

Che cosa nutre i nostri bambini? What nourishes children?

In the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, the theme of nourishment is addressed by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education in an international conference in Conegliano, Italy. The aim is to bring attention to bear on the importance of nourishment in early childhood, not only physical, but also mental and emotional nourishment and their implications for the future well being of the individual and of society. We seek to strengthen European cooperation on these themes through an exchange of ideas and practices and through the presentation of experiences that underline how healthy development for children can be brought about in a social environment which is united and conscious of its responsibility towards future generations.

The conference was opened by **Karen Chapman**, teacher at Conegliano Waldorf School and Italy's representative on the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE). The Vice-President of the Province of Treviso, **Floriano Zambon** welcomed us to the region and recalled that in matters of nutrition, bread alone is not enough, as mental and emotional nourishment are fundamental to human health and well-being. He stressed that Treviso is interested in international projects and is active in the European arena. Improving the range and quality of services for young children is a primary aim for local, regional and national governments across Europe.



The Centre of Conegliano



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The Mayor, **Alberto Maniero**, welcomed us to the beautiful and tranquil town of Conegliano and invited us to consider this important topic of nutrition, while imbibing the calm and enlivening mood of the setting. He applauded the opportunity for transnational discussion and acknowledged the positive contribution and presence of the Waldorf School in the district.

Christopher Clouder then addressed the conference on behalf of ECSWE; 'What nourishes children?' is, in some ways, a strange title for a conference, given the thousands of years of human cultural development and ingenuity that have brought us to this century. Why, after all this time and all the upbringing of children that has taken place, are we still asking this question? Surely, after many centuries of childhood, and cuisine, the answer to this question must be both simple and fully established. Well, there are many childhoods;

each child passes through a different childhood and each child poses a new question that requires a fresh response. As with cooking, so with childhood: there is no one recipe book because continual change is a feature of humankind. The Welsh poet, R S Thomas pointed to the notion that children inhabit a land "*where we dance, where we play, where life is still asleep*". It is not enough for adults to approach children with an "*analytic eye*", since if we do, we may well fall short and in trying to cater for the masses, we may fail to meet any child where they are, rather than where we 'analyse' them to be.

An emerging dynamic in contemporary western society is recognition of the importance of identity and the possibility of working more consciously with identity. Da Vinci's work *The Last Supper* presages this social development by depicting 12 completely individual responses to the scene in which Christ breaks bread with his disciples. A dozen distinct characters and personalities; their separateness, similarities and differences emphasised and brought together. They are all alone and, at the same time, in relationship to each other. The task of harnessing diversity and individuality into social communities of the future is offered here, in prototype.

It can seem that the analytic approach is often to the fore in the design of education policy, with an almost myopic attention to the supposed requirements of standards, targets and measurable assessment data. The good news, however, is that children cannot be standardised and we should really honour this in our endeavours as teachers, parents and policy-makers.

During the last 20 years there has been a significant change in the sociology of childhood. At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, there was a focus on saving children from physical want and need as well as a moral duty to save children from sin and error. The concept of rescuing children has transformed in the current century into an emphasis on establishing and promoting the 'rights' of children. Following the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the progressive view is to see children as agents of change in their own right. This has led to a new set

of issues, circling around the question of those things that don't nourish or malnourish children. A long and miserable, albeit familiar, list of problems and symptoms is the outcome of such questioning. Palmer (2006: *Toxic Childhood*) refers to the relentless waves of modernity that press in on all sides, leading to an array of mental health problems and social and emotional difficulties.

In a book entitled *Good Work*, based on interviews with some 12,000 people, Gardner (2002) addresses the questions '*What makes people good?*' and '*What makes people do good?*' Good doesn't derive from genetics or biological determinism. While conditioning and inheritance play a part, the book argues that neither family nor cultural influences provide sufficient reason or explanation. There is another element, which lies in the idea that how we think of the future determines what the future becomes. Conscious human choice shapes and creates the future. It is not mistakes or ignorance that count most but people's intentions. When such thinking is applied to working with children, it becomes apparent that authenticity and intentionality matter, not just the actuality of what transpires in day to day life.

The Danish family therapist and writer Jesper Juul has spoken of how respect gives birth to respect and people who are cared for look to care for others, while those whose integrity is honoured do likewise for the integrity of their fellow human beings. Regarded in this sense, love is a very important aspect of intentionality.

Answers to the question: *What nourishes children?* are not complex; in fact, one could say they are rather simple, although cutting edge research in neurobiology, psychology and genetics is only now beginning to confirm what common sense has long avowed. Love and laughter nourish children and enrich the brain's development. Poets, artists and many other people have long held such things to be true and now, even the "*analytic eye*" has discovered this phenomenon. Nature nourishes children and children can suffer from an absence of being in nature. In New York, it has been observed that children who exhibit symptoms of ADHD can be calmed and nourished by a 20-

minute stroll in a public park. 50 years ago, Rachel Carson (1962) issued a prophetic warning in her book *Silent Spring* and now we have reached a demographic situation where 50% of men, women and children live in an urban setting and this raises a whole new set of challenges for our children's relationship to their environment.

Play and imagination nourish children. In a time where outer progress is evident in matters of infant mortality and primary infant care, the sad and worrying fact is that many children are losing the ability to play. When we lose the ability to play, imagination is threatened and this undermines the foundations of human creativity on which rest capacities for social and cultural renewal and economic and environmental transformation.

Stefanie Leone, Legambiente School & Training Centre, Verona, Veneto

"Environmental education: a means towards growth"

In the aftermath of the industrial revolution, concern for nature and the natural heritage of the countryside heightened. Today, it is widely recognised that the protection of nature enhances the countryside, society and the economy. In the past there was a tendency to regard those in the scientific community as the keepers of 'elite' knowledge, whereas nature was valued for its merely 'aesthetic' worth.

After the First World War, there was a temporary halt in the interest in nature, followed by the creation of national parks and the rebirth, in the 1960s, of the 'nature movement' witnessed by a surge in interest in and awareness of the natural environment and ecology. The 1970s can be regarded as a turning point when the hazards and dangers posed by nuclear power and nuclear 'accidents' were brought home to the western world. Today, the health and quality of the environment is a source of a concern not limited to scientists and activists.

Environmental education began by chance, via improvisation and 'do it yourself'. Such activities

served to awaken a wider consciousness. The school system, meanwhile, was rather closed, limited to describing and informing about environmental matters. During the 1980s, and more powerfully following the Chernobyl nuclear accident in April 1986, a widespread sense of impotence and fatalism emerged as people invested trust in the value and accuracy of 'scientific' and, therefore, 'flawless' information. Too often this information relied on reductive and materialistic thinking. Chernobyl reawakened fears that nuclear accidents are incomparable and the prospect of the rapid and catastrophic movement of deadly pollution across national borders was apparent.

The idea of protecting nature developed into a need for sustainability, in order that there would be a future to hand on. Urban and environmental concepts merged and the call for environmental sustainability began to be heard over the ever-present advocates of economic development. It is increasingly considered that hands-on activities and on-site experiences are vital in influencing environmental consciousness and changing people's ways.

As modern human beings we can think globally, but we *must* act locally, by getting to grips with emergencies that are on the doorstep and events that are truly experienced in nature, *in situ*. Environmental education is a tool and a method of learning that nourishes and teaches, is purposeful and fun, and includes the feelings and emotions. As such it is a practical expression of the Chinese proverb: *Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.*

The *Legambiente School and Training Centre* promotes the idea that environmental education should not remain within the confines of a school or a curriculum, but should have a place in fairs, markets and local civic initiatives. In schools, the Centre supports and promotes projects that are to do with the actual nature of environmental problems. For example, the precious asset of water can be looked at and studied and appreciated scientifically, culturally, socially, artistically and internationally, by means of integrated, multi-

disciplinarian approaches over one or two years. Such projects lead to the production of posters, books of reflections, art work and interactive drama. The direction begins with the aim of teaching children to read the environment; to act autonomously to begin with and then to be guided to study nature and natural phenomena and to know what to look for. A trip to a waste-separation plant has a clear experiential focus, which can stimulate a sense of respect for the waste and the people that work with it. The idea that waste can lead to art and craft activities is an offshoot of such an approach, providing a stimulus for transformation and regeneration and re-use.



Libera Scuola Steiner-Waldorf "Novalis", Conegliano

Dr Sergio Maria Francardo, S.I.M.A (Società Italiana di Medicina Antroposofica)

"In nourishing a child we educate him: our conscious choices are a means to freedom"

There is great choice in the field of nutrition in the modern world and so a key consideration is an awareness of what the choices are. We must be careful that we are not hemmed in by a singular approach to choosing; by an approach that is linked to intellectual thought that is unable to grasp the essence of life and existence. Food is made of life, not molecules and bits and pieces of material substance. Food has an inner, psychological quality and has an intrinsically human aspect that manifests through pleasure and the development of the senses. Food is part of the whole earth and is a living element shared by mankind. Through the nourishment of our food, we give the food the seal of our own individuality.

Proteins manifest differently in each person; each person produces their own unique proteins. Food acts as a channel whereby an individual provides for their own energy. Food is also a place where the inherited, genetic stream and individual stream converge. These two dynamics are fundamental for the future development of human life. Parents instinctively do not want clones; they wish their children to be unique, unfettered. Even identical twins have different, incompatible proteins. Poor quality nutrition can be a fundamental aspect of a child's environment. Today, it is alarming that our individual proteins are becoming less individual. Our genes need to be refreshed by food and the living quality that is present in good food. If food is lacking in zest and vitality, if it is boring and repetitive, people can become like arrested caterpillars - trapped in a state that we cannot develop beyond.

With food we can be hugely sociable or anti-social. There is a certain implicit selfishness in the way in which much food is produced today. 800 million people are underfed; over a billion people eat too much. An excess of proteins cause most degenerative diseases. Meat-eating and tobacco smoking are inherently selfish and unsustainable. According to the United Nations, the number one source of global warming is the industrial production of food. A huge amount of greenhouse gases is the by-product of food production. It is on such a scale that the emissions from agriculture put transport emissions in the shadows. In addition, methane is more damaging than carbon dioxide, which prompts the conclusion that the cultivation and consumption of vegetables produces much less carbon dioxide than meat-eating.

Children are nourished by play, games, exercise and rhythmical movement. In fact, if play and movement in childhood were to be given their rightful and proper space, heart surgery in adulthood would decline drastically. This is because play and movement helps the body to develop the healthy proteins. When we exercise, we learn to cope with our physicality and we make proper use of our proteins. Adults need to make informed and healthy choices in the area of

exercise and nutrition. It is for parents and teachers to make the choices for the children's well-being, not the children themselves. It may not be in fashion to say this but when we give children too many choices and too much responsibility for making choices, we end up taking freedom from children - the reverse of what is intended! By giving them choices; it is like giving them cortisone, when we ask a child 'What would you like for dinner?' we cannot really complain if they say, 'Chips!' This business of burdening children with choices at every turn is akin to dosing them on cortisone. It's unhealthy and it masks or denudes the immune system, which is a vital system that tells us about our health and well-being. We can choose for our children to have full childhoods and healthy food. Why should they be restricted and burdened by having to make such a choice themselves?

Cinzia Scaffidi, Slow Food Study Centre
"Children, not customers. How to counteract the market-oriented food system, at home and at school"

Over the last 30 or 40 years, there has been a change in thinking in terms of what constitutes an adult. In some important ways, western society is passing through an adolescent phase in which there is a pressure for us all to act like teenagers, as immature customers seeking easy self-gratification. After all, a mature person is not a good customer; he has few needs, she knows what she wants. If we don't have confidence about who we are and what we want the market will keep making proposals, telling us what we want, or what we should want. The ever-impressionable citizen can be reduced to a perpetual consumer with needs that are never fulfilled - the need to keep purchasing, keep consuming, keep trying things out, keep moving on from one fad to the next, in an insatiable shopping spree.

In the past, society showed more respect for childhood. Children used to be sent out to play, told what time they should go to bed and provided with the food that was theirs to eat. Adults who do not know what to eat themselves cannot help children to learn how to eat. Children

are frequently given *carte blanche* on which to write their own preferences from an enormous menu of choices. In recent times, children and nature have been treated similarly in an exploitative and materialistic way. Pretending that adults and children are equal in terms of maturity and status is not empowerment; it is false egalitarianism that leads to precocity, not maturity. When families treat children as clients, via a stream of consumer throwaways and gadgets and when schools treat children as trainee customers being inducted for service in the market, then our society is in trouble.

The process or journey from the shop-counter to the dustbin is accelerating. In order for the market to keep pumping, it is necessary for a simple premise to be in place - that every promise is a false one. Otherwise, consumers would quickly achieve fulfilment via consumption and this would sound the market's death-knell. There is an element of violence in the dynamics that drive the market and, of course, there is the basic ingredient of illusion. As with the cat and fox in the story of *Pinocchio*, the consumer - the citizen - is assailed on all sides, tempted to double what he wants, needs, can do - easily and quickly. The market is full of foxes and cats and appears to offer and allow everything, with new editions or new versions being promoted all the time. Children are used to hearing the old adage, 'Don't take sweets from strangers'. Well, in the unfettered free market, multinational corporations are the strangers, sponsoring fast food lunch canteens in schools and *Coca Cola* is the new coloniser with drink machine outposts strewn across the land.

The western world is in need of cultural renewal, but a transformation, not a revolution. Transformation brings change more slowly, in a grounded way that has depth. If we do not take care of our children, the market will feed them; force-feed them with a diet that they think they are choosing. Children need to learn how to spend time on their own, to spend time in nature, to spend time not constantly choosing and consuming. Having time to grow things, to experience the fulfilment that comes from cultivating life from seed to fruit is nourishing. We must look to ourselves and each other to

become more citizens and less consumers. Although the sense of liberation and possibility from the 1960s has been replaced by a sense of displacement and distraction, globalisation is potentially a force for positive, transformational change, since globalisation is a network of temporal and spatial connections, concerned with the circulation of ideas and thoughts, not just products.

Fabio Brescacin, EcorNaturaSì

"Which agri-culture will nourish the future generations?"

Feeding people is a fundamental activity. Plants are necessary to life; man cannot feed on sunlight. Traditionally, the connections between humanity and the land were forged via the production of animal manure that was then spread on the land to nourish it, which then led to the cultivation of vegetables. Chemical fertilisers solved the problem of production and freed the farmer and the grower from the land and from animals. The 'fertiliser revolution' led to the 'weeding revolution'. In days long gone, digging the earth and weeding the soil carried archetypal biblical meanings. Hoeing and digging are now an ancient task. What was labour-intensive and time-consuming is today done very cheaply. The rapid spraying of liquid pesticides and weed-killers has put paid to the labour of weeding. Thirdly, the 'old' growing methods were turned over by the introduction of hybrid seeds. Before, farmers kept back the best seeds and traded in the local farming community. Now, seeds bought from American corn-fields are selected, exported and planted in other countries on other continents. The seed has been stripped of its sense of place.

A combination of engineering, scientific and cultural developments has created the modern agricultural paradigm, whereby there is relief from manual labour and also a sense that the problem of quantity has been solved. For less effort, we have more food in fact, we have too much. Food can now be produced at our convenience and yet alongside the sense of achievement and progress, a number of problems and tragic elements have surfaced:

1. The nutritional quality of food has declined - growth is now forced and unnatural; plants absorb an enormous amount of water in the cultivation process.
2. The chemicals used to protect the plants are polluting; toxic elements are now evident in plants and this leads to an increased number of people with wheat allergies who cannot eat bread. It is alarming that the body rejects bread, because it is no longer suitable.
3. With the genetic manipulation of plants, little or no attention is given to the 'life' quality. Plants become more and more abstract from the earth, from the farmer and from the customer.

Care for the landscape is an inseparable part of farming the countryside. Farming gives shape to the landscape and there is much evidence that the landscape is becoming deformed. Here and there, curves and corners of traditional agriculture remain, for example, in the villages around Benedictine monasteries. Sadly, much of modern agriculture flattens the landscape and spoils it. The soul breathes with the landscape and industrial methods of farming are alienating the man from the land. Tractors can now be driven by satellites, tractor drivers are becoming superfluous. Technicians now determine and govern farming. There is little room for personal participation. The green revolution took farmers off the land and generated beggars on the streets of cities. The 'technical' treatment of the land has broken the link with the human soul and people are needed less and less in agriculture. Did traditional agriculture have to change? Yes, undoubtedly. Was this the only way to change? No, most certainly not.

In the 1920s, Steiner was asked a question about the nature of the farm. He reported that each farm is an individual organism and must be treated so. The primary features of farming shared by organic and bio-dynamic farmers alike are:

- The over-riding importance of the quality of food
- Focus on the sensitivity of soil

- The importance of a varied and nourishing landscape
- The notion that each farm must carry footprint of the farmer and his work with the plants and animals
- The proposal that each farm is its own action-research centre

Such considerations pose weighty questions and propose opportunities for a renewal of farming philosophy and practice. Within such a renewal, the role of the consumer is key. The customer can be an integral part of farming in the future. Food that is mass-produced quickly and mechanistically is neither good *per se*, nor is it inevitable. Food-choice and consumer-intervention are also powerful agents for change and could be the means by which farming reclaims its roots.



European Council members at Conegliano

Sabino Pavone,
Federation of Steiner-Waldorf Schools in Italy
"Man does not live by bread alone..."

In concluding the conference, Sabino reminded us that the European Union is focusing on the theme of social exclusion and poverty. When we face so many complicated and challenging problems, an element of conviction is needed. We know there is not enough time; that it is relatively easy to identify the problems and to see the intractable nature of the problems. We can also recognise that poverty might exist in a situation of apparent abundance, since poverty can be the outcome of spiritual short-sightedness, as well as material shortage. Cultural marginalisation is a feature of

our times and the issue of food, farming and nutrition is a prime example where progress on an outer, material level might simply manifest as a mask for deeper problems - problems of cultural deficit, environmental overload and social dislocation.

In 1996, an *International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*¹, chaired by former European Commission President Jacques Delors, identified four foundation stones for education: learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together. Such foundations constitute an educational, social and cultural manifesto to ensure that no human talents and gifts lie buried in the soil as unknown treasure. These foundations are surely the means by which we can make the bread that will nourish children the world over.

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Trevor Mephram (Rapporteur)

¹Learning: the Treasure Within, the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century

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