
FIELD PROJECT:
“WALDORF-KINDERGARTEN”

Jennifer Nicole Król (14085)

This reflection draws upon the day of my research in a German-speaking Waldorf-kindergarten in Brixen. The goal was to get an overview about the concept and its impact on all relevant people like the children and their kindergarten teachers. I discovered the importance of recurring rituals, free play and the effects of spatial design on the human body and its psyche.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF WALDORF-KINDERGARTEN

Without being instructed, children learn dealing with other people, with animals, plants and objects, to feel the joy of life and to learn dedication to what they do. All this will be learned by their ability to imitate. Authentic role models with a sense of humour, decisiveness and a joyful soul are important points of reference.

CONSTITUTION OF THE WALDORF-KINDERGARTEN IN BRIXEN

With a population of 22'000 Brixen offers his citizens about five kindergartens. The Waldorf-kindergarten in Brixen is between Capuchin monastery and the church. A big play yard is near the kindergarten. The street in front of the entrance has sparsely traffic and is well-structured. The building is located a little bit outside the city centre.

Two female kindergarten teachers take care of twenty children. The group is mixed with boys and girls at the age of 3 to 6 years. The Waldorf-kindergarten is regularly open from 7.30 to 13 or till 15 o'clock from Monday to Friday. Parents have to pay for the service between 2'220- 2'660 € annually.

FIELD NOTES

The door was open when I arrived at 7.45 am at the Waldorf-kindergarten. No lights were switched on, but a few candles in candleholders with a pattern of stars brightened the room. A big orange curtain separated the main room from the entrance, kitchen and wardrobe. I took off my shoes and jacket and sat down on a footstool from where I had a good view across the room. When I entered the room, I felt immediately relaxed and calmed down. The candles created a harmonic atmosphere and it brought back some memories of my own childhood. I felt a kind of inner peace.

The main room had many different playgrounds and safe havens, where children could hide themselves and get shelter. There were two large tables with chairs, a second kitchen with a lower countertop for children, two tiny houses made of rose-colored blankets with shelves, chairs, tables or mattresses. A self-made crib with figures made of felt, a wooden stable, stones and shells spangled the room. The windows were furnished with rose-colored curtains and the walls were painted in rose and orange tones. The colours were wisely chosen by their meaning and their effects on human psyche. In fact the elderly kindergarten teacher explained that they have chosen the rose colour because it creates similarities to the colour a child perceive in their mothers uterus which is associated to safety and comfort. The wooden kitchen inside the room was filled with fresh fruits, vegetables and some spices. They were all biological.

The Advent wreath was decorated with bees-wax candles. All toys were made of

wood and had pastel colours. The toys were not exactly shaped, but instead gave children possibilities to use their own creativity and imagination.

In the air you could smell a mix between fresh air from outside and burning candles.

A 5 or 6 year old boy and the female kindergarten teacher were sitting in the room.

The kindergarten teacher felted an animal and the boy asked her why she was doing this. Because of the restless boy, which jumped up and down she whispered with a steady voice, that it will be a birthday gift for a girl of their nursery group. He

constantly talked to her and asked about the animal made of felt. She spoke to him

and answered all his questions calmly. After a while the second kindergarten teacher,

a young woman entered the room and welcomed the boy with a lovely "Good

morning" by shaking his hand. Gradually more and more children arrived with their

parents. The parents helped their children to take off their shoes and left after that.

All children were welcomed by shaking their hands and called by their names. After

that they were free to do whatever they wanted to do. The younger kindergarten

teacher started preparing a light snack by washing carrots, apples and cooking

porridge. The 5 or 6 year old boy asked for permission to help. She gave him a knife

and a chopping board for cutting the carrots into small pieces. In case of some

difficulties she helped him. I was surprised by their trust in the abilities of the child;

the children had a high sense of responsibility and a lot of fun joining activities of the

kindergarten teachers. It was like exploring new things like a discoverer without being

told to do so.

Two boys, siblings, joined them by talking about their school bag. One of the boys

was 5 years old, the other one 3 years. When the three boys were running excited to

the house made of blankets, they were reminded two times by the calm voice of their

kindergarten teacher to do that silently.

All children played together and used their own imagination to create games. One

group built a pizzeria in the second house. The other group built a store where they

sold chairs by moving different shelves in front of the house. At first only one boy

played in the "pizzeria house". He got angry and farouche as a girl wanted to play with him. The girl didn't surrender and after a while she put her own chair inside the house and they played side by side. No kindergarten teacher had to solve the problem, which was an interesting new experience for me.

Some of the "sales assistants" came to their elderly kindergarten teacher, which was sitting at the table and felted. They made her an offer for a few chairs for 1000€. Their offer wasn't accepted, in fact she replied, that for 1000€ she could have a golden throne but the sales assistants didn't gave up. Together with three girls they went back to their store and talked about the unsatisfying chair sales results. Meanwhile some children initiated doing handicrafts together with their kindergarten teachers after they observed them for a while and got curious.

The elderly woman separated herself from the group and went to the store together with some children. She asked the sellers of the store how much they wanted for the chairs and went to get some nuts to use them as money. "Have your pick, I will pay", she said to the group of children which followed her to the store. So they picked some bracelets and gadgets. The idea of the kindergarten teacher, to offer the children something from the store, felt as very loving and respectful gesture to me, although it was just a game. A 5 year old girl reminded the kindergarten teacher that she was hungry by prodding her arm. "Okey, let's go to the pizzeria then." All of the group members went to the second house, where other kids had created a pizzeria. "The pizzeria is closed", said a 3 year old boy. "Oh, what a pity. Could you call us when you're open, please?", asked the kindergarten teacher. "Ok, it is open!", replied another 3 year old boy.

Inside the pizzeria were only four chairs, not enough for five children. One girl stood behind the table with a sad face, while the other four children were sitting and waiting for the pizza. "Oh dear, you need a chair! Let's go to the store and buy a chair for you", said the elderly kindergarten teacher. All kids stood up and went to the store to buy a chair for the girl. Nobody remained seated.

For about ten minutes they continued the game all together. All in all it became more silent and I heard only some voices from the children in the houses.

After a while the kids from the store exclaimed twice that they will soon close the shop. Two 3 year old boys from the pizzeria watched them and shouted excited: "We are closed. We are closed."

At the beginning some girls looked at me and smiled shyly, during the game a few kids between 5 and 6 years old came to me and asked me what I would write down on my notebook and how long I intended to stay. I answered them that I was writing down some things which I saw and that I would stay until lunch. Other kids showed me their hands full of wax from the candles. Thanks to my position they were not so much affected by my presence. Otherwise it could get harder to see their natural behaviour.

ROUTINES AND RITUALS:

LEARNING EMPATHY, THOUGHTFULNESS AND SOLIDARITY

There were a lot of rituals and routines during their day. Every new activity was initiated by singing, playing a game or a rhyme. The kids knew the songs and games and started to take part of the new activity. They knew exactly what to do: When the kindergarten teacher started to clear up all toys the whole group helped her. Then some of them started to make a semicircle with the chairs around the crib while the others finished cleaning-up. Two girls carried the Advent wreath in the middle. Everyone took a seat, then the kindergarten teacher whispered: "It's getting silent in our house..psst.." then they sang a song together. Later the kindergarten teacher looked at her list of names and one girl could open up the Advent calendar. She showed everyone the new picture of the calendar before she put it aside. In all songs and games every child was involved. No one felt apart or less important than the other kids. Every child got a role and they kept changing their roles from time to

time, so that every child had the possibility to experience different characters. For a Christmas play they masqueraded as Josef and Maria, the Three Kings, angels and sheep. The children had the possibility to switch in diverse roles and practise them. This was new to me, because when I went to the Kindergarten, we had to choose a role and never got the chance to change that. However, this change of roles could bring many benefits, as children could learn faster, which things they like and which they don't. In the long run this could bring an earlier so-called maturity and could be very helpful e.g. after middle school to make the right decision regarding high school or vocational school.

The two female kindergarten teachers never had to say something about the daily structure. Exactly the opposite had happened, because of their attentive reticence in all activities and games and because of their own course of action, the children were interested in their behaviour. None of the kindergarten teachers had to shout or to give strict instructions. I perceived it as a harmonic flow from one activity to another.

The songs often contained words or actions of the new activity. Before they started to paint, they sang a song about a bird and colours. The last strophe of the song was an invitation to start painting. They tried to do all their activities respectfully and silently. I thought maybe they had the chance to speak out loudly during the songs, the content or the game reminded them to calm down and then they started the activity together in silence, focused on the topic. Another point of view is that repetitions of games or songs create solidarity and develop a kind of security for a child. Every child could learn for example the days of the week by remembering the specific topic or activity on that day. In Brixen they're baking bread every Friday and every child knows that.

Before the beginning the kindergarten teacher created a relaxed atmosphere by including all children singing a song, playing a game or to perform a quote.

She called every child by its name to give them a sheet of paper for painting. Some younger kids couldn't carry their wooden tableau, on which they could paint and the

elderly kids gave them a hand. If nobody helped them, a kindergarten teacher asked someone for support. Most of the time the kindergarten teachers saw no need to request help, because the children naturally offered help to the younger ones.

RULES

The first rule I've noticed was during the snack. Some children filled up the bowls for the porridge and handed them to the other ones. Every child had to wait till the moment the kindergarten teacher and all children wished themselves a blessed meal. Then all kids had to stay calm until they finished their meals. A 5 years old girl wasn't that hungry but wanted to speak to the others, which ate porridge for their second time and had therefore the permission to speak. The elderly kindergarten teacher stroked her mouth every time she wanted to speak. Because of her still filled bowl she wasn't allowed to communicate with her friends. Maybe the purpose was to show her that next time she should tell them to get less food, because she isn't that hungry in order to prevent food waste. On the other side it was hard to observe this, because I thought no child should eat more if it feels not hungry. It could be that the children have to be silent to experience all the different tastes of a meal and to make a sensory experience. Like a popular quotation says: Strength lies in calmness.

Another rule I observed was that nobody could start the next activity without waiting for the others. If somebody wasn't ready to start, everyone had to wait or help him. This might help the children to learn inclusion and respect everyone's own rhythms.

I saw how the younger children watched the older ones and repeated their actions within their limits of their resources because of their different ages. In general, I noticed that the kindergarten teachers didn't tell them what to play or what to do. It was a free play and the kindergarten teachers started their own activity, for example cooking or doing handicrafts. Some children were curious and asked them about

their activity and some of them participated. Others had time to play freely according to their own imagination. They had time to observe the kindergarten teachers as role models and could join their activity whenever they wanted to.

At the end of my second day in the Waldorf-kindergarten I was very thankful for having the possibility to make such a wonderful experience. The concept of the Waldorf-kindergarten, as I experienced it, was based on respect in the social intercourse and I felt comfortable being there. The importance of free play and naturalistic toys inspired me for my future work as a social pedagogue. I think with the fundament given by Waldorf-kindergarten, a child has a big range of learnt skills which lead to a successful life in balance. They learn how to solve problems, respect each other and to use their own creativity. There is a lot of freedom and self-determination, which, however, made me wonder about their challenges later in school. One question for our future is how far public schools are educating children to self-determining people and how much space they're giving us for our development.

This field study was a great enrichment for me and gave me the chance to revise my own concepts for raising children and to delve deeper into the topic around our school system.

“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility—these three forces are the very nerve of education.”

— Rudolf Steiner (founder of the Waldorf-education)

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