Communicating Preferences Form. The goal of this form is to show the difference between a principle upheld strongly by the teacher, for example punctuality, with a preference, for example removal of classroom clutter. Both teacher and assistant fill out separate forms and then meet to compare and discuss their answers. Three ring binders for collecting these various forms are also recommended for the teacher and assistant. These forms are available in the Appendix section of this paper.

It seems difficult to imagine such organized data collecting and review taking place among the teacher and assistant(s) in early childhood Steiner classrooms, but there is something to glean from this methodical approach. While note taking usually does not occur during time with the children, what if teachers and assistants took part of their break time to write down their observations for discussion at a weekly review session? Perhaps they are working with a new circle structure or trying out a new way of working curatively with a child. If these adults were gathering data in some way and discussing it, would they perhaps find some

patterns they would have otherwise missed without their collective focus? Collaborative research is an attempt to better share our striving as human beings, to remove our thoughts from isolation and hold them in a circle of care (Finser 40-41). The mainstream approach is very intellectualized, very in the head so to speak, but as mentioned, perhaps some of these organizational data collecting and discussion ideas could be warmed with the art of the conversation between the teacher and assistants by utilizing Goethan Conversation or Non-Violent Communication (NVC).

Goethe found true conversing to be the art of arts. Marjorie Spock writes of the art of Goethean conversation and how it could allow conversations among a select group of individuals to "...take place across the threshold, in the etheric world, where thoughts are intuitions." Perhaps a weekly discussion among teacher and assistant(s) could present an opportunity to practice this type of exchange. Spock provides guidelines for Goethean Conversation which meld well with a weekly classroom meeting. She says that the topic of the meeting would be set up in advance and that participants would keep this topic in their daily meditations. As the day of the meeting draws near the group should "...anticipate coming together as a festival of light, which...will lead to their illumination in the spiritual world." Spock also advises that any thoughts previously encountered on the topic prior to the meeting should be discarded so as to become an open vessel for spiritual insight. The group should abstain from chatter or personal courtesies during the meeting as well as side remarks. The meetings should have an exact starting and an exact ending where the participants stand together at both times and recite a verse. This type of conversation at a weekly teacher and assistant(s)' meeting seems well geared toward topics relating to a child's challenges or a reworking of circle structure. In a Goethan conversation, the data from an Observation Form or an Observation Action Worksheet, described previously, could be warmly presented. This collaboration can be greatly advantageous to finding solutions as "...illuminated hearts serve as the organs of intelligence, and the tendency of hearts is to union."(Spock 12)

Goethean Conversation might not work as well if the topic is emotionally charged, for example if one of the adults in the classroom takes issue with another adult's actions in the classroom. In this case, an approach using a form from Morgan and Ashbaker (35), entitled A Problem Solving Template for Enhanced Communication might help participants remain objective. Participants could complete the form and bring it for discussion at a weekly meeting. The discussion participants could also seek to employ NVC dialogue techniques where facts are stated without judgements in an effort to foster respect among the individuals (Rosenberg 16-17). Two major parts of NVC are expressing honestly and receiving empathically. The speaker's expression includes only "...the concrete actions we observe that affect our wellbeing; how we feel in relation to what we observe; the needs, values, desires, etc. that create our feelings; the concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives." (Rosenberg 47-49) This communication methodology may seem artificial at first, but could help avoid hurt feelings and misunderstanding. It requires commitment on the part of the discussion participants to learn the NVC form well enough to use it correctly. This requires some work to understand the differences between feelings and non-feelings, value judgements and moral judgements (preferences and principles), listening and paraphrasing skills and to be fluent enough in the vocabulary and method to actually focus on the problem instead of the process of NVC.

Aside from the various communication improvement and problem solving forms, fostering respect among teachers and assistants was tackled in additional practical ways by Morgan and Ashbaker. They suggest the following concrete actions on the part of the teacher:

- posting the assistant(s)'s name outside the classroom door alongside the teacher's;
- putting the assistant(s)'s name on the teacher's mailbox for informational literature distributed in the school;
- advising the assistant(s) as to the journals or publications or conferences available that would assist her(them);
- allowing the assistant(s) to have some opportunities for shared decision-making with the teacher;
- being the assistant(s)'s advocate if additional training outside the classroom is needed;
- learning what life experience the assistant(s) bring(s) and valuing these experiences;
- being aware of the way the assistant(s) is(are) spoken to.

One might not wonder if the Steiner School Early Childhood teacher does not already have enough to do in the classroom and as a member of the College of Teachers without having to add additional responsibilities for the assistant(s). But this is a required supervisory role of the lead teacher according to Morgan and Ashbaker. This supervisory role can lead to many rewards: "another adult perspective in the classroom, someone's lifetime of experience and skills, another pair of hands and eyes to help you learn more about your own effectiveness as an educator; an opportunity to facilitate another adult's learning and professional development; and...a tremendous source of support for the important work [of the teacher] (Morgan and Ashbaker 53). Indeed Steiner mentions that teachers can only provide the most favorable conditions for the children to educate themselves for "...there is no education other than selfeducation (Steiner, "The Child's Changing Consciousness")." Part of shaping and influencing this environment depends upon the "...the qualities of the [teacher's] own being and her relationships to the children and other adults in the kindergarten, to the parents,...and to living on earth" (WECAN Mentoring Task Force: Susan Howard 22).

Communication and respect have been highlighted as major cornerstones to a healthy social dynamic among teachers and assistants. Commitment is yet another important ingredient; finding the will to carve out the time for such work. In most Steiner Schools, time is already carved out for weekly faculty meetings, faculty committee meetings, family responsibilities. Some teachers and assistants even have other paying jobs such as babysitting or teaching yoga classes once the school day ends. And school days end at 3:15pm in the Early Childhood classroom at some schools. Getting to school an hour before children arrive would mean arriving at 7am. Teachers and assistants with young children would have to bring them along early as well. These meandering, unsupervised children are the "Waldorphans" Eugene Schwartz mentions in his *Waldorf Teacher's Survival Guide*.

This author has had the opportunity to collect some data using five minute eurythmy and singing exercises with a lead teacher and her two assistants. The purpose behind these short exercises was to see if these exercises were effective in bolstering the bond among the three adults. and consequently affecting the quality of the children's play. The three participants were Kerry (Lead Teacher), Claire (Assistant), Roxanne (Assistant). All three participated Monday through Wednesday; Claire did not participate Thursday and Friday as she works elsewhere on those days. The singing exercise was begun on Monday, November 15, 2010 and lasted for approximately two weeks. The song was a simple round: "All things shall perish from under the sky, music alone shall live, music alone shall live, music alone shall live, never to die." At the end of the day, when all the children had gone away, somewhere between 3 pm and 3:30pm, the three participants would close the classroom door and sing. At first, Roxanne would sing and the others would join in when they felt comfortable with the lyrics. The three sang in unison waiting for one of them to break out into the second round. This waiting went on for several sessions. Finally one of them tried to break out, but the round was not very strong. Then it was observed that the song was really a two-part round not a three part round, so Claire modified the melody. The new melody took about two sessions to get used to. By the end of the two weeks, the group did not really achieve a strong three part round.

The Eurythmy exercise was begun after Winter Break and continued for almost three weeks. The dates were January 10 until January 28, 2011 This exercise consisted of passing a knitted ball counterclockwise and then clockwise among the three participants. A nursery rhyme was chanted and then sung during the passing of the ball: "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after." The direction of the ball changed when the second sentence of the rhyme began. To pass the ball clockwise, the participants were required to cross their right arm over the left as the restriction was to always pass the ball with the right hand and receive the ball with the left hand. This exercise was learnt quickly by the adults and was completed successfully on all but the initial session.

During February 2011 there were no exercises performed but a questionnaire was given to the participants to complete which concerned both the singing and the eurythmy exercise. The Appendix contains the questionnaire and the responses.

Basically all three participants were very willing to participate in this study. It was remembering to do the exercises that proved a challenge. It is easy to see why the beginning of the day can be such a sacred time together, before the children arrive and the hub-bub of the day begins. At the end of the day, especially after three p.m., the teacher and assistants were tired; their own children were finished their day also and were needing their parent's attention. Sometimes one of the participants would have to shoo parents and some of their own children out of the room for "just five minutes while we do our exercise." Roxanne would often be the one to remind the others that it was time to sing or time for eurythmy, and as the others were bustling about emptying potties or packing away bedding or collecting their bags, they would say, "oh, right!" Roxanne would usually remember because it was data she was collecting for her own research project. After carving out that time and after the five minute session, the group would usually take a collective breath in and out. There was a little space created that the women could leave with to continue on with the rest of their day.

It was originally hoped that these exercises would occur before the children arrived in the morning, but the logistics were just too difficult to work out. One of the children arrives at 8 am by special agreement with the school and two arrive before 8:15 am. Drop-off time for nonstaff children is 8:15 am. Claire cares for two children before school begins and takes them into school for their 8:15 am drop off time Roxanne is able to deliver her son to his Kindergarten room at 8:00 am as she is a staff member. That leaves really no time for the three women to meet before children arrive. Because the exercises could not happen before the children's arrival, the effect of the exercises on the immediate dynamic among the adults and its resultant effect on the children could not be studied.

However, based on the questionnaire responses, all three participants felt the exercises were worthwhile even though the effect on the children could not be gauged. All three want to have more singing exercises at the close of the day. Kerry did not notice any real shifts during the exercise periods. Roxanne did notice that during the time of the exercises she was able to have a real heart-to-heart conversation with Kerry on some unresolved issues. Also, at the close of the exercises during the questionnaire period, Roxanne and Claire were able to air some differences and clear up some misunderstandings. An effort was made after the completion of the exercises for the three women to meet outside of school. During one of these meetings they viewed the *Das Smal* Documentary by Helle Heckmann. Several days after the viewing of the video the three agreed to start and end their days together with a greeting and a handshake as the teachers do at Nokken. It seems comfort levels and trust increased to some degree and perhaps sensitivity of the group. After some time spent together outside the classroom, Claire was able to air her feelings on being creatively frustrated in her work in the classroom as an assistant. Kerry and Roxanne made an effort to have a meeting with Claire and the three brainstormed ideas for the future. The ideas coalesced into two concrete actions that will be undertaken. These actions will give Claire an artistic outlet in the classroom and allow her talents to be utilized.

The singing and eurythmy exercises were very short. They were so short that it can probably be safely said that the exercises alone did nothing to affect social dynamics. It was thought that perhaps singing in rounds would allow the three women to discover nuances or cues they had not noticed before. It was also thought that perhaps the eurythmy exercise would allow a more rhythmic flow among them in the classroom when some work must be done quickly and in tight corners. In reality, the participants could have read a verse together or their grocery lists and there would have not been much difference. It was the meeting together in a sacred space, regularly with a united goal that made a difference; it was the commitment that raised the consciousness of the group.

Rudolph Steiner's work on communities and social order is reflected in his structuring of Waldorf Schools. He replaced the function of the principal or headmaster with the collective work of the teachers as in the College or Faculty of Teachers. He did this to deepen their knowledge of the nature of the human being. To be able to listen to others in this intensive group, the individual must work on herself to remain objective and non-judgemental; to hear what is truly being said. "Meeting and working together in this intensive way is intended to...create a "heart organ" for the school...[and] the spirit of the school is created by mutual

cooperation of everybody involved" (Rawson 81). The teacher and assistants in the Early Childhood room may be considered a microcosm of this College. To this end, if all participants, lead teacher and assistants, share the commitment to raise group consciousness, in some structured way, at some sacred time, each day and each week, the children in their care can only benefit.

It is through this hard work of adult social interaction that the lead teacher and assistant(s) "...may bring to young human beings bodily strength for work, inwardness of soul and clarity of spirit" (Rudolph Steiner, "Foundation Stone Verse").

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