Core Principles of Waldorf Education

Three Contributions to the Study of Core Principles #4 and #5

[Editor's note: The Core Principles of Waldorf Education, authored by the Pedagogical Section Council of North America (PSC), were published in the *Research Bulletin* Vol. XIX, No.2. Since then PSC members have agreed to write short articles to support the study of these Core Principles. Herewith are three additional contributions for studying Principles #4 and #5.]

Core Principle #4. Freedom in Teaching: Rudolf Steiner gave indications for the development of a new pedagogical art, with the expectation that "the teacher must invent this art at every moment." Out of the understanding of child development and Waldorf pedagogy, the Waldorf teacher is expected to meet the needs of the children in the class out of his/her insights and the circumstances of the school. Interferences with the freedom of the teacher by the school, parents, standardized testing regimen, or the government, while they may be necessary in a specific circumstance (for safety or legal reasons, for example), are nonetheless compromises.[1]

A Contribution to the Study of the Fourth Core Principle

Jennifer Snyder

> How can we ourselves transform education for the free human being into a free act in the very highest sense, that is to say, into a moral act? How can education become out and out a moral concern of mankind? This is the great problem before us today, and it must be solved if the most praiseworthy efforts towards educational reform are to be rightly directed on into the future.
>
> – Rudolf Steiner, *Education*, Lecture 3

Rudolf Steiner spoke these words over 90 years ago to inspire a new art of pedagogy, and they are possibly more urgent for us to grapple with today. In the United States, it has instead become the norm for educational reform to issue from the dictates of legislative authority rather than from experienced educators. Restrictions on the freedom of individual educators have become the populist standard.

In all areas of cultural life, institutions are facing restrictions on their freedom, imposed or threatened to be imposed by political legislation. This is as true for the practice of medicine, for example, as it is for education. The autonomous "country doctor," who was once able to practice medicine guided solely by the Hippocratic Oath, now has to operate within the confines of predetermined protocols. The ethics and competence of individual doctors were traditionally determined only by the opinions of their peers. Hospitals granted doctors wide-ranging autonomy to practice the highest form of medicine. Today physicians have exchanged much of that autonomy for protection against a litigious society.

Parallel to the compromises in the autonomy of the practicing physician is a challenge to the freedom of the modern educator. The Core Principle defending "Freedom in Teaching" stands as a lighthouse to guide the journey of the contemporary teacher on the stormy seas of current educational practices.

The path of the developing Waldorf teacher could be compared to that of a jazz musician who is becoming an artisan working within a live form. Subtle improvised changes to a "standard" or set form, made in the moment and responsive to the others in the ensemble, characterize "jazz" music. True jazz music is rarely played as written and does not exist until played in live performance. Yet, to get to this ethereal place, improvisation cannot be interjected for its own sake, or else the song risks losing integrity. True masters can play the same song, and it will always be different, yet we will all still recognize the tune. Similarly, no two master jazz musicians will ever be expected to play a piece of music the same way. The novice Waldorf teacher working with the core principle of "Freedom in Teaching" should recognize that it is not a license for performing "free form expressionism" with the lesson. Analogous to the journey of novice musicians developing their craft, the teacher must learn from performing standards.

A jazz performer can apprentice, or play with a master of the form, to develop greater chops. So too can the developing Waldorf teacher. Performing could be considered a meaningful career path for a musician both in live gigs and in the recording studio. On the other hand, the unique and rare gift of incredible jazz playing arises out of a synergy among an ensemble of musicians who share a deep background in the form and structure of music, along with finely-tuned craftsmanship and the ineffable quality of "free" spirit.

Rudolf Steiner offered the original circle of Waldorf teachers many thoughts to inspire this new pedagogical art, always hoping that in the mastery of this new form, freedom would arise out of deepest morality as the genesis of the art.

Taken in the order in which they appear, there are six primary thoughts expressed in this Core Principle. To begin, here are relevant quotes from the work of Rudolf Steiner to substantiate each thought:

1 Rudolf Steiner gave indications for developing a new pedagogical art.

> And in the practice of teaching there will awaken in us, out of this knowledge of human nature, the art of education in a quite individual form. (*Balance in Teaching*, Lecture 3)

> We have to lead an education into the future. This makes it necessary that in our present epoch the whole situation of education must be different from what it was in the past. (*Education*, Lecture 3)

> In principle it is possible to introduce Waldorf education anywhere, because it is based purely on pedagogy. This is the significant difference between Waldorf pedagogy and other educational movements.
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> Waldorf education focuses entirely on the pedagogical aspect; it can be adapted to any outer conditions, whether a city school, a country school or whatever. It is not designed to meet specific external conditions, but is based entirely on observation and insight into the growing human being. This means that Waldorf pedagogy could be implemented in every school. (*The Child's Changing Consciousness*, Lecture 8)

> We concern ourselves not only with teaching methods, but particularly with creating the curriculum and teaching goals from a living observation of growing children. This art of education requires that we fit it exactly to what develops in a human being. We should derive what we call the curriculum and educational

goals from that. What we teach and how we teach should flow from an understanding of human beings. (*Spiritual Science and Pedagogy: A Lecture for Public School Teachers*, 1919)

It is meaningful to refer to the concept of a "standard curriculum" in Waldorf education, and to acknowledge that the novice teacher is not expected to improvise like a jazz master. The songs can be played as written, at least to the degree that they *are* committed to writing.

2 The teacher, rather than a theory or institution, is accepted as the central author of this new art of education.

That is why the Waldorf school came into being in such a way that there were no set principles or systems—only children and teachers. We have to consider not only the individuality of every single child, but the individuality of every single teacher as well. We must know our teachers.

It is easy to draft rules and principles that tell teachers what to do and not do. But what matters is the capacities of individual teachers and the development of their capacities; they do not need educational precepts, but a knowledge of the human being that takes them into life itself and considers whole persons in a living way. (*The Roots of Education*, Lecture 4)

Everything depends upon the personality of the teacher. This comes out quite clearly throughout the whole lecture, with warmth, depth and responsibility. Time and again it made me particularly happy that Dr. Steiner emphasized this with complete insight and certainty. Thus, he has also shown us what a great task and responsibility we have if we wish to continue in our profession as teachers. (*Spiritual Science and Pedagogy: A Lecture for Public School Teachers*, 1919—from a teacher in the audience after the lecture)

Returning to the analogy of the jazz musician to the teacher, the art arises from the artist because it is always performed live. Children reside in the present moment, and that is where art can arise.

3 The ingenuity of the teacher in every moment is the ideal of a living, evolving pedagogy.

In educating, what the teacher does can depend only slightly on anything he gets from a general, abstract pedagogy; it must rather be newly born every moment from a living understanding of the young human being he or she is teaching. (*An Introduction to Waldorf Education—An Essay*)

In order for pedagogy to be general for humanity, teachers must practice it as an individual and personal art.

The developing human thus becomes a divine riddle for us, a divine riddle that we wish to solve at every hour. If, with our art of teaching, we so place ourselves in the service of humanity, then we serve this life from our great interest in life. (*Spiritual Science and Pedagogy: A Lecture for Public School Teachers*, 1919)

Once again, the kernel of the matter is knowing how to adapt to the individuality of the growing child. (*The Child's Changing Consciousness*, Lecture 6)

4 When the teacher perceives the processes of child development in the student(s), individual moments of changing consciousness can be understood, and the requisite pedagogy can arise.

On the one hand, we stand on the firm ground of pedagogy that derives from objective knowledge, and that prescribes specific curricular and educational tasks for each

year. To ascertain what must be done in this education, we take our cue from the children themselves; and not only for each year, but also for each month, each week, and in the end, each day. … [Teachers] have come to realize that not a single detail of this pedagogy is arbitrary, that everything in it is a response to what can be read in the child's own nature. (*The Child's Changing Consciousness*, Lecture 7)

It is true that to bring the two into harmony—the development of the pupil and the development of the civilized world—will require a body of teachers who do not shut themselves up in an educational routine with strictly professional interests, but rather take an active interest in the whole range of life. Such a body of teachers will discover how to awaken in the upcoming generation a sense of the inner, spiritual substance of life and also an understanding of life's practicalities. (*An Introduction to Waldorf Education—An Essay*)

The first thing that was imparted to the teachers of the Waldorf School in the seminary course was a fundamental knowledge of man. Thus it was hoped that from an understanding of the true nature of man they would gain inner enthusiasm and love for education. For when one understands the human being, the very best thing for the practice of education must spring forth from this knowledge. Pedagogy is love for man resulting from knowledge of man; at all events it is only on this foundation that it can be built up. (*Education*, Lecture 5)

5 Teachers are called upon to develop unique insights out of their inner work and perceptions.

It is now planned that the Waldorf school will be a primary school in which the educational goals and curriculum are founded upon each teacher's living insight into the nature of the whole human being, so far as this is possible under present conditions. (*An Introduction to Waldorf Education—An Essay*)

The world is permeated by spirit, and true knowledge of the world must be permeated by spirit as well. Anthroposophy can give us spiritual knowledge of the world and, with it, spiritual knowledge of the human being, and this alone leads to a true education. (*The Roots of Education*, Lecture 2)

The child accepts the teacher's opinion and feeling because they live in the teacher. There must be something in the way the teacher meets the child that acts as an intangible. There must be something that really flows from an all-encompassing understanding of life and from the interest in an all-encompassing understanding of life.

I have characterized it by saying that what we impart to children often reveals itself in a metamorphosed form only in the adult, or even in old age. (S*piritual Science and Pedagogy: A Lecture for Public School Teachers*, 1919)

6 Compromises result from "prevailing conditions" of one's school or situation.

It would be fatal if the educational views upon which the Waldorf school is founded were dominated by a spirit out of touch with life. (*An Introduction to Waldorf Education—An Essay*)

Sectarianism to any degree or fanatical zeal must never be allowed to creep into our educational endeavors, only to find at the end of the road that our students do not fit into life as it is; for life in the world does not notice one's educational ideals. Life is governed by what arises from the prevailing conditions themselves, which are expressed as regulations concerning education, as school curricula, and as other related matters, which correspond to current ways of thinking.

> And so there is always a danger that we will educate children in a way that, though correct in itself, could alienate them from life in the world—whether one considers this right or wrong. It must always be remembered that one must not steer fanatically toward one's chosen educational aims without considering whether or not one might be alienating one's students from surrounding life.
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> From the very beginning of the Waldorf school, something had to be done. It is difficult to give it a proper name, but something bad or negative had to be agreed upon—that is, a kind of compromise—simply because this school is not grounded in fanaticism but in objective reality. At the very beginning, a memorandum addressed to the local school authorities had to be worked out. … Such an offer, for our teachers, amounted to an "ingratiating compromise"—forgive the term, I cannot express it otherwise. A realistic mind has to take such a course, for discretion is essential in everything one does. A fanatic would have responded differently. (*The Child's Changing Consciousness*, Lecture 7)

> Idealism must work in the spirit of [the school's] curriculum and methodology; but it must be an idealism that has the power to awaken in young, growing human beings the forces and faculties they will need in later life to be equipped for work in modern society and to obtain for themselves an adequate living. The pedagogy and instructional methodology will be able to fulfill this requirement only through a genuine knowledge of the developing human being. (*An Introduction to Waldorf Education—An Essay*)

Now that we have identified these key thoughts in Steiner's work, let us look at educational freedom from another perspective.

Academic freedom is not unique to Waldorf education. As Ralph Fuchs (1963) notes, it is given out to members of the academic community and underlies "the effective performance of their functions of teaching, learning, practice of the arts and research." It is considered a right, and "it is not sought as a personal privilege, although scholars enjoy the activities it permits," which "resemble that of the judge who holds office during good behavior to safeguard his fearlessness and objectivity in the performance of his duties."

This concept of freedom within academia in the United States rests upon a three-part foundation:

- Originating in Greek philosophy, it arises again in Europe during the Renaissance, and still later comes to maturity during the Age of Reason;
- It arises as a function of autonomy for communities of scholars in the earliest universities of Europe;
- It appears as a guarantee in the Bill of Rights of the Federal Constitution as elaborated by the courts.[2]

Freedom in teaching granted within Waldorf education can thus be placed in a context of Classical Western academic philosophy, in which responsibility and autonomy are granted to the educator. We can begin to understand that the significance of Rudolf Steiner's idea of "freedom" within education, as illustrated in this core principle, reflects the classical role of the educator. Today, however, latitude for the individual teacher in mainstream education—both secular and parochial—is reserved only for higher levels of education; in contrast, in Waldorf education, freedom is extended to educators at all levels of instruction.

> For Rudolf Steiner, a full comprehension of freedom and its correct application in life lay at the heart of human morality and development and as a solution to the most pertinent problems afflicting mankind. He did not mean the freedom to follow one's animal drives and passions, but rather freeing the human being

> from such tyrannies, of allowing the self to rise to greater heights of perception and insight into supersensible realms, and the leading of moral life. Upon the possibility of liberating the individual's consciousness from material to spiritual reality through self-perception, Steiner founded the principles of anthroposophy: the spiritual science of the human soul.[3]

In coming to understand the meaning that Rudolf Steiner imparts to the controversial term "freedom," one arrives on the shore of ancient pedagogical practice. The call for teachers to realize freedom in education is an imperative if modern pedagogical art is to continue to be grounded in the principles of classical education.

> If one studies education as a science consisting of all sorts of principles and formulas, it means about the same thing in terms of education as choosing to eat partially digested foods. But if we undertake a study of the child, of the true nature of the human being, and learn to understand children in this way, we take into ourselves the equivalent of what nature offers us as nourishment. And in the practice of teaching there will awaken in us, out of this knowledge of human nature, the art of education in a quite individual form. In reality the teacher must invent this art every moment. (*Balance in Teaching,* Lecture 3)

When the issue of freedom is discussed in Waldorf schools, frequent questions arise concerning consistency and quality control. "What do I tell parents who ask me why their children's class teachers are teaching different lessons at the same age?" asks the enrollment director, or, "If every teacher can choose what to do, then how do you know that they are teaching well and how can you get them to change if they have to change?"

These concerns require answers, but the answers should arise out of discussion and collaboration, like a jazz musician working out of an ensemble, rather than out of some external entity enforcing regulations on the practicing teachers. "External" in this sense can even be the school's own guidelines.

Without a doubt, the school has to be able to stand behind what the teachers are doing. Yet the more this "standing behind" is based on written protocols and pre-determined solutions, the more compromised can be the pedagogy. Experienced teachers should engage newer ones (and one another) in conversations about the aims and methods of the school, and should visit each other's classrooms to ascertain that Waldorf pedagogy is being practiced successfully. A teacher may have to make changes, and indeed few are the teachers who do *not* need to shift perspectives or make changes. And if a teacher refuses to cooperate with the school leadership, then that lack of cooperation becomes a separate issue and may lead to corrective action.

An important point to remember is that freedom and license are not the same, and that the results of a teacher's work must stand up to the scrutiny of his or her peers. Ultimately, however, the ideal is a faculty composed of responsible and capable teachers who are able to find what their students need without having to follow a pre-determined path.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the principle of freedom in teaching is that Waldorf education bills itself as an education towards freedom, and it is absurd to suggest that we can educate "free human beings, who are able of themselves to impart direction and meaning to their lives" while at the same time following a scripted approach to education. As difficult as it is to stand under the authority of one's own pedagogical judgment, it is what we must finally strive to accomplish in creating this art.

Endnotes

1 A note about school governance: While not directly a pedagogical matter, school governance can be an essential aspect of freedom in teaching. Just as a developmental curriculum should support the phases of child development, school governance should support the teachers' pedagogical freedom (while maintaining the school's responsibilities towards society).

2 See Ralph Fuchs's *Academic freedom: Its basic philosophy, function and history* (1963).

3 Chris Fort, "How esoteric is Rudolf Steiner's concept of freedom? With special reference to his *Philosophy of Freedom*" (2010).

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Core Principle #5. Methodology of Teaching: There are a few key methodological guidelines for the grade school and high school teachers. Early Childhood teachers work with these principles appropriate to the way in which the child before the age of seven learns—that is, out of imitation rather than direct instruction:

- Artistic metamorphosis: The teacher should understand, internalize, and then present the topic in an artistic form.
- From experience to concept: The direction of the learning process should proceed from the students' soul activities of willing through feeling to thinking. In the high school, the context of the experience is provided at the outset.
- Holistic process: Proceeding from the whole to the parts and back again, and addressing the whole human being
- Use of rhythm and repetition

Six Gestures for the Waldorf Early Childhood Educator

Holly Koteen-Soule

> From the first to the seventh year, gesture predominates in the life of the young child, but gesture in the widest sense of the word, gesture that in the child lives in imitation.[1]
>
> – Rudolf Steiner

In this elaboration on the principle of Waldorf methodology, I have chosen to describe the work of the early childhood teacher as a set of qualitative gestures, because this approach is more closely aligned with the nature and orientation of the child before the age of seven than a typical set of guidelines.

Rudolf Steiner speaks about the task of educators as a continuation of the work of higher beings.[2] He tells us that before a child says, "I," before experiencing him- or herself as separate from parents or the surrounding world, spiritual beings that guided the child before birth are still active in the life of the young human being, especially in the child's learning to walk, the acquisition of speech, and the beginning of thinking.[3]