

THE UNIQUE, SPIRITUAL AND INSIGHTFUL EDUCATION OF WALDORF PEDAGOGY

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Міжнародні вальдорфські школи — це сторіччя досвіду, але все це активні організації, присутні в 64 країнах світу. Вальдорфська педагогіка має в основі духовність, але школи не є доктринально духовними. Рудольф Штайнер створив свою освіту навколо природного розвитку людини; три семирічні періоди дозволяють дітям розвиватися на різних етапах діяльності, почуттів і мислення. Ми розглядаємо, чи працює це як складна інтелектуальна система.

Ключові слова: духовна педагогіка, інтелектуальна освіта, Рудольф Штайнер, вальдорфські школи, педагогічна практика

International Waldorf schools are a century old but still vigorous entities, present in 64 countries world-wide. Waldorf pedagogy has spirituality at its core and yet schools are not doctrinally spiritual. Rudolf Steiner designed his education around the natural growth of the human being; three seven-year periods allow children to develop at distinct stages of doing, feeling, and thinking. We consider whether this works as a complex, intelligent system.

Keywords: spiritual-based pedagogy, intelligent education, Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf schools, pedagogical practice

Introduction

This article will assess the unconventional qualities of the alternative education system of Waldorf. The Austrian polymath Rudolf Steiner, (1861-1925), established the spiritual, scientific philosophy of Anthroposophy. Steiner also conceived the areas of biodynamic agriculture, anthroposophical medicine, and Waldorf education. Steiner's disciplines were guided by his theological and scientific underpinnings; it is Steiner's spiritual and insightful education that will be explored here. The first Waldorf School originated in 1919, in Stuttgart, Germany (Goldschmidt, 2017). There are now approximately 3,000 schools and kindergartens around the world, and notably: 43 Waldorf schools in China, 12 Waldorf schools in Poland, 6 Waldorf schools in Ukraine, and 35 Waldorf schools in the United Kingdom (Waldorf World List, 2022). International Waldorf schools are connected globally by their unique nature, and yet each has a separate identity.

This paper is based on an empirical research project which was conducted during the Covid pandemic, interviewing 43 Waldorf teachers internationally

on their interpretation and experiences of Waldorf pedagogical theory and practice. The project was separated into the three different educational periods of kindergarten, grade school, and high school.

The spiritual basis

Rudolf Steiner established Anthroposophy in 1902, seeking to teach ‘human wisdom’ (see Suggate and Suggate, 2019). In education, Steiner’s aim was for teachers to value the developing humanity of the child, and to enact this understanding throughout children’s schooling. Steiner’s understanding was informed by Eastern, as well as Western religion in valuing the ‘soul life’ of the individual child (Goldschmidt, 2017). Steiner believed in reincarnation, where individuals’ soul lives live another life, so improving one’s morality. Anthroposophists believe that one’s childhood involves incarnating through four stages of human growth of physical, etheric, astral and ego (Welburn, 2004) (these concepts are explored below). Such a spiritual understanding by teachers is not taught to children in Waldorf schools; instead, teachers unobtrusively respect and nurture children’s development.

Goethe and Mackenzie

Steiner was significantly influenced by the German Enlightenment thinker and spiritual scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) (Hasler, 2010). Goethe conceived the ‘metamorphosis of plants’ notion (Attfield R., 2021), and used this analogy to comprehend the developing human being, leading to their spiritual advancement (Aeppli, 2016). Steiner used this idea to form his ‘fourfold structure of the human being’ of the life-stage ‘bodies’ of child development; that is physical (equating to mineral plant growth), etheric (inner strengthening), astral (growth of feeling and creating), and ego (leading to maturity and spiritual awareness) (Tunkey, 2020, p.18). (It should be acknowledged that contemporary Anthroposophists and Waldorf educators disown and denounce Goethe’s and subsequently Steiner’s racism of 1700s-1800s, and early 1900s) (ASinGB, 2022).

Millicent Mackenzie (1863-1942) was an Anthroposophist, and British educational philosopher, contemporary with Steiner. Mackenzie shared Steiner’s views on: spirituality as the basis of education, educational autonomy, reverence between teacher and pupil, and educational inclusivity. Mackenzie became the UK’s second woman professor in 1904 at Cardiff University, to the consternation of her male colleagues. It was Mackenzie who created Steiner’s platform to successfully appeal to fellow educators to form the second Waldorf school in 1925. Mackenzie believed that such a spiritual and intelligent education would enable generations of wiser societies (Mackenzie, 1924), (Paull, 2013).

Educational concepts

Steiner wanted children to be able to learn productively and meaningfully, through the multiply layered means of doing, feeling and thinking, in order to nurture children's natural development towards maturity, self-awareness and reflection (Dahlin, 2018). Kindergarten children (aged 3-7) develop their physical and 'etheric' bodies, and their 'will', through memory, habits and ideas, and through play (Suggate and Suggate, 2019); grade school pupils (aged 7-14) move towards developing their 'feeling-life' astral bodies, and their judgement, instinct and 'moral self-education' (Steiner, [1919]2000); and high school students (aged 14-18) cultivate their 'thinking-realm' intellectual capacities and acquire a sense of agency, towards developing their 'I' or 'ego' (Mackensen, 1994). Waldorf does not attempt to be an 'intellectual education'; rather, drawing the intellectual potential out of students is one way of inspiring them, but it is supported by other approaches throughout (Tunkey, 2020).

Methods

This empirical research followed the principles of social science, underlined and challenged by Waldorf academic writings and sociology of education. 43 qualitative interviews were conducted with Waldorf teachers across the three periods of education. Teacher participants are from the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. As it is a close-knit community, individual teachers are identified by their country's initials. The interviews took place online, during the pandemic. The social science devices of scrutiny and rigour were applied (Silverman, 2022), (Bryman, 2012).

Findings

The Waldorf pedagogical focus

Teachers expressed the nature of Waldorf pedagogy in terms of meeting the needs of children. In relation to kindergarten one teacher stated: US "Developmentally at that age the child thinks in images, not intellectual thoughts", hence the kindergarten focus on learning through play and imitation. A second teacher conveyed how they saw the key purpose of Waldorf kindergarten as enabler: US "Children live in this imaginative sphere, and we work out of that; instead of teaching about life, we do life". By grade school, one teacher stated: G "Waldorf offers children learning challenges in a sequential way through the curriculum, which interests children and enables their access by not intellectually overloading them" (see Nordlund, 2013). Goldshmidt (2017) represents the Waldorf curriculum as holistic and integrated, focusing on experiential learning. A second colleague explained: US "Lower school children move from the right brain into the left brain. If we ask them to use left brain tasks too early, it's yanking them out of one place, and insisting they be somewhere else".

A high school teacher described their active class physics experiment on tension and compression: UK “We talk about ‘open concepts’. This is ‘thinking with feeling’ and ‘thinking with doing’; that develops growing intellectual thinking.” Similarly, a second teacher requires the thought of their students to be global: G “In philosophy at class 12, I explore the idea of freedom with students. We question ‘where is the human being? Can I make free and independent decisions?’” (see Tunkey, 2020). A third high school teacher explained that the Waldorf curriculum: UK “...doesn’t just require intellectualisation, it requires experience, feeling, expression and thinking”, that is the stimulation of all-round senses of the student. The overall aim is for these young people to develop emotionally mature self-control and clear-sighted resilience (see Steiner, [1914]2009).

Waldorf spiritual education

Teachers explained how their inward focus allows the nurture of the child’s ‘soul life’: UK “The Waldorf principles are spiritual soul qualities. It is the deeper anthroposophical understanding of the child and child development” (See Ergas, 2017). Teachers referred to the spiritual and ‘soul development’ of children throughout their education, in facilitating for them to become independently minded and resilient future citizens. Mackenzie (1924, p.4) wrote “the term ‘spirit’ denotes the permanent self, the underlying reality to human nature, and the term ‘spiritual’ indicates creativity in all its forms”. A teacher explained how their belief in reincarnation influences the recognition they give to each child: US “When a child appears in front of us, they are not merely undeveloped adults, they come with a whole trajectory that they’ve chosen, and they have a sense of what they need to be doing here on earth.” Rawson (2021, p.65) corroborates, “the I, as spiritual core, is the largely unconscious locus of agency in growth, learning and development”. And yet, students have no concept of Anthroposophy, and are not indoctrinated; instead, they are taught to be independent thinkers.

Conclusion

This creative education incorporates biographical and experiential teaching methods, and an awareness of countries’ valid histories and identities. The intellectual component of Waldorf education does not dominate other aspects of the education, of physical, sensory and creative learning; arguably what makes Waldorf education intelligent, is that it is not purely intellectually based. Steiner saw education as an art, that requires the Waldorf teacher’s own spiritual study, and deep understanding of humanity (Steiner, [1907] 1996), (Goldshmidt, 2017). Dahlin (2018, 65) stresses that “gradually through learning and maturity the individualized spirit comes to self-consciousness in adolescence and early adulthood, in a process we call individuation or in German ‘Bildung’.” One high school teacher summarized: US “Waldorf is a humanizing education; kids

are academically sharp, but also creative, and they are interested in the world and in problem solving... We bring values of less egocentrism, less judgement, and less indifference to the world”.

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