

What Should Waldorf Education Look Like Today?

By Gilad Goldschmidt

What are the present and future challenges of Waldorf schools and how should we face them?

I would like to start by saying that everything in this article represents only my own view, my understanding, and my thoughts. It is not the ultimate truth, nor does it represent what Steiner had said. Instead, these are my thoughts, resulting from my own work in Waldorf education.

In 1906, 116 years ago, Steiner began to lecture on the topic of education (this was later published as "The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science").¹ A hundred and three years ago, in the year 1919, the first Waldorf school was founded in Stuttgart. Steiner, who was the founder and director of, and consultant to the first school, passed away in 1925. This means that the last time Steiner had said something about Waldorf education was 97 years ago.

Since its inauguration more than a hundred years ago, the Waldorf educational movement has been growing and thriving, first in Europe, then the U.S., and, in recent years, almost everywhere and in every culture on the globe.

We have every reason to be proud. Today, the Waldorf movement is considered the largest alternative form of education in the world, considering the number of students who are currently enrolled in this alternative to mainstream education. We have many kindergartens and schools all over the world, we have a profound philosophical background and well-established fieldwork. We know what to do and we also know how to do it. And we have a long and powerful tradition.

However, we also have all the reasons to be worried. Why? Precisely because of all that I mention above! Because we have a deep, profound spiritual background or philosophy, because we have a tradition, because we know what to do and why and how to do it...

Let me explain:

There is a very delicate balance between form and life force, between tradition, know-how, and new impulses, between what we are accustomed to doing and what we ought to do. Now, in my opinion, we have been lacking balance for many years. Our educational

practice tends heavily to the side of tradition, existing know-how, and form. This raises enormous questions.

I would like to explain what I mean by the term *Life*: I use the word "life" to denote the fountain from which an impulse is flowing, the creative stream underlying what we do. In educational terms, I use it to refer to the intention directed toward the child itself, with his or her unique needs and development; to the act of a meeting taking place between child and educator, between children and other children; and, finally, I use "life" to describe the place that has created all the forms we are familiar with, those we usually call "Waldorf education."

By the term *Form*, I mean the external design of pedagogical practices, which Steiner himself and many other Waldorf educators, through the generations, have shaped out of the creative impulse. These are the 'things Waldorf teachers do', the habits, rituals, and other activities inside and outside the classroom that make up the work of Waldorf pedagogy. Main Lessons, the Main Lesson Book, the recitation of the Morning Verse are all examples of Waldorf forms, but so are the structure of the school day and week, the methods of instructions, and so on.

Steiner himself was aware of the relationship between *life* and *form* and of the challenge of keeping the living and creative impulse alive. He developed and created multiple elements, which makes it difficult for Waldorf school educators to view the educational process as a mere form, a technical element. One example of this is the cancelling of the use of formal textbooks, so that every teacher is forced to prepare his or her Main Lessons and the subject matter on their own. Another example is a curriculum that provides the general principles on every subject of study, yet refrains from going into the finer details, and so on.

My concern is that Waldorf schools, in many places, tend to become a tradition, a series of answers without questions, a series of habits, an "educational cookbook," that they turn into "this is the right way to do it," that is, into some specific frozen shapes of external symbols: wooden furnishings, pastel colors, Main Lessons, large notebooks... These are educational techniques – wise, beautiful, aesthetic, humanistic, yet still mere techniques, mere forms.

¹ See: Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996).

We, as a Waldorf movement, have a profound and strong tradition. This tradition is based on knowledge, on wisdom, on spiritual insight; but, once more, those insights, wisdom, and knowledge were given a hundred years ago. Since then, humanity has gone through tremendous changes: We breathe different air, we eat different foods, we live on a different earth, and we are using completely different technology. We do not have the same children in our kindergarten and schools, we do not have the same parents, and, above all, we do not have the same teachers.

We are facing enormous questions or challenges, which must have their answers here and now. Such challenges, to name but a few, include the following:

- How do we give answers to the deep needs of children nowadays? Or to the needs of parents? Moreover, how do we answer the needs of new teachers?
- Do we truly have a pedagogy that is appropriate for our time? Do we truly touch the raw nerve of our time? As a Waldorf education movement, have we adjusted to the enormous changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries?
- How do we form an education that is truly geared toward the challenges of our present time and work on finding the right ways and forms that will provide real answers to these challenges?
- What is our answer to the new screen technologies?
- What are we doing with so many children who are unable to learn in a group with so many other students?
- What are we doing in our schools with the enormous question of the ecological crisis?

I recently spoke with a class 12 student who had spent a year in a Waldorf school in Australia, as part of a student-exchange program. The student's main impression of the Waldorf school in Australia was that it was "exactly the same as ours." For instance, she noticed that "in class 3 they study the exact same Main Lessons we studied in class 3, almost ten years ago." Even the teaching methodologies seemed "familiar" and reminded her of "doing the same things that we used to do." Well, the Waldorf school in Australia and the Waldorf school in Israel teach the same subject blocks, using the same teaching methods in class 3, even after a time lapse of ten years! It is fabulous, one might say, that Waldorf

schools look the same, even if they are located on the opposite sides of the globe, in a different culture, using a different language, practiced by different nations, and in different decades. Still, this student felt uneasy about this experience; in her own words: "It does not make sense that everything is the same, Australia is so different from Israel..."

The name "free school" (this is how Waldorf schools are called in Germany and Holland) not only designates freedom from the State and its bureaucratic mechanisms but also, no less, a school where the educational experience itself is based on freedom. Where there is freedom, there is a chance to have life. This life is the heart of every meaningful educational process.

We can also look at this particular question from a different angle:

What will be left of Waldorf schools if we removed all the well-known external marks, namely, the school building would be an industrial square one, the walls would not be painted in lovely pastel colors, there would be no wooden chairs and desks, there would be no large Main Lesson books on unlined pages, the students would have to write using lead pencils from their first day of school in class 1, art class would not include painting in water colors, there would be no teaching of Main Lesson blocks, and the Morning Verse would not be recited. Can a Waldorf school still function under these conditions?

What makes a Waldorf school a Waldorf school? What is the internal flow that keeps the educational spirit functioning without any external signs and tokens? How can we have access to the internal fountain, to the essence of Waldorf education, and create directly from it?

Naturally, we tend to lean on what we recognize as Waldorf practices based on what has been done before us by veteran Waldorf teachers, and on the few examples given by Steiner himself. I am still looking for a brave teacher who will not teach "The Octopus" in class four! We lean on

the school's tradition, and in the process, we face the danger of losing the deep intention underlying all of these traditions and of what by now are ready-made forms.

A living form is created from the present moment. It is always connected to a unique living encounter between people. In education, we can define it as an encounter between an educator and a child or group of children in a specific moment and place. Every teacher

We aim to identify the present and future challenges of Waldorf schools and seek to understand how we should face them.

is familiar with the creative process of education, in which I, as teacher, endeavour to connect, on the one hand, to the deep being of the children I work with, and, on the other hand, to the depths of the material I want to convey to them, while, through a mysterious process deep within me, in which sleep at night plays an essential role, I suddenly receive an intuition of what I should do and how I should do it. A form of learning process has been created. We are learning a grammatical role in a way that emerges in the exchange between me as a teacher and the unique needs of the children in the classroom. A week from now, or in working with a different group of children this form of the learning process might not be appropriate, so I will need to create another form. If I use the same form it won't be alive, it will become a tradition.

In my opinion, this is one of the most important questions of Waldorf education: whether we live the pulse and spirit of our time, bringing forth living forces and inspiration to the children we work with, or will we continue to adopt past forms that once were right and appropriate, even though they were created in a different time and place and for other children.

So, what should we do? How can we touch the living stream of life? How can we connect ourselves to the very source of the educational moment? In other words, how can we meet children in kindergarten, in the classroom, during play, and at home, with all our heart, and do with them whatever it is that is right and fitting for them alone?

I do not know if I have answers to these big questions, but I think I can outline a path along which such answers could be found. I envision this path as involving the following three dimensions:

- Esoteric work
- Research of our daily practice (Action research)
- Waldorf for every child

Esoteric Work

How do I create and shape my daily encounter with my students? How do I attain the kind of teaching that is driven by whatever it is that is going on within *them*? In other words, how do I create a deep, meaningful

encounter with the children that were sent to be educated by me?

The key to a true encounter with a child or a group of children, the key to life in the moment, to knowing what to do out of what is going on right now, out of the children themselves, the key to all these is our internal

ability to hear the inner dimension of the world around us, the inner dimension of the people I meet, and also to hear myself. I call it meditation. A "life of the soul in thought, which gradually widens into a life in spiritual being" "Spiritual life within the thoughts which spread out to become life inside a spiritual

entity"—this is how Steiner characterizes meditation in his basic book on internal development.² A detailed description of the meditative path in the spirit of anthroposophy will go beyond the scope of this article, but in my view, it is a necessary foundation for what I am seeking.

In this regard, a meditative life for the educator is profound. Having studied a certain issue once in teachers training, or having worked on this issue occasionally in a teachers meeting is great; however, I seriously doubt that this is enough. In order to fulfil our spiritual mission, a daily effort is required, a methodology is needed, and, above all, cooperation between teachers is necessary.

For many years, this question has been alive within me: How can we nourish, cultivate meditation work, a meditative culture in our schools? For many years now, I have been working on this issue with young students in various training centers and with school faculties. I have come to realize that we must establish group work. Supportive group work forms an essential part in many spiritual streams. In our particular spiritual stream, this quality is not sufficiently developed (unfortunately, the reasons for this are too extensive to be described in detail here).

We are living at very lonely times. In principle, we are lonely. Many young people want to meditate, they know it is important for them and for their work, but they fail again and again and give up. Another observation I made is that in our schools, many teachers practice meditation along *other* spiritual paths. It is not surprising, since the anthroposophical path is too difficult and lonely.

² Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment* (translated by George Metaxa) (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1947), p. 30.

What we need is a support group. Already in teachers trainings, and much more so in our kindergartens and schools, we need to establish groups of educators who have the will to help each other, to support each other, and to create a meditative culture together. This is perhaps the most important mission of the faculty meeting nowadays!

Researching Our Work

If we want to live here and now, to meet the reality of our children, our parents, and our colleagues, if we want to sense the pulse of the time, then we must study and explore our daily doings, our teaching methods, our curriculum, and all that our School Being includes. The foundation to this research is the meditative effort, on the one hand, and the knowledge about education that has been given by Steiner, on the other hand.

The forms that we use—teachings methods; curriculum; day, week and year planning; the role of the class teacher; etc.—must be examined and investigated, so that we can adapt them to fit the conditions of our times. And I mean *all* our forms. On different occasions, Steiner said that Waldorf education is the right kind of education for the period of the consciousness soul, that is, for many centuries to come. I am convinced that the spiritual foundation of Waldorf education is appropriate for the children who are born in our present time and into the future. The external forms, however – the methods that flow out of this spiritual source – these must change with the times, they must be flexible, and this is something on which we must constantly work!

Again, it is almost impossible to practice such renewing research alone, especially for younger teachers. On this issue, again, we must use the power of the group. Faculty can take this research as a shared challenge, as a communal mission, and work together on different questions of our daily work. Whenever I was part of such inquiry work, it has been my experience that it was always profoundly life-bringing and strengthening to everyone involved.

I would like to give some examples from our work in Waldorf schools around Israel. All these examples are from work that I did with groups of teachers in the framework of faculty meetings.

- *The question of the daily rhythm.* We tried to look at this question from the child's perspective: What

does a child go through during a school day? What is best for her at her specific age? What would be the appropriate rhythm between lesson and recess for each age? What will constitute a healthy rhythm for the children? How many lessons are appropriate to each age in one day? Does a 7-year-old child need the rhythm of lesson – recess – lesson – recess?

In one school, for instance, the faculty reached the conclusion that in the first three years of school, in classes 1, 2, and 3, we have to establish what they called 'a continuous day' or a flowing daily rhythm, without breaks. The class teacher feels the children's need or mood and navigates the daily routine accordingly. Hence, English or Arabic, painting or handcraft lessons can be longer or shorter and can start before or after the originally designated time.

- *The question of choice.* Is it in accordance with children's development and inner needs, that from class 1 to class 12 they must learn only what their teachers think they should learn? Should we perhaps involve the students, starting at a certain age, in their own curricular determinations? I see this as an area that needs careful studying and a question that we must explore extensively. In one school, we came to the conclusion that from class 6 onwards, the students should experience choice in some subjects, for their own benefit and development.

- *Preparing meals and eating together.* This was an issue that the faculty at a certain school wanted to study. The teachers thought that it is very important for children nowadays to know how to make their own food and to create a culture of communal meals. As a result, this school now has a kind of makeshift kitchen, and students from all classes work together to prepare the meal during the Main Lesson period, and then each class eats together as a group.

- *Designing the beginning of the school day.* How should we start our day? What should the students and the teachers do at the beginning of each day? What will be the most appropriate opening for the students? What would bring them healing forces? Would that be walking around the school area for half an hour? play in the school playground? work in all sorts of crafts? This, too, is an issue of great importance.

To conclude, there are endless issues in our daily Waldorf activities and routines that merit further research. The main thing is that we, as teachers, begin a culture of asking questions, of inquiry, that we are in continuous research and that we pursue this research together with our colleagues.

Waldorf for Every Child

I am convinced that we won't be able to fulfil our mission if we remain within our very narrow boundaries. Almost all over the world, Waldorf education works among rich, wealthy, and well-educated communities. However, the Waldorf impulse, the Waldorf qualities, aim to influence every child, not only those who attend Waldorf schools! We must look at ways in which we can expand beyond our current communities, beyond Waldorf schools, and approach every child and examine the question: How we can become an impulse that truly changes the education systems, the life of every child? How do we transform ourselves into cultural reformers that influence mainstream education, a stream of education that is truly meaningful?

How do we do it?

The traditional Waldorf school cannot accomplish this. We need, of course, Waldorf schools that represent a deep and original Waldorf impulse. Steiner called such a school a *Musterschule*, which can be translated, perhaps, as "exemplary school." Hence, we should keep on nourishing and developing the Waldorf school as we know it, for those who want it, who can afford it, and who appreciate what the Waldorf approach can give their children.

In addition – and I see it as a separate stream of education – we should create a new impulse that steps out of the traditional Waldorf school and is introduced to other school systems, a new stream of what I call "Waldorf for every child." To this end, we can take the more external components of the Waldorf school and work with them, transforming them in such a way that we could bring them to every school, every community, and every place. This means working as Waldorf ambassadors that are ready to offer some of their goods to other schools.

We are already doing this in Israel. We are working with schools that reach out to us, whether through the principal or other administrators or even through interested parents, asking about ways to implement elements of Waldorf education in their own school's practices. The requests come from both secular and religious Jewish

schools as well as from Arab schools and communities. We work with the school teachers, seeing first how they understand "Waldorf," what is it they really want, and then share our practices while working with the needs and expectations of the school teachers and parents. In this way, every interested school could have its own unique "Waldorf" suite.

Here are some examples of such elements of Waldorf education that are brought to non-Waldorf schools:

- The artistic impulse of Waldorf pedagogy – artistic activity during every school day for every child
- Emphasis on the human connection, on the element of human encounter in the school – the educator meets the student every morning and at the end of each school day
- Emphasis on movement for the children's healthy development
- The significance of handiwork – implementing various types of work, with a variety of materials, during the school day; cultivating the school garden; taking care of animals
- The method of block lessons
- Assessment of each child individually, without comparison to other students
- Starting from a young age, fostering a deep and meaningful connection to nature through nature walks, field days, camping, outdoor activities, observations and studies of nature, etc.

Such essential elements from the Waldorf world can be offered to and introduced in non-Waldorf schools, so that every child in the world can have them and benefit from them.

We have a treasure in our schools, and many parents, educators, and people who work in educational fields appreciate this treasure. It is our mission to give this treasure to the world and to help as many children as we can to benefit from its many life-giving qualities.

In short, if we want to be relevant to our present times, to the cultures we are living in, to the children that are coming to us, and even to ourselves – then we must make an effort in the three dimensions of

- Esoteric work
- Research of our daily practice (Action research)
- Waldorf for every child

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