



LEARNING CORNER

Waldorf Education

Vinita

One would think urban parents are spoilt for choice these days, with regard to playschools. And yet, one visit to The Promise Centre in Bangalore suggests that it is one of a kind – a Waldorf-inspired early childhood programme. The centre started in 1990, and embraced the Waldorf philosophy in 2006.

For a fuller understanding of the Waldorf philosophy, it is crucial to recognise that it was introduced in 1919 – after the First World War, in response to the need for a new social order. Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher, scientist and artist, was requested by Emil Molt (the owner of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory) to start and lead a school for the children of the factory's employees. *Hence the term Waldorf education!*

Rudolf Steiner believed that education should be designed to meet the changing needs of a developing child. He believed that it should help children fulfill their potential, not push them towards goals regarded as desirable by adults. He suggested that children go through different stages of development every seven years until they are 21. During this time the 'body, soul, and spirit' (feeling, thinking, willing) gradually come into consonance. Waldorf teachers strive to transform teaching into an art that educates the whole child – heart, hands and head.

Learning

At the Promise Centre, learning focuses on rhythm, repetition and reverence (for the environment and nature). Much like the Steiner Early Childhood Education (ECE) worldwide, it does not emphasise formal learning of the three R's, in the belief that a child will learn these skills more effectively if she has had plenty of time and opportunity to first develop socially, emotionally and physically in a creative, secure and harmonious environment.

RUDOLF STEINER AND ANTHROPOSOPHY

*Receive the child with gratitude
Educate them with love
Let them go forth in freedom. - Rudolf Steiner*

Steiner's educational philosophy was not restricted to schools alone. Over a period of 40 years, he formulated and taught a path of inner development or spiritual research he called, "**anthroposophy**" – wisdom of man. From what he learned, he gave practical indications for nearly every field of human endeavour. Art, architecture, drama, science, education, agriculture, medicine, economics, religion, care of the dying, social organisation – there is almost no field he did not contribute to.



Contact promisecentre@gmail.com to learn more.

A young child experiences the world through the senses, particularly sound. Children at the Promise Centre are made to feel a variety of textures (cottonwool, sand, wood) through different activities, before these are described as 'hard' or 'soft'. Waldorf education emphasises the oral tradition, and children are introduced to letters through the repetition of sounds that come naturally to them – ga, ma, pa. Children learn to write before they read. At about 4 and a half years when they show a keenness to write, they are taught to do so.

Learning at the centre is in keeping with the rhythms of nature and children learn various concepts through the different seasons. In the summer months, mangoes are central to learning – colours, the letter M, or planting trees. Festivals are celebrated as a way to connect with the cycle of nature.

Children in a Waldorf programme are in a mixed age group, not exceeding 16 children. A typical day here follows a pattern that alternates child-led time with a teacher-led activity, and includes free play and circle time. Tidy-up time is not announced but adults begin to slowly and gently pack things away at the same time, everyday. Within a few weeks, children begin to tidy up at that time spontaneously, *so strong is their learning through rhythm and routine*. Eating together in a relaxed, social environment ensures that food-time does not entail coaxing! Every parent brings food for all children once a month, helping them acquire and appreciate new tastes.

Environment

Waldorf programmes emphasise being close to nature. True to this, the Promise Centre has been built using natural, eco-friendly materials. Walls and corners are draped with pastel cottons. It is such a refreshing change to see wooden blocks, cotton dolls, shells, pine cones, fresh flowers and other objects that educators and children themselves have collected, as play materials and to beautify the room.

For Steiner and his followers, the basis of education is neither teaching nor learning, but development of the child – in a spiritual and holistic sense. To an oft asked question, whether these children adjust to the mainstream, Lalitha says, "the children never have a problem adjusting because their self-confidence and sense of security and love has been nurtured with so much care and attention".



TEACHER TALK

The place of toys

Nandini Prakash

Are toys good for children, necessary stimulation or unnecessary indulgence? There is always a lot of controversy over this. In Montessori circles to which I belong, it is more of a controversy, for we believe that children do not play, they work at their development. They do not need toys, they need tools for self-construction. As a mother of two grown-up boys, this is what I have to share.

Many people go overboard buying toys for their children, particularly the age group up to, say ten years. Beautiful dolls and cars, puzzles of all sorts, art material like play dough, board games by tons, electrical and electronic contraptions and kitchen sets all come home and sit on the shelves, or in toy boxes. What does the child really do with them? Most often they await the visit of another child, and even then, are seldom played with at all times.

Does that mean we should never buy toys for our children? A lot depends on you. When my son Gautam was less than a year old, we had a lot of colourful plastic rings which linked, empty powder tins of different types, which could be rolled in different ways, teething rings with parts that moved, mobiles, squeaky rubber toys with parts that could be chewed and so on. My job would be to build towers which he demolished. We bought a box of assorted unpainted solid wooden shapes – cubes, cuboids, arches, semicircles. Again, all of us spent hours making buildings, bridges, towers and wells with them, suppressing our boredom in favour of his joy.

When Gautam was two, I bought him some dolls, so that he would have no gender prejudices. Unfortunately, he never took to them. My other son Arjun gave up his friend, who was a girl, for when they played she would send him off to office and not allow him to cook! We also collected miniatures of regular cars. I use them at school now, for lessons on speed. And they are really beautiful. Gautam had a pedal car with which he reached amazing speeds. His skill of reversing was phenomenal. He is probably good with his driving because of all that training!

We had balls and bats of various sorts. We created art work with Lego blocks, and kept them on display. Guns came in spite of me, and were used for some thief and police games with friends. To please me, they set up targets to show their sportsmanship. These lasted till both came to high school.

Scrabble, our own *pagade* and *kavade* games, Carrom, Uno – all took their turn. I believe that these games help in developing logical analytical thinking. We did not just own them, we as a family played with them.



Toys are what you make of them..

When my children were teenagers, it was the computer as usual – PC Pool and Hangman to start with, then maths games and Doom and Crusader, to Need for Speed and World of Warcraft. I have sat behind them and seen them all, carefully neutral and non-judgemental. Now that my children are adults and in college, it is computer accessories, laptops and mobiles. But they are satisfied with window shopping in virtual reality. Between sessions, they give me lectures on differentiating between 'wants' and 'needs' and on self-control! I am content to have a window into their world, trying not to ask too many questions.

Toys are a part of the world around our children. If toys catch their fancy and they want to explore them so as to belong to the rest of their peer group, who are we to deny them? Within limitations, every thing can be constructive. If nothing else, they may build a bond between you and your child, helping your adult son feel comfortable enough to talk about anything on the earth – finance, drinks and drugs, girlfriends, insecurities, career choices and, wonder of wonder, feelings!

Toys per se are neither good nor bad. They are things and therefore lifeless. What is important is what you make of them.

The author is associated with the Indian Institute for Montessori studies, Bangalore.



WHAT'S NEW

Life in our schools: some candid pictures

"MOVE fast," "hands at the back." This is not a scene from the army, just students being taught staircase etiquette in *Shades of Our Schools*, a documentary commissioned by 'The Teacher Foundation', Bangalore.

"The focus of these short films is on interactions; mainly student-teacher but also parent-teacher and interactions with principals. How conducive are these interactions to learning? A cross-section of schools were chosen to provide candid shots of life in schools," says filmmaker Gautam Sonti.

These vignettes – alternately funny and sad – show that there is little interaction between teachers and students, in the classroom or outside. Most teachers race through their lessons with hardly any interruptions. Younger children look terrified when they are addressed. Parents look equally scared at PTA meetings.

The films are part of a project being undertaken by TTF in collaboration with NCERT, to look at the social and emotional dimensions of schools. The films can be used by a school or teacher training institute as a tool for reflection and discussion. For more details, contact Maya Menon, Director TTF. Email: teacherfoundation@vsnl.net

SPOT LIGHT

AECED: a network for preschool educators

Mandira Kumar

The Indian Association for Preschool Education (IAPE) was a vibrant organisation founded over 44 years ago. The association has now been revived as the AECED (Association for Early Childhood Education and Development). AECED launched itself with a national seminar in April 2009 in Mumbai, to share current practices in early learning.

Different initiatives

Preschool service providers such as Jumbo Kids shared their model – one that standardises the curriculum in response to parental expectations and decentralises the delivery. They have moved beyond the metros and smaller cities and reached Tier 4 towns. Muktangan, a non-profit organisation based in Mumbai, has developed a low-cost model for preschool education where women from the community are trained to be teachers. The programme is run in Mumbai's municipal schools. Elizabeth Mehta lauded the municipal corporation for its encouragement in inviting Muktangan to set up more centres, and extending their work to the primary level.

MERITOCRACY AT THE AGE OF 4?

One of the key issues discussed at the AECED meet in Mumbai was the need to do away with testing at the preschool level. As early learning educators, we all know that children mature greatly between the ages of 3 to 6. Some of the most prestigious schools in Mumbai and Bangalore test children for admission to preschool. It is no surprise that coaching classes have mushroomed in response to this absurdity!

FROM THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN DELHI, 2007

A committee was constituted to look at pre-primary education subsequent to an order of the Delhi High Court in 2006. These are some recommendations in compliance with the court order:

- Pre-primary education for children who have crossed 4 years on March 31st shall be made available at all schools, government and private. All schools of Delhi will have to offer this one year of pre-primary education prior to Class 1 starting from 2008.
- **Neither parents nor children will be tested for admission to the pre-primary level. It is undesirable to have selection procedures based on ability testing or screening for any pre-determined qualities.**
- Facilities for younger children (crèches, playschools, preschools etc) can be in their neighbourhood.
- Children will carry a tiffin but no books to and fro school at this stage.
- The care and education of young children at this stage cannot be merely custodial but must be developmental in nature.

Another Mumbai based non-profit organisation, QUEST, works in tribal Maharashtra. They have chosen to work with government-run anganwadis, and provide a para-teacher who assists the anganwadi worker.

In the spirit of looking at early childhood education as serving children upto 8 years, Nandita Jhaveri spoke on the process of revitalising the Diamond Jubilee School in Mumbai. This intervention followed a whole school approach, of working with teachers, the curriculum and the methodology. They shared how a project such as visiting the market offered rich opportunities for observation, drawing, writing, math, creative expression in designing packaging, and so on.

Join this movement and become a member of AECED! Email Vrinda Datta: vrinda@tiss.edu

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