

Waldorf Education in South Africa

A report on the work of the Hague Circle – May 2005

by

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There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa.

– Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country*

That this country of South Africa would be beautiful, I had no doubt. That it would be so stunning was beyond anything I imagined. It is a society of many colors, of eleven official languages and of almost 45 million people, 35 million of whom are black. Every conversation we had inevitably made reference to the 1994 election as the turning point for what South Africa is to become. Numerous times, we heard, “Everyone who lives here is a South African.” Everywhere, we met hopefulness. From the white people who now find themselves as the disadvantaged ones in seeing that their grown children cannot find work; to the mixed race people (the so-called coloreds) who wonder if they are now invisible to the black government leaders; to the blacks who strive to become part of the middle class; there was always an optimism that South Africa will be different than any other country in the world.

There are signs everywhere that this may be the case. It is a country in which a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” invited people to come forward to admit and apologize for their politically motivated crimes so that clemency could be granted. It is a country in which then newly elected President Nelson Mandela insisted that the national anthem would include the music and words of the Afrikaner anthem of the former oppressive regime. It is a country in which 600,000 simple new houses have been built and sold at affordable prices to the residents of the shanty towns known as the “townships” so that comfort could also be theirs. It is a country in which the national rugby team, called the “Springboks,” a symbol to many of apartheid, won the world rugby cup in 1995 and was awarded that cup as the team of all South Africans by Nelson Mandela dressed in a Springboks’ jersey over his suit.

There are problems, to be sure. Crimes of property are of epidemic proportions in some areas. Many homes of the more than four million whites are surrounded by walls or spiked fences topped with razor wire. Unemployment is

as high as 40%, nine million adults have had little or no schooling, some seven million people (as of 1996) are in “informal housing” (read: “shantytowns”). Laws which aim to wrest economic control out of the hands of rich whites have led to the flight of many in the professions who no longer can find work. HIV/AIDS is ravaging the poor black communities. As an example, 25% of the black teachers and 30% of black mothers in maternity wards are HIV positive. There is a long history of European aid projects which crumble after the sponsors leave because the local people have little ability to sustain the results due to poverty, lack of initiative, and years of being culturally crushed by the white minority.

Yet it is also a country of potential for the Waldorf community locally and worldwide. There are seventeen Waldorf schools and many childcare centers around the country based on Anthroposophical ideas of child development. Five of the schools are more established, some having existed and survived the apartheid years in spite of admitting some children of color to their classes. The others are newer, many having ventured into or near the townships where poverty and crime is still rampant.

This report can only be a snapshot of Waldorf education in a country which is more than twice the size of Texas, but I hope that it will be one which will provide some of the colors and hues of this lovely land.

The Hague Circle gathered 20 of its 25 members for its first meetings outside of Europe since it was founded in 1970. As we do twice each year, we met to discuss Waldorf education, the needs of children, and the life in some of the 894 schools worldwide. We also met with the Council of the Federation of Waldorf Schools Fellowship (South Africa). We met with the Assistant Director of the Ministry of Education for the government and two of his staff to hear about the history and present condition of schooling in the country. We led conferences for the SA school communities and for SA Waldorf teachers. We discussed the HIV/AIDS epidemic with the daughter-in-law of the late African National Congress leader Walter Sisulu. She is a Waldorf parent and an AIDS specialist in Southern Africa for the UN. We split up our group to visit and work in the 17 schools and also to observe in numerous Waldorf childcare centers in the townships. All this took place over a ten-day period in the first part of May 2005.

Waldorf Education in a Land of Change

South Africa confronts the Western visitor with a mixture of first-world amenities and third-world challenges. The media play up the violence, but the fruits of colonialism show themselves most often in crimes of property, not crimes of person. This is not a European culture, so the solutions for such crime

come more through unique laws which seek to correct the imbalance of 42 years of the racist policy called apartheid (“separateness” in Afrikaans) than anything found in the West. Educational policy is also a mix of approaches. On the one hand, first world approaches (high-stakes testing and a national curriculum) have been laid on a third world infrastructure (classes of 130 children, shockingly low salaries, 11 official languages, some teachers who cannot pass a fourth grade literacy and numeracy test) which is stressing the educational system. On the other hand, the new government showed its resolve in 1994 when it sent out 40 teams into the world to research the best education for the country. Waldorf education was the choice of the commission receiving the team reports, but the government decided that it did not have the budget to finance Waldorf schools for the entire country. Instead, it chose, as second best, what it sees as a “child-centered, outcomes based” method for its 27,000 schools.

The Waldorf conference we held in Cape Town of teachers, childcare providers, parents and board members opened with an African welcome. This consisted of a performance by some 25 mostly black teachers in the richly-colored clothing of the tribes of this land. Singing, dancing, and rhythmically showing all gathered the inspiring music and harmony which lives in this culture, these Waldorf teachers showed some of what they bring to their work with children. Later, some of them spoke about their commitment to this education and what it is doing for the children in their care. They can see that it works.

Yet this is in many ways a non-Western culture, right down into the way people think. For instance, the grammar of the Xhosa language does not separate the pronoun “I” from the verb. The very form of “I” changes when the deed is done. Perhaps one can appreciate the implications when the will is intimately and openly part of the “do-er” and when the effects of the deed clearly affect the one doing it. Once I’ve done something, I am not the same “I” that I was before. This, it seems, is much more evident to the Xhosa people than it usually is to us.

So, too, teacher trainers must learn to work with a consciousness which is not easily engaged by the too-often dead intellectual concepts of the first world. Even to delve into the intricate constructs of *The Study of Man* is not easily achieved. This asks us in the Waldorf movement to bring Rudolf Steiner’s ideas in a living-enough way that they will speak to the African soul. The reality of Waldorf education already speaks to these black teachers; these women we met know that the education is “right” for their pupils and right for the young children for whom they care in the townships. Yet it does not necessarily conform to the national curriculum promulgated by the government, in spite of the appreciation of Waldorf education by some levels of government. Waldorf schools are as important in South Africa as anywhere, but how can they justify their differences

from mainstream educational approaches in a society which is trying to eliminate the vestiges of separate but equal?

In this light, the three challenges identified by the leaders of the Waldorf school movement in South Africa can perhaps be appreciated by our first world readers of this report. These challenges are:

- How to operate as free schools without the appearance of being elitist, “segregation academies?”
- How to mitigate first-world testing demands on students when there is only third-world financial support for education?
- How to find the most effective Waldorf teacher-training approach for teachers of different cultural backgrounds and learning styles.

South African Waldorf Schools and Programs

(Here follow a few glimpses of what we met in the schools.)

The Kindergarten to seventh grade Waldorf school in **Lesedi** is in a remote region about three hours (much of it on dirt roads) northeast of Johannesburg on the high plateau in the north of the country. There, the residents of this traditional village are all black.

The people are enthralled with their Waldorf school (all South African elementary schools end at class seven in SA).

The visitors from the Hague Circle were greeted with a traditional Xhosa dance in costume and song of welcome and by the village dignitaries. The children in the school are warm and affectionate with each other and with their teachers. Picture if you can, a class of kindergarten children led into a class by fourth grade children with a gentle protectiveness that touches the heart. The little ones sit around the walls of the eurythmy room in absolute silence with rapt attention as the fourth graders do eurythmy. At the end of the class, the fourth graders spontaneously take one of the younger children under their care and lead them back to their teacher in the yard.

The **Inkanyesi Waldorf School** is in the Alexandra Township, an all-black area of a very different nature adjacent to Johannesburg. Here, the school began in a rough barrack-like building which has gradually been supplemented by brick buildings in the fenced compound. A guard is posted at the rolling iron-picketed gate. The classes run in size from about 15 to 25, and the children are met with confidence by their teachers. The teachers hold a non-denominational chapel service (the Free Religious Service for children given by Rudolf Steiner) every Thursday morning which is gratefully attended by the children from all classes Kindergarten to Class seven. A Man and Animal block here can include

an uncanny yet vibrant presentation of an animal, each done by a child in a unique way.

The teachers are very poorly paid as the government subsidies are small and few parents can pay much to supplement this. Government money also brings inspections and sometimes the turf battles with low-level civil servants over the Waldorf approach in light of the national curriculum. Contributions from Europe make up some of the shortfall. Absenteeism is a problem mostly due to the parents' own life struggles, but the children are sorry to miss a day.

Roseway Waldorf School, K-13, is near Durban in the east on the Indian Ocean in the province of Kwazulu-Natal. It is in the Valley of a Thousand Hills where morning mists often fill the valley floor, leaving only the hilltops to be seen. Here, Zulu is the main language spoken by the native black people. It is predominantly a school with white and some families of color, all of whom seem devoted to their school. Roseway has benefited from the gift of a lovely hilltop farm overlooking one of the "thousand hills" of this region and some charming buildings have been erected on the land. The climate is mild with warm days and cool nights in the late fall and winter, often with morning mists. Lively teaching is found in the classrooms, some of which sit in a circle surrounding a grassy courtyard.

The children and high school students have a warm and friendly attitude, the high school parents are concerned about their children's fitness for the job market (very similar to what one might find in a North American high school), yet the school is growing. Though employment prospects are rather dim, the degree of optimism and patience for what is possible shines through.

Hague Circle Discussions

(As we do in each meeting, reports and discussions about the world Waldorf movement brought very interesting exchanges and exploration; a sampling follows.)

"Waldorf schools squeezed from two sides" served as a topic to help us to take stock of the present conditions of the education. Rudolf Steiner wanted the first school to serve as a model for new schools, not as simply a curiosity. That the world list now includes 894 schools is a testament to the broad appeal of this education beyond central Europe. Yet we recognize that there are weakening effects coming at the schools from two sides today.

The first effect is due to the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor and the resulting squeeze on the middle class which provides so many of our pupils. The cost of schooling in a Waldorf school risks becoming so high that increasing numbers of our families will not be able to afford it. The second

effect, related to the first, shows itself in the choice of course offerings and their manner of presentation which aim to have students perform well in mainstream academia. Too often, this is at the expense of those courses which aim for building human capacities over the long term. The choice of courses and especially the methods used to teach them comes about, often unconsciously, when we try to make our schools more attractive (read: more like high-fee prep schools which will bring in higher tuition fees). That Waldorf schools should be subject to these pressures is understandable. Our concern is that there is too little debate in faculty meetings when such decisions are made.

We ask ourselves in the Hague Circle how we can aid in the development of a “rights life” for spiritually free education through out the world. Should the Circle add such a task to its founding principle of furthering the spiritual tasks of Waldorf education? Clearly, these challenges to our schools is intimately bound up with the failure to further the threefold ideas which are such a part of our work today. More work on this needs to be done both in individual schools and in the Waldorf movement worldwide.

Euro-centric education is one criticism which is sometimes leveled at our schools. Especially the history and literature in the Waldorf school can come in for this kind of complaint. Yet we begin to better understand our work if we see that our task is one of working with and countering what might better be termed a “Western-centric” or “Modern-centric” world view, rather than Euro-centric. This topic of Euro-centrism has been raised in many conversations in many schools outside Europe over the last years. It also was raised in South Africa where there are so many cultural traditions. As we addressed this question in the Waldorf conference mentioned above, I will share some of the thoughts which were voiced and some of my own reflections.

The engine that is driving many of the citizens and most of the governments around the globe today is what might be termed the dominance of economic considerations. Whether we think of artistic, spiritual, scientific or simply human endeavors, the sphere of economic activity is in danger of eclipsing all of them. Behind this economic kind of reckoning is the materialist thinking which is the hallmark of the modern world and our times. It is this thinking which is truly pushing itself to be *the* central factor in addressing the human condition today. Always in need of balance by spheres of the rights life and the cultural life, materialistic/economic thinking left to its own will become self-centered, even selfish. It would be more accurate, it seems, to see that our culture and our world is dominated by this most-Western of world views, that is, a “Western-centric” world view rather than a European one. This modern view and the consciousness

which gave it birth is the fruit of the historical development of the way of thinking fostered since the 16th Century in Europe. It has now further developed in the West and spread to many countries around the world.

The Waldorf school aims to address this one-sided thinking through examining its roots (really it is our roots as modern people), putting it in the context of other cultures and ways of thinking through geography, literature and history, among other subjects. At bottom, it is this thread of the development of modern consciousness which we follow in the Waldorf school. We do this in order to recognize both its historical necessity for the attainment of human freedom even as we teach other ways of thinking and engage in other activities (artistic, service projects, outdoor education) in order to balance it.

If we recognize the need for human beings to go through the “eye of the needle” by coming to the self-recognition that one-sided thinking is inherently unhealthy, then we can understand the curriculum indications of Rudolf Steiner. The curriculum which he developed (and which we must continue to elaborate), must trace the path of human development and consciousness which has led us to where we are today. Yet it must also cultivate the other qualities important to the social life and the cultural life so that our students will be healthy, balanced adults. The curriculum with which we work is not Euro-centric, but rather designed to give the students the understanding to work in and change society. We must begin with where the students are so that they can become more than a mere product of contemporary society.

Some final thoughts

I hope that the mix of joy, satisfaction and humbleness that we all felt as visitors to this wonderful land has come across. This trip provided myriad examples of the universality of Waldorf education and the anthroposophy which informs it. I hope that you, too, can perceive that each of us who has chosen to work with children in this way, wherever we are in the world, is truly making a difference.