

## What should Waldorf Look Like Today?

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What are the present and future challenges of Waldorf education and how should we face them? This article aims to try to understand our situation in the Waldorf movement, both currently and into the future; to look at the challenges we are facing and to try and draw some lines of action or some directions in which we can work to face those challenges.

In 1906, 114 years ago, Steiner began to lecture on the topic of education. A hundred and two years ago, in the year 1919, the first Waldorf School was founded in Stuttgart. Steiner himself, as the founder, director and consultant of the first school, passed away in 1925. Therefore, the last time he said something about Waldorf education was 96 years ago.

We have every reason to be proud. Today, the Waldorf movement is considered the largest alternative form of education in the world. We have many Kindergartens and schools all over the world, we have deep and distinctive principles and well-established practices: we know what to do and we also know how to do it. We also have a long and powerful tradition.

However, we also have reasons to be worried. Why? Precisely because of all these reasons! Let me explain:

There is a very delicate balance between form and life force, between tradition, know-how, and new impulses. 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.

My concern is that, in many places, Waldorf Schools tend to become a traditional, providing a series of answers without questions, a series of habits; that they turn into "this is the right way to do it", into some specific frozen shapes of external symbols - wise, beautiful, aesthetic, humane ones, yet still mere techniques, mere forms.

The Waldorf movement has a profound and strong tradition. This tradition is based on knowledge, on wisdom, on spiritual insight – but that insight, wisdom, and knowledge were given a hundred years ago. Now, in the past 100 years, humanity has gone through tremendous changes: We breathe different air, we eat foods, we live on a different earth, and we are using completely different technology. We do not have different the same children in our kindergartens 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, and those challenges must have their answers here and now.

The phrase "free school" not only symbolizes 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.

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

This is one of the most important questions of Waldorf education, and at the end of the day, this is what will determine whether we live with the pulse and spirit of our time, bringing forth living forces and inspiration to the children we work with – or adopt past forms that once were right and appropriate, at another time, in another place and for other children.

So, what should we do? How can we touch the living stream of life? How can we cleave to the very source of the educational moment? In other words, how can we meet the children in kindergarten, in the classroom, during play and at home, with full hearts, 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 can be found. I see this path as involving the following three dimensions:

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

### *Esoteric work*

The key to a true meeting 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 of these is our inner 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. "*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 inner development. In my view, it is a necessary foundation for what I am seeking.

In this regard, a meditative life for the educator is fundamental. Studying the issue once in a teacher training programme, or working on it 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 the teachers is necessary.

We are living in a very lonely time. 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 practise meditation along other spiritual paths. Is the Anthroposophical path too difficult and lonely?

I think we need a support group. Already in teacher training, 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!

### *Research*

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, explore our daily doings: our teaching methods, our curriculum and all that the Being of our school includes. The foundation to this research is the meditative effort, on the one hand, and, on the other, the educational insights given by Steiner.

The forms that we use 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 various occasions, Steiner mentioned that Waldorf education is the right kind of education for the period of the consciousness soul; meaning, for many centuries to come. I am convinced that the spiritual foundation of Waldorf education is appropriate for the children who are born at 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 – and this is something on which we must work on, constantly!

Again, it is almost impossible to practise alone, especially for young teachers. On this issue, again, we must use the power of the group. Teacher faculties can take this research as a challenge, as a mission, and work together on different questions of our daily work. Whenever I have been part of

such study work, it has been my experience that it has always been profoundly enlivening and strengthening to everyone involved.

In this article, in a few topics, I would like to give some examples from our work in Waldorf schools around Israel:

- The question of the daily rhythm.
- The question of choice.
- Preparing food and eating together.
- Designing the beginning of the school day.
- Narratives in each class.
- The question of ecology.

To conclude, there are endless issues from our daily Waldorf activities and routines that are worth further research. The main thing is that we, as teachers, begin a culture of asking questions, of inquiring further, 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. In many parts of the world, Waldorf education works among rich, wealthy and educated communities. However, the Waldorf Impulse – the Waldorf qualities – are supposed to influence every child! We must look at ways in which we can approach every child and examine the question: How can we become an impulse that truly changes systems of education, and the life of every child. How do we transform ourselves into cultural reformers, working in 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 ('Mutter Schule'). Hence, we should keep on nourishing and developing Waldorf schools as we know them, 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, a new form of what I call "Waldorf for every child". To this end, we can take the more 'outward' components of the Waldorf approach and transform them in such a way that we could bring them to every school, every community, and every place. Here are some examples of such elements:

- The artistic impulse of Waldorf pedagogy – artistic activity during every school day for every child.
- Emphasis on human connections, on the element of human relationships 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 meaning of craft – implementing various types of work during the school day, using a variety of materials; cultivating the school garden, taking care of animals . . .
- The method of block lessons, or thematic learning.
- Assessment of the child in herself, without any comparisons with other students.
- Fostering a deep and meaningful connection to the natural world for young children through nature walks, spending days in nature and outdoor activities, learning about nature and observing it, going on school camps, and so on.

Such essential elements from the Waldorf world can be taken and applied so that every child in the world can have them and benefit from them.

We have 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 summary, if we want to be relevant to our present times, to the culture we are living in, to the children that are coming to us, and even to ourselves – then we must make an effort in the following three dimensions:

- Esoteric work
- Research of our daily practice (action research)
- ‘Waldorf’ for every child



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