

Teaching as Learning in a Steiner Waldorf Setting

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“The importance of the role of the teacher as an agent of change, promoting understanding and tolerance, has never been more obvious than today. It is likely to become even more critical in the twenty-first century.”

This bold statement from the 1996 UNESCO report underlines the crucial role of the teacher in our contemporary societies and also its formidable professional responsibilities.¹ To be able to live up to such a task, it is clear that on-going professional development is a *sine qua non*, and that schools themselves have to be valued and constructed as learning institutions for all involved in them. This perception has also been a basic principle of Waldorf education since the founding of the first Steiner school in Stuttgart in 1919 and it is integrated in various forms in all the present 870 schools worldwide. As a whole, the report is based on the moral values explicitly stated in the authors’ introduction as their perspective of education as *“an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain ideals of peace, freedom and social justice.”*² The teacher’s role is delineated within a cultural context where:

The need for change, from narrow nationalism to universalism, from ethnic and cultural prejudice to tolerance, understanding and pluralism, from autocracy to democracy in its various manifestations, and from a technologically divided world where high technology is the privilege of the few to a technologically united world, places enormous responsibilities on teachers

*who participate in the molding of the characters and minds of the new generation,*³

These sentiments would find a ready echo among practitioners in Steiner Waldorf Schools. Rudolf Steiner spoke in remarkably similar terms in his early lectures given in the second decade of the last century, before the actual founding of any school or institution based on his insights. His seminal lecture, “The Education of the Child,” was delivered in the Architektenhaus in Berlin in January, 1910, and then published a few months later. He went on, over the next 20 years, to give over 200 lectures developing the themes found in his early work on education. This particular lecture has taken on a classical status in Waldorf teaching circles and is a key text in understanding Steiner’s educational philosophy and how it is now practiced. He starts by enumerating the issues of his age: “...social issues, women’s issues, various educational issues, questions of health, questions of human rights. . . .”

He then describes that the tendency was, as he saw it, to seek solutions with inadequate methods that

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range from “radicalism, which carries with it a revolutionary air; moderate attitudes, full of respect for what exists, yet endeavouring to evolve something new out of it; and conservatism, which is up in arms whenever any of the old institutions are tampered with.” These all try to operate “without really knowing the foundations of life.” It was his view that an investigation of the *depths* is what will be required, and that this is basically an educational question. “We will not set up demands nor programs, but simply describe child-nature. From the nature of the growing and evolving human being, the proper viewpoint for education will, as it were, result spontaneously.”⁴ This ethos makes demands on the Steiner practitioners to be acutely aware of their relationships to the pupils in their care as well as to exercise a thorough and critical consideration of what the content of lessons should be to meet and work with such “*child-nature*”—not forgetting that the teacher is a “*growing and evolving human being*” too.

This creative approach means that there is no fixed curriculum as such, as it is apparent that child-nature differs from age to age and culture to culture. What is generally accepted as the Steiner curriculum is actually a body of knowledge, experience and practice from which the teacher is theoretically able to draw according to his or her pedagogical insights. Since the inception of the first school, there has in fact been a great reluctance to publish anything that might resemble a fixed and definitive curriculum. One of the founding teachers published a small manuscript briefly outlining the lesson content practiced by the teachers in the early years of the first Waldorf school and carefully entitled it, *From the Curriculum of the First Waldorf School*, although the “From” did not survive into the first English translation.⁵ It has been stated by contemporary colleagues that in this account, each teacher left a clear imprint of his or her character in the account of his or her particular lessons. The other main source of Steiner’s statements that had any bearing on the contents of the lessons and methodology was a compilation dating from 1955, edited by another pioneering teacher in Stuttgart. These were derived from his written works, lectures and conversations with the initial teaching body. Although individual schools have had to produce a “curriculum” for either local or national authorities, it was not until 1995 that a reluctance to produce a generic version was overcome and the first full description of content was

published.⁶ There was, however, much internal controversy from those who were concerned that this would be taken and used as a straightjacket by future generations of teachers and governmental officials. The opening sentence of this work reiterates the approach, “Every teacher must develop a curriculum for themselves,” and states that this is to be created in continuing dialogue with the developing child or young person: “*The real curriculum is the child.*”⁷ However, the ideal of taking creative risks and responding to the perceived needs of the children entails an unavoidable tension with the contemporary requirement for accountability and transparency in the teaching process. The art of teaching is in finding a balance between these twin demands and conscientiously exploring the values that are both implicit and explicit in any lesson or learning context. This is not just a paradox in the Waldorf environment but should be a feature of any healthy educational debate, especially when standardised curricula are being produced and, on occasion, imposed.

“The boy or girl, seeing the teacher come into the classroom must not have the feeling ‘He is teaching according to some theoretical principles because he does not grasp the subconscious.’ They want a human relation with the teacher. And that is almost always destroyed when education principles are introduced....Pedagogics is not enough if it makes the teacher or educator merely clever.”⁸ Here Steiner is stating that teachers have to live their teaching and that the practice itself is the learning process for which training, research and theory are, in reality, a form of preparation which enables the practitioner to be alert to the teaching moment when it presents itself. The key is the quality of relationships. To enable and support individuals to follow these precepts, the school has to be constructed as a learning space, and, therefore, the development of collegial support and mutual interest becomes vital. Steiner schools are by no means perfect institutions and it is in this, frequently fraught, area that they are vulnerable. This also touches on the post-modern concerns regarding identity. The implication is that children learn more from what the teacher is than what the teacher knows, and this leads to a more reflective and self-reliant attitude toward the profession. But it cannot be done alone.

Steiner schools are supposedly non-hierarchical, being run on a communal sense of responsibility as far as this is compatible with national educational legal

frameworks. This is along the lines that David Hargreaves also advocates: "Any management tasks, pleasant or unpleasant, that are better undertaken by teachers rather than administrators should be shared and rotated and all teachers should see themselves contributing to the formulation of school policies as well as to their implementation. A much flatter professional hierarchy is essential to more collegial structures, and collaborative styles are appropriate for high quality teams of professionals."⁹ For Waldorf schools, self-administration is a part of the learning process for the adults in the school community, and for the teachers it can lead to an enhancement of their teaching skills and awareness of their responsibilities. Being part of practical and administrative decision-making bodies can mean the acquisition of new abilities, a more critical view of one's own opinion and prejudices, a deeper understanding of legal and cultural contexts and a development of social skills. It also requires an appreciation of the skills of others and the ability to resist the temptation that one can master all aspects of school life by oneself while disregarding expertise from other sources. Individual schools find their own route in this.

In some schools, the parents play a more active role than others, and in some countries state requirements limit the freedom in which this can be fruitfully practiced. However, on pedagogical issues, Waldorf teachers claim their own sovereignty and most schools create further training facilities within the structure of the school, such as weekly pedagogical meetings for the staff and more specialised staff meetings, where there are studies of individual children in depth, planning of communal events, and lesson reviews. Many schools are also developing mentoring and advisor programmes with an eye to school enhancement through quality care. The schools have found that there is no ready answer to quality questions and that each school needs to find a process that is suitable to its own ethos, history and cultural environment. However, the sharing of experience between institutions is usually considered of great value. Where this question is well thought out, it can lead to a palpable sense of confidence and direction in a school, a more proactive willingness to face and analyze shortcomings, and a creative approach in overcoming them. "The moral agent in the ethics of care stands with both feet in the real world... The care ethicist sees this precisely as a crucial condition for being able to judge well. .

. . The ethics of care demands reflection on the best course of action in specific circumstances and the best way to express and interpret moral problems. Situatedness in concrete social practices is not seen as a threat to independent judgment. On the contrary, it is assumed that it is exactly what will raise the quality of judgment."¹⁰ Being free is concomitant on being responsible, but the increasing complexity of educational institutions is providing significant challenges to this approach.

One area where Waldorf schools in general are struggling to find a constructive balance is the amount of parental involvement in this field. Most schools are, in fact, initiated by the parents themselves and they sometimes become the pioneering teachers as well. The first years of building up a school are relatively harmonious and enthusiastic, although they involve a steep learning curve for all concerned as there is no identikit method of doing this and the community of parents and teachers are setting about a task that is usually state managed. But in the ensuing years, as the body of teachers begins to form itself within a professional identity, this can lead to problems regarding the amount of parental engagement and who makes the decision as to what this should be. The working with parents in the Steiner schools is not always as diplomatic as it could be and feelings of alienation can appear on one side of the divide and on the other a need for protective measures from outer criticism. Those schools, however, that have had the courage to involve parents in their quality care process report a marked improvement in the area of human relationships. "Parents must acknowledge that the schooling which will be best for their children in the twenty-first century, has to be very different from the schooling they experienced themselves. ...They must certainly expect a lot of their children's teachers, but should base this on understanding, courtesy and partnership. Criticism and questioning is more palatable when it is accompanied by positive feedback, concrete help and active support. If parents expect teachers to change, they must show they are willing to change too."¹¹ I would suggest these maxims should be applied in both directions and Waldorf teacher education has become increasingly interested in ways of developing these skills of empathy and understanding between the adults around a child. Judging by the reported behavior in the school, the

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children certainly respond positively to an embedded sense of common ownership, and vandalism or violent behavior is practically unknown.

In these contexts, Steiner schools are wrestling with very contemporary problems, and, although they cannot claim to have ready made solutions, or even forms that can be readily adapted elsewhere, the fact that they have worked with these for the last eighty years are grounds for further research and appraisal to the benefit of the profession in general. These innovative approaches are to be found in sixty countries and a great amount of international expertise is shared, allowing the schools to feel themselves active participants in a global educational network. Its implications for teacher education are equally profound. A commonplace statement in the Steiner milieu is that teaching is an art. Therefore it is incumbent on any Steiner teacher education programme for its students to develop the skills needed to become artistic practitioners. This artistry should also extend to the methodology of the scientific subjects. It is also assumed that artistic skills are transferable ones and that the practice of aesthetic judgment, realization of ideals, a willingness to struggle with and confront the material, the need for perseverance and courage, and practice of communication skills can be enhanced by artistic activity in many areas of endeavour and that the acquisition of these make for better teachers. The use of textbooks in Waldorf schools is therefore delayed so that the children experience a direct and personal approach from the teacher. Torsten Hiigerstrand, a prominent futurist scientist in Sweden, talks of a new aesthetic keynote: "In both research and practice it is necessary to revive the original double meaning of the concept 'art' which previously encompassed both practical skill and works with 'fine culture'.... More and more people believe that the aesthetic, taken in a broad sense, is the foremost cohesive and moderating force which can be mobilized in our technological age. That thought is an interesting challenge to all those engaged in the business of teaching."¹² In Steiner teacher education programs as much as 50% of the contact time can be related to artistic work of one sort or another. This can be in forms of movement akin to dance, drama, music, singing, creative writing, storytelling, development of speech and declamation, painting, drawing, sculpture, a rich variety

of handcrafts and art history. As has been shown in the BA. Hons. Waldorf programmes at Plymouth University, UK, these can readily fit into a university context and student achievements are quantifiable enough to meet university standards of attainment. In 1923 Steiner was referring to the "*Erziehungskunstler*" and was propagating the idea of artistic activity as the real foundation of a renewed teacher education.¹³

This emphasis on the arts as a teaching method is also an important aspect of the schools themselves, and, as teachers are meant to be sincere practitioners of the ideals they set before the children, they are also a potent resource for continual professional development after the initial training years. Good Waldorf schools are a hive of artistic work that helps them develop an ethos in which learning is enjoyable and where everybody, whether pupil or adult, can contribute his or her gifts in an appreciative environment. As relationships are seen as a key to learning, this interpersonal realm is thereby enhanced with a sense of mutual achievement that can make a more lasting impression than examination results. When 18-year-old school-leavers are asked for their impression from the school years, it is dramatic productions and the frequent class trips that come foremost into their minds. In Steiner teacher-education seminars, students' abilities in all these areas are considered as important as their studies of theory, underlying philosophy, pedagogical insights and classroom skills, because one aspect is seen to enhance the other. Steiner's approach was that being artistically active could lead to new forms of perception which could transform a potential teacher from a knower (*Kenner*) to an enabled doer (*Konner*)*" "All instruction," said Steiner, "must therefore be permeated by art, by human individuality, for of more value than any thought out curriculum is the individuality of the teacher and educator. It is individuality that must work in the school."¹⁵ Although many teacher students who have been educated in conventional schools find this a challenging aspect of their adult education, it does, nevertheless, seem to seize their enthusiasm when their competencies are revealed and they are shown to have artistic skills, albeit unbeknown and unrecognized. It also provides a framework for teamwork, communal decision-making, and quality recognition and analysis, which will be necessary skills in their future careers in Steiner schools.

Teacher education from this perspective is about an

enrichment of culture where a living interest is fostered in everything happening in our world. The recent (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) publication *What Schools for the Future?* suggests a sea change in traditional expectations and the need for new competencies. "Such competencies closely match those required in the labour market and organizations, including the capacity of each person to design their own lifelong learning agendas and negotiate their way through complex, individualized pathways of professional development. They are less matters to be taught as part of a manifest curriculum, more embedded in the culture and everyday practice of working schools."¹⁶ As in Steiner schools this approach does not in any way undervalue cognitive skills or the need for scientific objectivity, but rather complements them with personal and interpersonal skills that can enhance the profession of being an educator by making the process of self-development an enjoyable one, whereby enthusiasm for learning can be directly transmitted to the children.

"One way forward," the OECD Report says, "is to reinforce the socialisation of schools and to recognise their nature as communities in their own right. . . . it suggests acknowledgment of a comprehensive set of educational outcomes going beyond measurable standards."¹⁷ The culture of enquiry is an essential element in the art of being human and in going beyond the measurable is where the creative element can provide both satisfaction and a stimulus for further learning and change. Freedom for both teacher and child is the freedom to grow, making life-long learning a reality, because life is always interesting and evolving. For both the student teacher and the teacher, Steiner's aphorism that "*All education is self-education*" can be a reminder of how innovative educational ideas can contribute to the development of their own vocational capabilities.

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