

# Childhood and Vulnerability: Tasks for the 21st Century

By Jan Christopher Göschel

The 2016 UNICEF report on «The State of the World's Children»<sup>1</sup>, published this year on the 70th anniversary of the organization, presents a challenging picture of the wellbeing of children across the globe. In 2014, 159 million children under age five (the equivalent of the combined population of Italy, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Hungary, Greece, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) were impacted by stunted development, suffering permanent developmental impairment as a consequence of social, economic and environmental conditions. Based on current data, the report projects that without systemic change, 69 million children (equivalent to the total population of France) under age 5 will die in the next 14 years. By 2030, 167 million children (equivalent to the combined population of Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) will be living in extreme poverty, and 60 million children of primary school age (equivalent to the combined population of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland, Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia) will be out of school.

## Childhood: An Endangered Period of Life

The root cause identified in the report is a «vicious intergenerational cycle that curtails children's opportunities, deepens inequalities and threatens societies everywhere.»<sup>2</sup> Children who get caught in its vortex «because of their place of birth; because of their race, ethnicity or gender; or because they have a disability or live in poverty» are denied the basic rights to safety, health, play and education «and deprived of what they need to grow up healthy and strong.» This intergenerational cycle, which not only perpetuates existing inequalities, but enhances them with each generational turn, is exacerbated today «by the increasingly protracted nature of armed conflict, [...] climate-related disasters and chronic crises, including those that lead to the persistent displacement of large numbers of people across the globe. As a result, even though access to

education has improved in many parts of the world, the total number of school age children around the world without opportunities for formal education has increased since 2011.

Meanwhile, even in economically privileged situations, childhood is faced with its own set of challenges. Much has been written elsewhere about the impacts of stress generated by narrowly achievement-oriented educational systems and the ever-more intrusive presence of media and information/entertainment technology in children's lives. The combined effect of these two factors alone is a drastic reduction of developmentally appropriate play, including the sensory, motor and social experiences necessary for healthy neurodevelopmental and psychosocial maturation. This decline has been linked to childhood anxiety, stress and depression, as well as difficulties with attention, self-regulation and narcissism which have all increased at the same time as play has gradually disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

## «Autism Spectrum Disorder» as a Phenomenon of our Time

Another more puzzling phenomenon is the rise in the recorded incidence of autism spectrum disorders. In the US, for example, 1 in 68 eight year-old children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls) qualified for some type of autism spectrum diagnosis in 2012. Of these, about 32% also qualified for an intellectual disability diagnosis, while another 25% fell into the borderline intellectual disability range. The overall numbers represent a very substantial increase from just ten years prior, when the recorded incidence was about 1 in 150. This increase continues a trend that has been seen for several decades and seems similar, at least across the mostly high-income industrialized countries where such data is available.<sup>4</sup>

While it is generally assumed that at least some of this increase is the result of changing diagnostic practices, even conservative authorities such as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now consider

the possibility that there might be some true increase in the prevalence of the underlying phenomenon. Other sources speak more boldly of an «autism epidemic». Regardless of this debate, it seems clear that autism has risen to the forefront of public awareness as a 21st century issue in health, education and social welfare (with 2011 estimates that childhood autism might cost the US up to 60.9 billion per year – an amount equivalent to about half of the entire federal education budget line item).

### **Invisible Eugenics versus the Development of Inclusive Cultures**

On the other hand, advances in prenatal diagnostics have already drastically reduced the number of children born with certain other types of developmental disabilities – most notably Down syndrome.<sup>5</sup> As prenatal screening widens its catch to a broader spectrum of chromosomal abnormalities and genetically linked syndromes, this trend can be expected to become much more pervasive. In the case of Down syndrome, this almost invisible reemergence of eugenic practices has led to a peculiar and paradoxical situation: While there is a body of literature that convincingly shows that having a child with Down syndrome is connected with greater wellbeing of the entire family (including parents and siblings) after birth, the prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome usually causes significant stress and anxiety and is experienced as a negative event, often leading to the decision to terminate the pregnancy.<sup>6</sup>

While the so-called «Down syndrome advantage», the positive effect that having a family member with Down syndrome has on other family members (shown in greater subjective indicators of well-being, lower divorce rates of parents and enhanced psychosocial development among siblings), has been identified specifically for this syndrome, the new eugenics also stand in broader contrast to the cultural phenomenon of a more widespread acceptance and recognition of the value and place in society of children (and adults) with developmental disabilities. This shift, which has developed in stages throughout the 20th century, is reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other forms in which the movement towards ever greater inclusiveness of society as a whole is being formalized and given legal power.

### **Inclusion and its Side Effects**

The movement towards an embrace of diversity and inclusiveness, now embedded in transnational agreements, is reshaping public educational systems – not only in high income countries, but also in middle and even in low income countries. However, legal mandates that claim to support diversity and promote inclusiveness sometimes have unintended consequences that negatively impact especially the most vulnerable people. A strong political and funding preference for educational placements that are considered «inclusive» can end up working against diversity and choice by eliminating the spectrum of educational options for those whose complex needs might not be met well by a one-size-fits-all approach. When political advocacy becomes ideological and is hijacked by attempts to cut costs, systems lose the flexibility to create undogmatic solutions that are based on a true understanding of unique individual situations.

### **Think global, act local**

These social, cultural and political trends make up some of the force vectors that converge to shape the field of education for children in vulnerable life situations. As professional practitioners in this field, we stand at their intersection in a particular place and time. It is sometimes difficult to shift the gaze from the immediate situation in front of us, the individual child and his or her needs, to this larger play of forces and recognize the individual situation as a place where these forces come together in a particular way to impact an individual biography.

However, as anthroposophic practitioners, we are called to do just that, in line with the familiar motto: «Think global, act local.» If we can carry a dynamic inner picture of global social and cultural processes – the trap of intergenerational cycles that make the poor poorer and the rich richer; the ecological crises and political conflicts leading to migrations and displacements at a scale never known before in human history; the progressive elimination of play through education and technology; the appearance of ever more children who do not learn to play, even if given the opportunity; the almost invisible re-emergence of eugenics, at the same time as we embrace diversity and social inclusion as contemporary values; the ideological in-

strumentalization of those same progressive values for an agenda of cost-cutting that marginalizes the most vulnerable even further – if we can carry this picture as the phenomenology, the symptomatology of our time, we can perhaps find the many small and unassuming ways through which we can break the dynamics of a destructive cycle right where it impacts one individual situation or one small community.

In a living system, change does not come from some central place of command-and-control. Change can start at any place within the system. Once it has appeared in one place, it will begin to show up in other places, seemingly disconnected and with little effect on the system as a whole. But at some point, when the small local embodiments of change have achieved critical mass and interconnectedness, their influence can begin to reverberate and ripple through the entire system, shifting it into a different mode. Not only disease and social pathology, but also healing and developmental progress can be propagated in this non-linear way.

### Vulnerability as a Yardstick for Social Change

The UNICEF report ends in a «Call for Action» that highlights another aspect of this non-linear dynamic of change. In reviewing developmental progress with regard to the situation of the world's children, it finds that whenever the effort goes towards improving the situation of the most vulnerable, the most marginalized and those who are least able to advocate for themselves, all groups will end up better off. However, when the focus is elsewhere, improvements may happen for some segment of the population, but they do not translate to the most vulnerable – and can even leave them more disadvantaged than before. In other words, positive social change trickles up, not down (as some neo-liberal economists would have it). Thus, the main strategic direction for leveraging global change is to develop new creative solutions to complex systemic problems at the local level, focusing on the most disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable children. And the more interconnected these local efforts are across the health, education and social sectors, sharing resources among private and public agencies and networks, integrating short-term emergency interventions and long-term development work and working in inclusive, bottom-up, collaborative and participatory processes, the more effectively they will gain global momentum.

### Contribution of Anthroposophic Curative Education

Such global social and cultural change through local action in support of society's most vulnerable members has been the expressed goal of «Heilpädagogik» (the original term for what is often rendered as «curative education» in an English-speaking anthroposophic context) since it was first articulated in 1861. It must remain the goal of the anthroposophic curative education as well. This has a number of implications for our work as we look ahead towards the 100th anniversary of Steiner's «Curative Education Course»:

- We will need to be attentive to the most vulnerable and marginalized children in today's world and develop ways of addressing their needs, even as we continue to support the achievements and progress towards inclusion made in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities. While the answer to the question of who is most vulnerable will vary across contexts, this will certainly include working with children affected by displacement and trauma, as well as complex and multiple disabilities.
- We will need to pay attention to the youngest children and the various challenges to sensory and neurodevelopmental health that impact early development – also, and maybe especially, in wealthy industrialized societies. This also means advocating for developmentally appropriate approaches throughout the various education systems within which we work.
- We will need to continue to build cultures that value human diversity, including the presence and contribution of those living with a disability, in order to counter the new eugenics that increasingly closes the door to a whole spectrum of possibilities for incarnation.
- We will need to strengthen our interconnectedness as a global movement – our ability to work with each other, learn from each other and support each other in practical ways, as well as our networking, partnerships and exchange with others active in our fields of work.

The spiritual scientific foundation of our work can help us understand and work with the dynamic interrelationship between the micro-perspective of the day-to-day work with individual children in need of care and support and the global context whose forces converge in this moment of the I-to-I encounter, and to which we can apply leverage through the way we shape that encounter. The central me-

dition that Steiner gave to those working in this field is a tool to practice this inner gesture: to see the whole global situation present within the meeting of two human beings, and to see the significance of what happens in that meeting for the whole of humanity. The point is the circle; the circle is the point. The situations of children in the 21st century bring us face-to-face with the existential question of humanity. When we can inwardly hold together the widest possible view of global developments with the individual developmental path right in front of us, then that perspective opens up, in which we can find the present and future tasks for our work together.



Jan Christopher Göschel holds a PhD in special education and rehabilitation sciences from the faculty of Human Sciences of the University from Cologne. He is a member of the director team of the Camphill Special School near Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and in charge of the Training Network of Camphill communities in North America.

## References

- 1) United Nations Children's Fund (2016). *The State of the World's Children 2016: A fair chance for every child*. New York, NY: UNICEF.
  - 2) All quotes are from the summary of the UNICEF report at <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2016>
  - 3) See for example Gray, P. (2011). *The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents*. *American Journal of Play*, 3(4); Retrieved from <http://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/3-4-article-gray-decline-of-play.pdf>
  - 4) All data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>
- See Skotko, B.G. (2009). *With new prenatal testing, will babies with Down syndrome slowly disappear?* *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 94(11), 823-6.
- 5) See Acharya, K. (2011). *Prenatal testing for intellectual disability: Misperceptions and reality with lessons from Down syndrome*. *Developmental Disabilities Research Review*, 17(1), 27-31.
  - 6) Georgens, J.D. & Deinhardt, H.M. (1861). *Die Heilpädagogik – Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Idiotie und der Idiotenanstalten*. Leipzig: Fleischer. Available at <http://150-jahre-heilpaedagogik.univie.ac.at/literatur>