

Interview with Mary Jo Oresti - 2019

by Betty Jane Enno, - a Kindergarten Teacher and Mentor, WECAN Regional Representative, Board Member at the Austin Waldorf School, and a graduate of the AHE Educational Support Program.

Introduction

Betty Jane Enno: Mary Jo Oresti has been a guiding source of inspiration for many people. Her indefatigable humor and lifelong dedication to improving conditions for children with learning challenges have become legendary. She has taken an administrative leave from her duties as president of the Association for a Healing Education (a semi-sabbatical) this year, so I thought it was a good time to ask her some questions about her life's work.

Mary Jo Oresti has been involved with the Association for a Healing Education since its inception and has served as its president for many years. She has also worked in the Educational Support program at the Detroit Waldorf School since its early days and consults and teaches in different programs nationally and internationally.

What inspired you to become interested in Extra Lesson?

Mary Jo: First of all, as a teacher, I was extremely interested in how children manifest their complexities—both the learning-based phenomena they show and their more individualized constitutions. Waldorf Education was such a rich source for so many unanswered questions.

I first heard of Extra Lesson in the teacher training course at the Waldorf Institute of Mercy College in Detroit in the late 1970s. However, I didn't have any real exposure until I began teaching and had the fortunate opportunity of working with Rosemary Gebert. Rosemary was part of the core group for the Waldorf Institute and initiated the Learning Support program at the Detroit Waldorf School.

Detroit has had a program since the late 1970s, and I've been a part of it since its beginning. I believe it is the only school with such a long-standing program. I had only been at the school a short time when Rosemary and her husband, Hans, returned to England. She put me in charge and said, "Oh, and by the way, you also will be teaching the remedial course at the Institute." Talk about jumping in the deep end of the pool! So if one learns by doing, then I had the chance to learn a great deal.

Fortunately, Rosemary had crafted a well-thought-out program, respected by all at the school. Even when the school faced financial challenges, there was never a

question that the program would continue. Rosemary provided me with incredible mentoring and helped me enrich my love of form drawing and bean bag work, which were the mainstays of my classes during those first years.

She also had a real gift as a mentor—a way of guiding a person to their own question. During those first three years, I was also in graduate school, pursuing my master's in Learning Difficulties, and very busy.

Rosemary had many years of classroom experience at Michael Hall in England and knew Audrey McAllen personally. She introduced the Extra Lesson to me and taught me about the assessments. I didn't understand all its complexities at first, but I remember feeling extremely connected to it.

Soon afterward, I attended sessions and workshops with Audrey McAllen, including one at Camp Glenbrook in the early 1980s. This was when the Association for a Healing Education was finding its organic roots and would soon formalize. I visited Audrey in England a few times and was part of the group that helped expand the *Extra Lesson* book. Although the revision didn't immediately come together, a few of us eventually began to form training programs: Lalage Craig and Mariann Judd from Australia, Ingun Schneider in Sacramento, and myself with AHE. Monica Ellis was already teaching small groups in England. This work laid the foundation for Joep Eikenboom's wonderful book *Foundations of Extra Lesson*

and inspired Ingun Schneider to work closely with Audrey on a new edition.

It's hard to identify a single reason why one feels aligned with a particular method. We all strive not just for what works, but what feels truthful—even if we can't always articulate the connections. I believe there are many windows to the truth, and each of us may only see through one or two. (Just beware of those folks with smoke and mirrors!)

I first found Waldorf Education while browsing a friend's library and came across the book *Eurythmy as Invisible Speech*. I was so moved by it that I signed up for classes that very day. My involvement with Extra Lesson was similar. Listening to Audrey speak about sacred geometry, the movement of the currents, and the Sun Being moved me. I realized that despite the complexities in children's learning styles, there is something universal and beautiful that can help them. She helped me see and honor the universal human archetype, and appreciate every child's individual purpose.

Betty Jane : What learning differences have you observed over your 30 years of experience?

Mary Jo: This is a tremendous question, as it touches on the age we live in. We see changes all around us and wonder what the effects will be.

A few things stand out:

- Children today seem to expect a stronger, more authentic relationship with the teacher.
- They are highly sensitive to their environments.
- There is a growing number of children with more complex needs—emotional, social, sensory-motor, and health-related.

While we have many effective teaching methods, we often must rely on other healing resources when a child cannot shift on their own.

Another difference is that children seem more willing to share their stories. A few weeks ago, a third-grade child said during a lesson:

“When we die, are we invisible and shiny at the same time?”

That age is known for being full of little philosophers!

Cultural influences have certainly played a role—screen time, entitlement, immaturity in adults, and falseness in communication. There are also medical factors: too many vaccinations too early, environmental chemicals that contribute to obesity and neurological damage, Cesarean births, poor nutrition, and lack of healthy movement.

These factors have led to:

- Increased restlessness
- Inner balance challenges
- Boundary issues
- Difficulty crossing the midline (auditory, visual, spatial)
- Organizational difficulties
- Poorer writing and drawing skills
- Weak composition abilities
- Contact disturbances
- Lack of resilience

Many children now require an individualized approach. And far more children need sensory-motor integration than we can provide in school alone.

Fortunately, the consciousness of many is also evolving. Sincere seekers can find healing methods. Dr. Steiner, even in his day, referred to education as an “act of rescue.”

So despite these complexities, I think of the old phrase:

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

The principles of education are timeless. We still meet the child with reverence and love and teach them to harness their will and develop their feeling life.

The more we help students grow into their capacities, the more they will be free as adults. The first seven years build the foundation for our ability to give back. If a child has not reached those milestones or is soul-wounded, the community must help recapitulate those missing steps.

Mainstream education is primarily designed for left-brained, right-side dominant learners. Thankfully, Waldorf schools offer a variety of learning modes, and teachers engage in Child Study, which brings healing. Sometimes, though, I wish we had more farm schools or Christopher Classes, where children could play and work more freely as they come into alignment.

Betty Jane: Can you speak about your work with the Extra Lesson exercises?

Mary Jo: Yes, I've seen some remarkable things through Extra Lesson. The exercises are designed to:

- Balance gravity and levity
- Deepen breath

- Coordinate left-right and above-below
- Establish dominance
- Develop body geography
- Strengthen spatial orientation
- Encourage proper limb movement direction

I follow Audrey's recommendation for a complete lesson — movement with a core exercise, drawing, and painting during the week. I often add reading or more movement.

Exercises like the Threefold Spiral, Copper Ball, and Right Angle Triangle bring remarkable changes. A favorite is the Straight Line & Lemniscate, which we sometimes draw with eyes closed. Lately, I've found that painting with red and blue has a profound effect, likely because they balance soul forces.

Other core exercises include:

- Ball Twirl
- Copper Ball Spiral
- Blue-Red Perspective Paintings
- Moral Color Paintings

While I work with individuals, small groups, and full classes, real change requires one-on-one work. In our school, we do group exercises in grade one and incorporate some Extra Lesson work in grade two—for example, wool winding, bean bag work, body geography, and painting Spiral Paintings with the class teacher.

We are fortunate to have a Care Group that can address a child's needs holistically. Therapeutic Eurythmy and painting also help continue the healing work.

Betty Jane: Can Extra Lesson work be implemented in Early Childhood?

MJ: Some Extra Lesson exercises can be done with kindergarten children who are ready for first grade. Children who are solid five-year-olds can do the Threefold Spiral. Other suitable activities include floor exercises, wool winding, playing catch, and marbles in the toes.

Some teachers prepare children for writing through scribble swirls and wool winding exercises. And Audrey often emphasized the importance of early movement patterns. While not technically Extra Lesson, understanding and integrating those movements is crucial.

Even if you don't feel confident in all the nuances of child development, you can bring a great deal to movement

circles. Varied movement forms neurological pathways. Crawling, jumping, one-foot hops, finger plays, and stretching can be incorporated into stories.

Vestibular stimulation and crawling are especially healing. Children can do single rolls followed by a pause, then swinging and twirling. The simple message is: **crawl and roll.**

One question I asked Audrey during a visit was:

“Is there an art that is most important for an Extra Lesson teacher?”

She immediately answered, “**Speech.**”

I wanted to pass that along because, as we know, speech is a strong forming principle. Early childhood teachers, in particular, are mindful of their pitch and tone. Even if it’s not strictly Extra Lesson, it is essential—and healing.