



## Learning that Grows with the Learner: Following Waldorf Education in Kindergarten "Under the Sun"

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### Abstract

Waldorf education, which is based on human development that addresses the needs of the growing child, has its roots in the spiritual-scientific research of Rudolf Steiner - Austrian scientist and thinker, social reformer, architect, and esotericist who founded Anthroposophy. He is considered the father of Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, anthroposophical medicine, and spiritual science [1]. Waldorf educators seek to transform education into teaching/learning from natural experience which educates the whole child: spirit, soul and body. When children relate what they learn to their own experience, they are alive and interested much more in many things, and what they learn belongs to them. Everything what surrounds the child is important: environment, atmosphere, people, the things they do, the games they play and how they play.

There are many Waldorf kindergartens, but non two of them are identical, starting from outside and seeing to inside. Waldorf educators develop ideas and generate them with inner enthusiasm for learning within every child; they could achieve this in a variety of ways, looking to children internal characteristics, behavior, features, as well using their creativity, feeling, point of view to life from different perspectives. The Waldorf curriculum is broad and comprehensive, structured to respond to the three developmental phases of childhood: from birth to approximately 6 or 7 years, from 7 to 14 years and from 14 to 18 years. Rudolf Steiner emphasized to educators that the best way to provide meaningful support for the child is to comprehend these phases fully and to bring "age appropriate" content to the children that nourishes healthy growth.

This article deals with the experience and positive impact in quite newly opened private Waldorf kindergarten "Under the sun" (orig. "Po saule") in Kaunas, Lithuania, created by parents and which is developed following Waldorf education and managed in accordance with social trinomial model. Article presents child education in self-experience based environment, games influence of child's growth, learning that grows with the learner and its importance in future education and self development.

### 1. Introduction

Waldorf education is based on an anthroposophical view and understanding of the human being, that is, as a being of body, soul and spirit. The education mirrors the basic stages of a child's development from childhood to adulthood, which in general reflects the development of humanity through history from our origin, far back in past times up to the present [2].

In the International Conference on Education of UNESCO by Dr. Warren B. Eickelberg, professor of Biology and Director of Premedical Curriculum in Adelphi University, emphasized that "Waldorf education places the development of individual child in the focal point, convinced that the healthy individual is a prerequisite for a healthy society." [3] This quote is like a basement of this article and opens Waldorf's education idea, seeing that the physical and emotional wellbeing of child are essential elements of the curriculum and, as such, should be incorporated into each child's individual education development plan. In this article are provided several of many activities, „therapies“, which educate child from the basis.

Educational institutions which philosophy are based on R. Steiner's ideas (Waldorf pedagogy) have a unique and distinctive approach to educating children, aiming to enable each stage of growth to be fully and vividly enjoyed and experienced. They provide a balanced approach to the modern school curriculum. The academic, artistic and social aspects, or 'head, heart & hands', are treated as complementary facets of a single program of learning, allowing each to throw light on the others [4].

R. Steiner designed a curriculum that is responsive to the developmental phases of childhood and the nurturing of the child's imagination in educational environment. He thought that kindergartens, schools should cater to the needs of the child rather than the demands of the government or economic forces, so he developed schools that encourage creativity and free-thinking [1].



## **2. Creation process and aims of Waldorf education institution**

Impressed by Waldorf pedagogy, naturalness, focus point in the child as individual personality, wishing the best for their own children, group of parents (at the beginning we were 7 families, from which were 3 kindergarten educators who have experience in Waldorf pedagogy) decided to take the initiative and create their own kindergarten together. Common aim was to create a warm, nice and lovely home-like environment that is safe and in which the child would be able to grow and develop naturally and would feel that the “world is good”.

After a year, from the aroused idea, in April of 2014, the new private Kaunas Waldorf kindergarten “Under the sun” (orig. “Po saule”) opened its doors. It is a community based public non-profit institution which has curriculum inspired by Waldorf education that nourish and inspire our children. The education brings forward creative imagination, critical thinking, self-confidence, a sense of delight, and respect for nature and humanity while building a strong natural development in child’s education basement. Children emerge with the ability to impart direction and purpose to their lives.

The Waldorf curriculum is broad and comprehensive, structured to respond to the three developmental phases of childhood: from birth to approximately 6 or 7 years, from 7 to 14 years and from 14 to 18 years. This article deals with the activities and their benefit for child and his individual education at the first stage of child’s development in his first septennial. We will review advantages for child’s natural education and development via indoor and outdoor activities which are pursued in Waldorf kindergarten.

## **3. Education and physical intensification while being outdoors**

We all wish that the child grow up healthy and physically strong, we seek properly development of their sensory skills, emotional intelligence, logical thinking and cultural assimilation. All that we can develop and improve being outdoor, because when the child is outside, in the nature, has great opportunities for play, experiment through an inexhaustible abundance of the nature’s laws and elements.

### **3.1. Importance of being outside**

In Waldorf kindergarten, going outside is very important activity, part of the daily rhythm which is created by alternating the overall group daily activities that require more attention and with children’s free activities, when they are playing more or less independently. In general, these activities occur in regular order, and one flows to the next, in the same way each day. To create a rhythm in Waldorf’s pedagogy there is an important rule: the rhythm consists of „in-breathing“ and „out-breathing“ activities. This balanced “breathing” of activity creates an environment of clear expectations and familiar pace. Through this rhythmic activity, the children’s focus and attention span are given the opportunity to exercise and strengthen.

Stable rhythm is necessary especially for little ones, because they do not know the hours and only settled rhythm allows them to appoint which part of the day is it, rhythm allows to focus in time and to be on time. The day is rhythmic for them only when the same things are repeated in the same sequence. Therefore, the children go to the garden (outside) at the same time, after certain, diligence and attention demanding activities (called “in-breathing”).

When being outdoors children are granted full freedom of movement, which can be called "out-breathing" activity. But children are different, therefore, some children outside feels like “in-breathing” other “out-breathing” and that is natural, this helps for their health development. Physical activity helps to correct the formation of internal organs, bones, heart activity. The presence of the field develops all 12 senses (especially it is trained sight, smell, hearing, touch, movement, balance, etc.).

### **3.2. Freedom for imagination**

Being in an environment where a rich array of natural things are, the child feels especially free, uninhibited, excited, his creativity and imagination is awake, because having toys, which are not prepared in advance, are not finished, he thinks and finds out how natural things, recourses of nature can become toys and how to use them, adapt to his needs and wishes. Being outdoor also logical thinking is trained, because information’s gathering and its perception is held by collating, sorting, classifying, measuring and recognizing, kids systematize their world and gain an understanding of how it works. Inside the brains, children thinking is developed in symbols which are set in their mind, and its’ application which means that they use items, nature resources in a special way, for example, imagining that cone is a phone or a stick is a horse.



### **3.3. Space for exploration**

There is no doubt that the nature for children is an inexhaustible space for exploration, discovery. As well, when being outside it is perfect cognitive abilities developmental that reflects the principles of operation of intelligence, it covers how children think, perceive the world and fit what learns. Children, in particular when they are outdoors, watch the events, ask questions, predict possible solutions. And we, adults, should monitor such children's cognitive development and curiosity.

### **3.4. Training of motor skills**

Being and playing outside in nature children have more opportunities to develop of gross and fine motor skills. Gross motor development is obvious: they are outside running around, jumping, climbing in the trees, fetch, waving and so on. Fine motor development, it is training of the small muscles of the body (hands, fingers, wrist), which enables us to write, grasp small objects, put the clothes on. Scientific studies have shown that the development of fine motor influences cognitive child's development, for example, if the child gather pebbles, small stones, he improves fine motor, but as well the brain's part which is responsible for development of cognitive processes works actively. Fine motor skills are a strong indicator for determining children's subsequent achievements. Through the prism of playing children assimilate exact, physical sciences, gaining literacy, literary skills.

## **4. Education development through play**

Friedrich Froebel (Fröbel), the German educationalist, best known as the originator of the 'kindergarten system' and play. He believed that humans are essentially productive and creative – and fulfillment comes through developing these in harmony with the world. As a result, Froebel sought to encourage the creation of educational environments that involved practical work and the direct use of materials. Through engaging with the world, understanding unfolds. Hence the significance of play – it is both a creative activity and through it children become aware of their place in the world. [5]. Froebel was using nature as the model of perfection to educate children. His goals were to teach children how to learn, observe, reason, express and create through play, employing philosophies of unity and interconnectedness [6].

A play, especially for child, is a very important activity, which enables to tame the world, discovering himself. The game provides a basis for the development of each child's individuality [6].

Israeli psychologist Sara Smilansky investigated relation of children's play, imagination development in the kindergarten and his subsequent behavior at school. She found that the play has an impact on cognitive and socio-emotional development at school. Children who nicely played in kindergarten, were sensitive to the world (from positive point of view), open to contacts and had better educational results at school. Cognitive-creative activities which are developed during the play are: better verbalisation, richer vocabulary, more curiosity, higher intellectual competence, higher language comprehension, better peer cooperation, reduced aggression, etc. [7]

When playing the child undertakes a make-believe role, uses it to transform objects into things necessary for the play, as well verbal descriptions or exclamations are used at times in place of actions or situations. Further it is explained how child develops during the game.

### **4.1. Speech's and language's skills development**

The game provides an opportunity for children to develop speech and language skills, it is also a great practice by learning to listen, to understand, to hear each other. Whether, a child plays together with an adult or friend, or the one, he usually and listen or talk during the game, speak instead of toys and gives them character traits. While child is playing, especially when discuss about his play with adult, he expands his vocabulary, as well here writing primers are formed.

### **4.2. Social expression and relationship building, patience development**

Role-playing game encourages social interaction, develops social skills and competence. Children who play with both, adults and peers of their age, learn about social communication, relationship between people that they acquire during the game experience. Such children are more aware of the feelings and quality of the relationship and friendship, manage their moods better. While playing children share ideas and develop their experience, are accustomed to respect different points of view, learn to wait, to develop their patience. Also, when they play with other children, they have to agree on the necessary details of compiling plans, take decisions, understand a safe game rules. They are repeating and recreating real-life situations and trying to overcome their fears of playing the part of what excites him, while playing even the rules for the child makes sense and makes that activity interesting.

Children who play role-playing games are able better to express sympathy for others, because they have the chance, to be in others role.

## 5. Conclusions

Concluding the article, we should emphasize, that in Waldorf education great attention is paid to the child's imagination and creativity development which in the first septennial unfolds during the play, as well being and proceeding in natural environment indoor and outdoor. The creative power of the child is encouraged in various artistic activities and the environment that surrounds the child. Therefore, in Waldorf kindergartens, there are a lot of toys that are not fully consummated, toys are natural, made from natural recourses or are nature's elements, that children could creatively interpret games by themselves. Child's imaginative development is an important prerequisite for creative thinking, also it is important to emphasize that thinking and a volition development makes personality free of restrictions and enables to successfully adapt to a changing world and grow in individual education [8]. R. Steiner thought that one of the basic principles in pedagogy and education is – teaching to mobilize internal forces in creative way, training to feel a nearby man and environment, developing artistic taste and imagination. Therefore, firstly, artistic spring has to be educated and on the basis of it to foster intellectual development. Beside of this we have to maintain the rhythm. From the steady beating of your heart, to the rising and setting of the sun, and the regular flow of the seasons, rhythm is an essential element of the human experience. The familiarity of a regular rhythm creates the best possible learning environment for the young child [7] and as Rudolf Steiner emphasized - rhythm is the “carrier of life” [9].

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