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Waldorf: An education of its time?

To what degree is Waldorf education of its time? Is it contemporary? These questions are put forward by Neil Boland, senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. He looks towards possible futures and finding new forms of and for education. This is his second article; the first, "A sense of place within the Waldorf curriculum", asks how Waldorf pedagogy can find its place within local cultures and the extent to which it localises itself when it moves beyond its European beginnings.



I would like to address a second audit – one of time, of being of one's time. It needs to look at how time is treated, where in the flow of time the Waldorf movement places itself. Waldorf education's relationship to place is important. I have come to think that the importance of realising our relationship to time and to the needs of the time we live in is nothing short of critical.

Education for today

I think many of us at some time have heard Waldorf education called 'an education for the future.' Maybe even 'THE education for the future.' As a concept I don't have difficulty with this, though I would argue that we need to be an education of today, rather than for tomorrow.

In lecture one of "The Foundations of Human Experience", Steiner says: "We must have a living interest in everything happening today, otherwise we will be bad teachers for this school. We dare not have enthusiasm only for our special tasks. We can only be good teachers when we have a living interest in everything happening in the world" (1).

Waldorf education has had a documented tendency to self-ghettoise itself (2), to live in a bubble, to isolate itself from wider education debates and from other education professionals. The older the student, the more important is it for them to know that their teachers are keenly interested in everything happening in the world, up with every trend and topic, ahead of the game in their area of expertise and are actively 'people to today.'

Futures studies

Futures Studies comprises a host of different areas which combine to look at how the world, the environment, society may or could be in the future. It includes every discipline and is constantly being refined and taken in new directions. For an excellent summary, I recommend Jennifer Gidley's recent book, "A very short introduction to the future" (3).

Educational Futures look at how education might be in the future and, especially, addresses the vital question: what we should we be doing now, to educate our students to meet these (undecided) futures?

James Martin founded a research institute in Futures Studies at the University of Oxford in England in 2005 (4). In his book, "The meaning of the 21st century: The make-or-break century" (5) he lists what he sees as the large-scale problems of the 21st century. These are problems which we as individuals, as teachers and as nations are facing. Since the 1970s, they have been known as 'wicked problems.' There are 16 of them; they form the backbone of most serious news reports.

1. Global warming
2. Excessive population growth
3. Water shortages
4. Destruction of life in the oceans
5. The spread of deserts
6. Mass famine in ill-organised countries
7. Extreme poverty
8. Growth of shanty cities
9. Unstoppable global migrations
10. Pandemics
11. Financial collapse
12. Non-state actors with extreme weapons
13. Violent religious extremism
14. Runaway computer intelligence
15. War that could end civilization
16. Risks to homo sapiens' existence

These wicked problems have been created largely in our lifetimes; we are having to deal with them, but even more they will be confronted by our children and grandchildren.

All of these wicked problems are multinational. None can be solved by one country alone. All countries participate, to different degrees, in causing most of the problems, and they must participate in the solutions. These wicked problems are interconnected and, because of this, the solutions are interconnected to a large extent. More than anything, they resemble a tangled mass of wool. Pulling at one end, tightens some others. Most of the problems are the consequences of bad management and absence of foresight.

Because they need to do so

When the first Waldorf school was begun in Germany after the First World War, society was in crisis, at least in that part of the world. Now the whole world is in crisis, at many more levels. Why have you then chosen to be here at this time? The children we teach, our own children, our grandchildren, why have they chosen to incarnate now, at this time, to work with these things? An answer is that they want and need to; this age is going to give them the opportunities they are looking for to develop.

All crises are, at the same time, moments of opportunity. Einstein said, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind [sic] is to survive and move toward higher levels" (6). These problems are challenges to discover the "new type of thinking ... [to] move toward higher levels" which Einstein spoke of. In perennial philosophy, such a moment is called an opportunity for initiation, a chance to undergo a process which may result in a higher level of knowledge.

As Elgin put it:

Our time in history is unique in one critical respect: the circle has closed – there is nowhere to escape. For the first time in our history, the entire human population is confronted with a predicament whose solution will require us to work together in a common enterprise that respects our rich diversity (7).

It seems to me and from reading futures education literature that the people needed to meet these challenges will have these qualities:

- Courage
- Strong impulse to act, strong will
- Possess insight, imagination and flexibility
- Innovative, able to think outside the box
- Non-egotistical or selfish, socially adept
- Take responsibility for their own actions and for others
- Will be able to see issues as part of a 'big picture'

This echoes an interesting study several years ago; it is called "Holistic education and visions of rehumanized futures" (8). Gidley investigated how young people see the future – are they daunted by what they see coming down the line? How do they feel about it? She interviewed hundreds of high school students from state schools in Australia. She then interviewed students who had attended or were attending Steiner schools.

Though her findings are not recent, I do not imagine things will have changed. They make interesting reading.

Social futures

- All students voiced similar concerns about current trends regarding the environment, social justice and conflict
- Steiner students voiced more feelings of empowerment regarding the future

- Steiner students demonstrate a “strong sense of activism to create more positive futures”
- Steiner students saw “humanness” as a major factor in the challenges we face
- The futures they imagine are where human development, responsibility and action are in the foreground
- Steiner students do not, on the whole, see technology as providing the necessary answers; their views more indicated that the answers lie in us

Gidley breaks divides the responses of Steiner students into several categories showing:

- Activism, changes in values
- Spirituality (being aware, awake, conscious)
- Reconnection of humanity and nature (‘re-sacralisation,’ re-acknowledging the spiritual in the world)
- Conscious development
- Personal empowerment
- Community empowerment
- Interconnectedness
- Education for future care

It appears that Steiner education is already achieving results, which is undoubtedly heartening. But are we as good as we can be? Is the manifestation of Steiner education we offer in the world all that it might be? As good as it needs to be? Is it finely responsive to present needs, looking towards the future, or is it cobwebbed and over-reliant on traditions of the past?

In Steiner’s lecture cycle "The fall of the spirits of darkness" he said, “We ... must seek ever new ways, look for new forms over and over again ... however good the right may be that you want to bring to realisation – it will turn into a wrong in the course of time” (9). When we are facing the unique challenges of the early twenty-first century, we need to look for new forms again and again in education. We do not yet know what form these new ideas may take, but I do not believe that what these times are calling for is a replication of what has been done (often successfully) for decades.

Out of place

Steiner said this rather remarkable sentence in an address to young people in 1924: “Most people today are visibly out of place in the twentieth century. One has the impression that they were alive at least one hundred years ago. It is not that they have simply remained the same age; they seem to have become stuck in a time long before their own births” (10).

This is worth thinking about. To what extent does it apply now? In which century or part of a century do you see yourself most naturally fitting in? Your colleagues? Other people you know? Your politicians? It is much more than just a question of younger people coming through and taking the place of the older generation. That is always happening. Steiner is talking about people being 100 years or more out of their time.

In the same address, he asked the young people attending, how they imagined the human world would look in 1935 if it incorporated their youthful desires. This is worth considering as a teacher as well. What are the impulses in the souls of young people now? How should the world look in 10 years if the impulses they have in their souls are to be able to find a place in that future world? It is a question we can all ask of young people we meet. They have a sense of place, they have a sense of time, and they certainly have a sense of community.

In this education movement which is nearly 100 years old, we have to recreate, to rekindle the flames of enthusiasm for all we do. Steiner, in the same address, says that “enthusiasm carries the spirit within itself.” Your enthusiasm to question, to discuss, to challenge, to engage, to seek new forms again and again, and to take your understanding ever deeper – your enthusiasm to work together with others, “not only for your special tasks,” will help make Waldorf education an innovative movement of the present which is what your students need. Then they will gain the strength, the courage and the wisdom to tackle the immense world challenges they have chosen to take on.

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