

The "harmonizing-vision"... Extract from the book VISION WORKS by Peter Hesse (pages 118 to 121)

– an attempt to unite major child-centered didactical methods in harmony:

"In the very beginning in Haiti, when I first "discovered" the value of Maria Montessori's didactics for early childhood development, I talked about Early Childhood Education in my political circles in Germany. In my view, the reality in Haiti and also in Africa was rather sad. Whatever happened for children before their school age of six was concentrated in the larger cities and of very insufficient quality. It, however, proved to be difficult to suggest Montessori as a well suited didactical model to "give children a starting chance in life" (as I usually simplify my appeals) for educational reforms on a wider scale. In political discussions people were skeptical when I mentioned Montessori as one suitable method.

Any particular method often created acceptance problems in politics. This was independent of the method itself. Only when there was personal experience or deeper knowledge concerning a specific method, there was acceptance among important opinion leaders. Sometimes, when someone knew Montessori from their own experience, mainly through their children, there was positive resonance. Other people had positive Waldorf school experiences. In the USA, "High-Scope" had their followers. High-Scope is a didactical system, which leans heavily on Montessori, as the founder of High-Scope himself admitted in a private discussion, but created its own "brand" for marketing reasons. Those three (and later some more) child-centered initiatives all fought for change. All wanted to replace traditional teacher-centered methods with something better – with their respective child-centered didactics. Unfortunately however, all good systems fight their own political battles. That gave birth to a new vision: **good child-centered early childhood educational systems working together** to gain political recognition. Still remaining skeptical myself, whether this vision could work, I started a process to at least give it a chance.

The fact that learning begins with birth, or even before, started to be recognized by the educational world, but not yet in some systematic form. This became evident at the "World Conference on Education for All" in 1990. In most competing quality concepts, pre-school started around the age of three. So why not get together and argue together as one group for more political support?

I found relatively easy acceptance for the general principle that children and not teachers must be "in the center", because children are individually differing, but equally valuable personalities. Good didactical systems simply cannot treat children as if they were all learning at the same speed. Good teaching must follow the children's differentiated learning. This was widely accepted in political discussions even among people who are not engaged in educational questions. To increase political "impact" in arguing for educational change, for better educational quality, I wanted to bring representatives of at least the best known child-centered didactical systems together to form a unified platform for change. It was an early rational vision in the early beginning of my own widening consciousness. This vision of a united action may have been naïve. I tried it anyway.

"The World Conference on Education for All" in Jomtien in March 1990 was organized by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank. I tried to get invited to the conference – in vain. State representatives and the international community did, however, follow a good direction in Jomtien. The Education for All ("EfA") goals were not yet decided, but Early Childhood was already being looked at – although not yet very seriously. Five years later, during the "UN Mid-Decade Review Education for All" in 1995 in Amman, Jordan, Early Childhood Development was reinforced. By that time, it had also become easier for the engaged civil society to participate in UN conferences. I again made an effort to be invited – and finally was allowed to join the conference in Jordan. I participated as the only NGO from Germany – but we were an engaged group of international Early Childhood activists working and arguing together with some success.

Five years earlier, in 1990, the time had not been ripe for serious cooperation between the official representatives of states and the international community with the engaged civil society. Inside the international organizations and inside the civil society, true cooperation was also slow to develop. I, therefore, had tried to speed this up a little in those circles who were involved in improving the quality of Early Childhood Development and Education ("ECDE").

In November 1990, I approached the three UN EfA-organizing bodies and the World Bank with a two-page proposal (see copy of the original pages in the annex) to help to bring together "didactical specialists for early childhood education" with the (naïve) goal: ***"Optimizing didactical material as much as international consensus can be reached"***. The final goal was to initiate good quality pre-school projects in those One-world countries (in 1990 we still called them '3rd world countries') who would be willing to participate. – Nobody in those great UN organizations responded to this suggestion. When I directly approached representatives of the three main educational groups, it became quite evident that my vision was truly naïve.

Nobody wanted to give up their supreme feelings of being the best. In the case of Montessori it was not clear to me at that time that there was no fully homogenous Montessori structure, but several somehow competing fractions. The followers of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy responded with basic sympathy and some Waldorf school teachers even joined an "INITIATIVE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION for children in ONE world" which I started two years later in 1992 (please see pdf pages in www.solidarity.org - "Early Childhood Education" under "ONE world concepts"). Following my suggestions to cooperate with the other systems, however, did not catch on with the Waldorf schools I contacted. "High-Scope" did at least seem interested in the beginning. They invited me to come to their headquarters where the whole managerial group carefully listened to the suggestions – with poker faces and no positive reaction either.

Well, it had been worth trying. Finding out that group interests are difficult to overcome for one united political purpose was not really a surprise to me, but hopefully at a later date, the engagement for all children may still bring people together in a growing One-world consciousness. In Haiti, our option was simply to continue building on what had been started."