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Changes Observed in Kindergarten Children

by

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In listening to these various living pictures on kindergarten children from the audience, I was struck again by the many children I've worked with. Last October I quietly celebrated 30th years of working with young children. I started a school before I knew about Waldorf and then transformed that school into the Waldorf School of Baltimore. Over these 30 years I have seen huge changes. I am reminded of a conference I went to with friends in Vienna. It was a public school conference with Jörgen Smit in the 80's. At a workshop he asked us for descriptions of children and similar descriptions were given as we heard just now. He said, "Aren't you seeing anything positive that is new?" I was so preoccupied with the problems that I actually could not tell you what was positive. Today, I am hoping to weave back and forth. Yes, the problems are severe but new developments of an inspiring nature can also be observed.

In the 70's children were quite different. It is hard to put your finger on the difference. The first thing we became conscious of was that young children seemed much more nervous and the word we started to use was thin skinned—the protective sheath was thinning down—things would get to them—they would react with a nervous gesture. The fear is more recent. It started with a thinning down of the protective sheaths. At the first Kolisko Conference in 1989 a retired kindergarten teacher said that when she was a young teacher doctors told them that their job was to polish the children's sheaths. I thought, if I did that they would crack. Our job is to build up the sheaths that are worn thin. In the 70's children were more thick skinned. In play a healthy well-protected child can be immersed in play and all hell can be breaking loose over here—the healthy child is

nonplussed, not affected. They remain in their own wonderful flow of activities. With the nervous child the least thing can happen and they are brought out of the mood of play. They cannot sustain it. We saw the first sign in the 70's accompanied by a sinking down physically of the children. Studies of child development and first grade readiness have found changes in the physical form. A sign of first grade readiness is elongation, a thinning down, a loss of baby fat; we begin to see the knuckles on the hands and not the dimples of baby fat. In early years you saw this change when children were six. Now you hardly see baby fat on a four year old, unless it is obesity. There is a rising incident of type two diabetes, not childhood onset. It used to be called late onset from a sedentary lifestyle and it is now an epidemic in childhood. In the 80's we were preoccupied with allergies. Younger teachers may not realize that one hardly talked about allergies in children in the 80's. A doctor came from Switzerland describing dairy allergies and he said, "What is that?" In his training in Switzerland he had never encountered a dairy allergy.

There was a study in Sweden a few years ago comparing public and Waldorf students. The study showed that Waldorf students had fewer allergies and it was not a question of pollution but a question of lifestyle. The smallest detail played a part and these were dubbed Steiner units; the more Steiner units there were in the child's life the less allergies. This was published in the English publication *Lancet*. So, allergies suddenly became a reality in the kindergarten. Allergies affect children in quite different ways. They can manifest through the digestive system—hives or children throwing up after eating something. Or they manifest emotionally through the rhythmic system where children have a chronic cold; a running nose all the time where the lungs are affected. Or they affect the nervous system which can be seen in behavior patterns.

I took a class in the middle of the year and observed the behavior of one of the boys that was all right but something off. He had been on a strict diet the year before. When he had not been on the diet he exhibited bad behavior. He hit someone on the head with a log; he pulled up flowers, smashed his sister's dollhouse, which is extreme for a five year old. On the diet he was fine. One day he came in agitated and he was a big six year old. You could tell he wanted to just smash somebody but he had enough control not to do that. So he would fling himself on the floor pounding his arms and legs on floor. He did this five or six times in the course of the morning. I told the mother and she went home and looked at the new box of cereal, which he was normally able to eat and found one new ingredient in the cereal and it was a food he was allergic to. That behavior was allergic behavior.

When I visit a classroom I watch for this in the child the teacher wants me to observe. It is one of the first things I look for; darkness or puffiness around eyes is one of the signs of allergies. Very often the child has that. If you can address the allergy you can address the problem. If the child does not have an allergy then one has to look deeper. This is one small aspect that came newly into our work over the years.

Universally there is a large increase in asthma that the asthma association is very concerned about. In the 90's things shifted again. I got a phone call in 90's from young doctor and he opened the conversation by saying, "What is wrong with the children today?" The young doctor was starting out in a rural area in South Carolina where is quite peaceful. On the second day of school, droves of children came to his office sent by the teachers saying this child is hyperactive, put him on Ritalin. There is an epidemic

of children being placed on Ritalin; it is happening by the millions. This did not exist in kindergartens in the 70's and 80's. There is a major change in the behavior of children and in other cases how we view the behavior and how narrow our educational scope has become that many children cannot fit into it. There are multiple reasons.

It would be wonderful to have a report from Kim Payne and Bonnie River-Bento on the way to address hyperactivity within Waldorf education. They have learned a lot in last couple of years. There is also at present a growing rate of depression and an increase in the use of Prozac. There are no statistics but one hears murmurs. It seems so impossible that young children should be depressed; that a lot of children are saying no I don't really want to be here. In Japan there are incidents of six year olds committing suicide. The pressures are enormous, the stress levels are enormous. Behavior that we once considered normal in 10-12 years olds in the 50's now sends children to the psychiatrist. Today we take them as normal behaviors related to childhood stress and anxiety. The figures on the mentally ill are not clear but one in five or ten are considered mentally ill to the point of it being a disability. These are not just minor fears and anxiety—it is serious. Most of it is an anxiety disorder, children are fearful. There is too much exposure too soon. Children are over exposed and anxious. One person whose work has helped me a lot is David Elkind who wrote *The Hurried Child*. He makes the point as a clinical psychologist that all through the 70's the hurried children were carrying stress in themselves with first level symptoms of headaches and stomachaches. If you don't address it when it is at that level it will go deeper into the body. We see stress and strain that has gone in deeper and manifested in a huge range of illnesses—there is not one.

In the 90's the inability of children to imitate had become an epidemic around the world. It began in the United States in the 80's but was not happening in Europe while it was sweeping over here—people in Europe could not imagine that children were not imitating. When I traveled very extensively in the '80's I talked about it but they just could not relate because European children were still well rounded, played, imitated, all the things that we as Waldorf kindergarten teachers couldn't imagine a world where this happened. I remember a point in late 80's Freya Yafka—showed me a photo of six kindergarteners going on the first grade—strong sturdy children but one little girl was thin and pale. She looked like an American child—Freya asked why I kept looking at this child and I tried to explain that this type of child had become common in the United States. Now one sees many such children in Europe—we are talking about exactly the same conditions. In Australia and New Zealand it began in the 80's and I am sure is sure now pronounced. In Africa—in one kindergarten where the teachers were working well—the children came in and out—I was getting anxious - there was no fence. I asked myself, why are you getting anxious, my experience was that the forces of imitation were so weak my children would be gone if they got that far away. Then I realized they are relaxed because they are connected. For us you need to work daily to keep it strong in the classroom. It cannot be taken for granted anymore—not the recognition of authority. In the old days that was a sign that they were in the stage of imitation. It is different now, and we need to wonder how they did with imitation when young because imitation will transform into respect for authority which effects what happens in adolescence.

The picture of the will takes a somewhat different form. In the 90's we are aware of an increase of violence, school shootings. There is research which links violence and TV, videos, music violence. In preschool we don't see it as violence—we see it as

aggression. Children are more aggressive and it not always easy to know why. Again, it is part of this general stirring up and stress in the child that can often manifest in difficult soul gestures. One is to lash out against the world and the other is to lash out against the self. Boys lash out at the world and girls take it out on themselves. You can see self-mutilations where girls have cut their arms. This is a tragic sign—to see this in a girl or woman. It is not an absolute—there is growing violence among girls now too. The newest thing is the increase in autism, especially the Asberger syndrome.

Building a definition of the illness of autism is not an easy thing to define and describe. One phenomenon is very bright youngsters who are so lacking in social skills that they are being diagnosed as autistic. The syndrome is named after Dr. Asberger, the doctor who defined the syndrome. There was a *Time* article in May, which talked about autism, and Asberger's and it referred to an article from *Wired* magazine. *Wired* is a publication that is read by the technology community. In this article a reporter was looking at statistics for Asberger's syndrome in California where they keep the best statistics. The headline said that in California the statistics were reporting a 237% increase over the last decade. That got me started paying attention. This reporter looked at the State and found that this was not universal over the State but the incidents increased the most in Silicon Valley. His reporting was so interesting. He talked to many parents. We find each in the child psychologists' office seeking help. The parent relates that their child cannot relate to the world at all, they are cut off from all human beings. One mother said their family was moving to Montana and she called to ask what services they had there for autistic children. The school reported they had general services but she was told she should move to the northwest part of Montana where they have better services because IBM is nearby and many children suffer from Asberger's autism. The reporter looked at it from a genetic standpoint—which I am wary of. He said the parents probably suffered from some kind of autism and usually these people tended not to marry but they are now finding each other in the high tech industry, marrying and passing on the condition. There may be some truth to the genetic determinism. If you were predisposed to lung cancer—wouldn't you do everything in your power to keep your child from smoking? It would not be recommended or ethical to put these children in front of computers. The culture is designed to create autism, sitting in front of a screen four to five hours a day—not relating to another human being. Relating, if you can call it that, to a screen. The screen basically doesn't care what the child is going through—the show goes on without response. But people say, you have interactive computers—isn't it wonderful. What kind of a response is that for a child who wants nurturing and warmth and instead is offered a cold experience of life? I have an anecdote of a father whose child wanted the same story every night so he read the story into a tape and told his daughter—now you can have the story whenever you want. His daughter said, "But I can't sit on the tape recorder's lap." A child of three asks about the color of the leaves and the parent gives a long explanation about chlorophyll and the child looks at the parent and says, "Are you talking to me?"

I promised we would look at some of the good side, and we have had enough of the heavy side. Over and over I hear from colleagues in the kindergarten about the degree of spiritual openness. Children have always been open when compared to adults and older children. The experience is now significantly greater. The way they talk about the spiritual world as a daily reality to them is quite amazing. There is awareness they

have of the spiritual world which is much more common than it used to be. I have pondered myself about what is it that is happening here. We are partly seeing the thinning down of sheaths, a split or the taking down of the veil and children are able to remember, to penetrate, cross over more easily and experience spiritually in every day life. One of the things that Rudolf Steiner says about the spiritual world and what we bring as gifts, when in the spiritual world is that we don't communicate as in this life—through teaching and listening. We don't communicate through conversation where we are separate. In the spiritual world with each other we interpenetrate with each other—we slip into the other and absorb their knowledge, views, being. In the spiritual world we have this capacity and are not blocked by bodies, the capacity to interpenetrate with each other. We bring that capacity to earth and it is very active for the first seven years and it is what we call imitations. This deep penetration of one another. Others of you who work with young children; you can feel as if the child is slipping into your skin and trying you on.

When you see a first grade teacher with their children; the look on the faces of the children says, “You know things I don't know and you are going to teach me.” The kindergarten child looks at their teacher not as wanting us to teach but to use in the best sense of the world; to slip into us and experience cooking, textures, the mood of the concentration of it, the purpose of it they absorb. All of that they get from us and that translate that over into play. They see, they imitate, they translate into play. First they want to do it with us. “What are you doing, can I do it to, can I help? The answer is always yes, sit right here (even if you are working with the sharpest knife) keep me company, that will be a good help. Mostly you have tools ready that they can use. More and more children imitate that way. It is the only tool they have for learning. They cannot take in much through instruction but they are set up for imitations. Some of it remains but much of it is disturbed. What is disturbing about that, if they don't imitate, if they don't play, these two things go hand in hand, if they don't take us and the world in and progress through fantasy play and with the simplest of materials create worlds and put themselves into it, change it, master it, feel themselves to be kings and queens of their world . . .

In my class I had two big six-year-old boys who vied about who was the biggest and strongest. One would say, “I am king.” And the other would say, glaring back “I am king.” As kindergarten children don't like direct suggestions in play I mentioned as I passed by that there was a kingdom in which there were two kings who ruled peacefully together. “Oh, we can both be kings” they said. Standing up on the table one said, “I am king.” And the other said “And I am a king” and then little Daniel, also six and a little wiry, clever, boy who would never vie with these guys—Daniel hops up on the table and stands behind them and says, “And I am the emperor!” That was his moment. All children have or you hope they have their moment and that was David's.

Play is becoming a lost activity of children. And if play dies from childhood so does imagination—the quality that a class teacher relies on as the medium of education. A public school counselor from Alexandria, Virginia spoke with me with my alliance hat on. She asked, “What is happening to children today. I was talking to some first graders about how they used their imagination and they looked blankly at me. You know, I said, when you pretend to be someone you are not. I gave them an example of how I loved to play Wonder Woman with a cape on, running with the cape and my arms out. People might look at that funny little girl and wonder what she was doing, but inside I was

Wonder Woman and could fly over houses and look at all the people. The first graders said they could not do that; not one child knew what she was talking about. That was a public school. We have a lot of the same children.

I hear over and over that a child comes into kindergarten and they don't know to play and not just without simple materials. We used to have to devote the first few weeks of school, and now it can take months, to build up play and without play then imitation does not blossom in the six year old. At fairy tale time usually children listens with mouth open. My theory is that what they are doing is drinking in the fairy tales. Not picturing them yet. In the six year old we can see the picture in their minds, can practically see it. They don't need all their props, they talk it out. I do this and you do that, and they don't use props for a while. They see things in their minds eye. A six year old will say mommy I can see grandma I only have to close my eyes. The doorway to imagination is open. The capacity for forming images at will comes and goes but can't forego it as a capacity. If they haven't played they cannot develop imagination and it is healing to bring about imagination. It needs intense work with movement and storytelling to get the imagination going. Where this applies to the youngster is how do they come to creative thinking as team. The doorway begins in the kindergarten and that incredible stream that exists as a legacy; the stream of the fantasy to the imaginative creative thinking of the adolescent. If we cut that off where we are as human beings, we can only go on repeating the past out of what people tell us. That is what we are seeing more and more. Something precious and wonderful is being cut off. At the same time these are the children who are more open to the spirit and sometimes it is in one in the same child.

The *Indigo Child* is thought provoking, but from my vantage point anyone who thinks they have the answers, I would like to sit at their feet. It is complicated and there are severe problems and at the same time an opening to new capacities. Spiritual opening and a social opening. With the increases in autism and the 9, 10, and 12 year olds opening to the world in breathtaking degrees of compassion and care—have you met this in you children? Such compassion for the earth and for humanity. I invited Craig K. to speak in our school. He was the 12 year old (who is 18 now) who traveled to India and Pakistan to bring attention to the plight of children in forced labor. 250 million children are engaged in child labor under the most severe conditions. He formed an organization of 100,000 members where the decision-makers had to be under 18. At eighteen he is now the elder in his own organization but cannot make decisions.

The degree of care and compassion and the willingness to be of service is amazing. Imagine the girl who spent two years in a tree! Who are these souls coming in with such a wish to help? I was driving a boy in the morning and in the car he said you know I just love this earth. I just love it. I love the plants and the animals, the stones and plants, and especially I love the animals. I just love the animals this five years old said and when I grow up I'm going to work in the zoo. When you knew what stood behind this, this deep, deep love for nature. You encounter this in young child and adolescents. They long to bring will into service. In Washington we talk about community service programs in high school. We need to talk about how to guide this will to serve from a much earlier age. Children want to be of service, just to bake a loaf of bread, make soup for the soup kitchen. Children come to this earth wanting to be of service. Habitat for Humanity needs people; they are needed in Russia and Vietnam to name a few ways that need building projects. The international youth camps—used to call this cosmopolitan

but for them it is normal—all races, all religions, that is their community. A kind of Michaelic hungering to go beyond the bounds of race and be part of such a large community. To see the children literally hunger for fairy tails from around the world. Boys love Native American culture—we give them far too little—the boys' hunger for it and it does wonders for the most active and turbulent boys in the kindergarten.

The growing stress needs to be addressed—we need to be aware that in United States the suicide rates among adolescents tripled in the last 50 years. Stress is deadly and not to be taken lightly. According to Canadian psychological research—research in Canada is somehow more sound than in the United States—they report among 18-38 an increase of depression as to 4. I ask myself are there some indications from Rudolf Steiner that will help us to understand this diverse phenomenon? A hint at some things? Don't take this as what I just said. I offer it in a different mood.

There are things we need to research together to look deeper for reasons behind the phenomenon. One thing that Rudolf Steiner said but on which I have not found a time line for the future—with other things he has been more specific. In the past human beings were very open to the etheric and great imaginations would flow into them. Perceptions of the spiritual world were much more open—what has been negatively referred to as an atavistic clairvoyance. For very healthy reasons along came matter and drove us into our bodies. The doorway didn't close but many layers came and we must really work to separate the layers and have spiritual experiences. He says as we move into the future it will change. Layers will thin down and become more loosely connected in the body and more attuned to the etheric and with that we will be more open spiritually. I hold it as a question if that is part of what we are seeing in children today. They come in but stay looser and there still more open spiritually. This has various dimensions and is not altogether a good thing—it has pitfalls. The pitfall is that in the spirit world not every spiritual being is fantastic. That is Lucifer having a grand time with us. There are all sorts of beings in the spirit world and our children who are encountering many.

A friend of mine is a kindergarten teacher in Vienna and her nine year old had the most ferocious nightmares. She was not exposed to TV and ate a great diet. When she was 19 she went to Colmar in France to see the Isenheim alter. This is the one of St. Anthony being attacked by beasts. In a dreamy way she looked at it and said, “Oh, I know that one and that one and that one,” and these were the beings from her dreams. So the more open our children are the more likely they are to enter the dark side of the spiritual world.

Dr. Von Kügelgen headed up the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association. He was a wise gentleman with the wisdom of taking four classes through. He came out of retirement to found the Kindergarten Association. Dr. Von Kügelgen was sure about this—the children today understand evil much more than children of the past. They need fairy tales to identify evil and to learn how to deal with it. One should not be overprotective. We feel squeamish. But we need to find the right fairy tales that portray evil along with the strength and courage of overcoming evil. I think more and more that we see fear in the eye of children—see a lot of fear. What is it they are fearful of? They have good reason for it but we are not always so discerning of what we see are the sources of fear. I worked with one child who was open in certain ways but not to the authority of the teacher, only to the parents. The child did some curative eurythmy which

I didn't now about at the time—that it had taken place. What I saw was that the next day the boy was different. I went to the curative eurythmist and asked what she did. She said, "I looked in his eye and I saw such fear that I work with the loving "A." I would go through it reaching out to the world and I bring the world to me. Reaching out to the world and I bring the trees to me with love over and over it goes, reaching out and bringing in love to add to the fear that he saw. It worked and the child was different the next day.

If in fact what we see is a more open gesture to the spirit world. There are wonderful beings at work in the etheric. All that Rudolf Steiner has said about the Christ entering the realm of the etheric as a new gesture and the possibility to experience this tremendous being of love now living so close to the earth. Many of our children are having experiences of this tremendous being of love. Feelings they don't know what to do with—that enormous capacity for love. Though healing, we must be careful with this and not abuse it—drink it out of the child—we hunger for it—but to maintain our wish to help the child with it. Our longing to protect that in the child—it is there for the child to give us but not for us—to suck it out—there is a delicate line here.

Many children are hearing the call of Michael in many different forms. In the call for diversity that we come to a place where we feel ourselves all to be citizens of the earth. Boundaries that we have created still exist and they are useful but insofar as they are not useful they do not matter—we should honor them when necessary and meet purely as human beings when that is the appropriate thing to do. This lives strongly in children and youngsters today. Diversity, a young woman said to me when I was still speaking out of my experience in the civil rights movement. She said I don't mean to be disrespectful but I cannot relate to what you are saying. Diversity is part of who I am, I am part English, part German, part Native American. All of my friends relate to being here as human beings and assume a mixture and diversity—a culture that assumes and builds on that. I was still working with issues that were mine. The next generation has longings and wishes about diversity. It's not about the spiritual that they need to learn from us. They come with the assumption that the spiritual world exists. They ask please help me to understand it. You don't need to convince me—help me to learn the discipline, show us how to build a diverse community. We have not achieved that yet—far from it. I'm not sure we even have it as a goal. That may be harsh. I've talked to people in school's where diversity is the imperative thing. It must be a priority on every level—board, parents, and students. Without that we will just slip into being a white school again.

Some years ago I asked myself a question flying over the Atlantic at 30,000 feet. Rudolf Steiner said that Ahriman is planning to incarnate at the beginning of the century—that is now. If I was Ahriman and was planning to incarnate, what would I do to prepare agents of souls who would recommend and honor me. I would go after the children. Bind them to the earth, computers, testing, early literature, everything which is happening so strongly right now in public education – bind these children to the earth and cut off the spirit. Exactly what is happening? If we care about human beings and the development of human beings we must do something about children, not only in our own movement. And that pointed in me to all the children born – something called so strongly. At the International Kindergarten meeting Dr. von Kügelgen said yes we need to do something now for all of the children. Not a Waldorf impulse but a world impulse,

that is what we have tried to build up. Waldorf has so much to offer and the world is so hungry for what we have developed for the last 80 years. But we must not be saying we have done this for 80 years—it calls for social tact. We must raise the money \$10,000, \$12,000, \$15,000 a year to send someone to every major educational conference that we have a booth and workshops to be together with educators and university professors who are looking for ideas to present to their students. Educators are hungry and desperate for new ways of understanding children.

* Members of the Waldorf High School Project core group have edited this article and the speaker has reviewed it, however, it is considered to be in draft format lacking a complete edit. It is provided so that AWSNA schools can make use of the content.

— David Mitchell
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