

The development of Steiner / Waldorf education: Looking through the lens of time

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ABSTRACT. Steiner Waldorf education has undergone many developments since it was first introduced in Stuttgart in 1919. Some of these have been the result of pedagogical experience, others in response to outer requirements, while others have been a response to changed and changing circumstances. Numerous articles have been published outlining changes Waldorf education has undergone since its establishment 100 years ago, and how it will need to develop in years to come. We look at development in relation to a fourfold concept of time: past, present, future and eternity. Instead of looking at changes and developments in general, we consider them in relation to one of these four aspects of time. We look at what eternal qualities in Waldorf education might be, and what development could comprise in connection to the eternal. Lastly, we consider how working with such a concept can help with processes of revitalisation and renewal which have been called for by many authors.

Keywords: development, time, eternal characteristics, eternity, archetype

Introduction

Waldorf education began in 1919 with a single school in Stuttgart, Germany at a specific historic time and under specific cultural circumstances. From there, it has gradually spread around the world and is now practised on all inhabited continents and in a wide range of locations and cultures (Göbel, 2019). In spreading from a single point into the wider periphery, it has created many networks and focal points, with many changes of pace. During this process, the significance of the original centre has waned (International Forum for Steiner/Waldorf Education, 2016). Steiner education is constantly in a process of development, a process influenced by all manner of conditions worldwide. Some idea of these processes of adaptation within the last hundred years can be gained by comparing changes in the curricula from Heydebrand (1925/1994) to Stockmeyer (1985) to Richter (2019; 2020). The image of Steiner education has become global; if one wants to get to know how Steiner education is interpreted today, one has to find out how it is realised worldwide. It is likely that Steiner education will develop further. However, what is missing so far from this discourse is an interrogation of what is meant by “development” and different types of development.

Numerous authors have expressed their thoughts on ‘what Waldorf needs to do’; we look at some suggestions below. What unites these authors is their common agreement that change is needed, that the status quo is neither desirable nor tenable. Part of this is grounded in the realisation that, at the same time as the movement has expanded, what might be called the core of the education has gradually become diluted. In this article we consider what the entity ‘Steiner education’ is which is considered to undergo development and view development through the lens of time.

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We see the need to find new ways for meaningful and critical exchange of ideas. In our experience, colleagues meet, listen to talks, applaud, have a short discussion with little follow up. This format – essentially a lecture format – was inherited from Rudolf Steiner and remains substantially unchanged. Articles and books are written, but not always read and still less discussed. We end this article with questions to encourage extended dialogue on Steiner education and its development for the continued health and relevance of the worldwide education movement.

Suggestions for development

Many authors have written on changes and needs which they observe within Steiner education, and how the education can or should be further developed. We do not attempt here to give a full overview of this work, and instead concentrate on a small number of publications.

After a series of meetings, the members of the International Forum of Steiner/Waldorf Education (2022) adopted a list of what they called *Key characteristics of Waldorf education* (2016). This is intended as “binding guidance for the worldwide Waldorf school movement” though “may be supplemented by specific cultural characteristics.” Looking closely, (only) three characteristics are precisely formulated as essential: that the “artistic element in structuring lessons forms the essence of Waldorf education”; that self-governance is “a key feature of the Waldorf school”; and, thirdly, that “a school is a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school when a majority of the teachers lives by the spark of the spirit.”

On the other hand, Martyn Rawson (2021) lists 18 generative principles of Steiner education. These principles take into consideration the ideas of Steiner, educational theory since Steiner’s time, as well as 100 years of pedagogical practice. They are meant to generate new and evaluate existing practices. Each principle is accompanied by a list of skills teachers need to develop in order to work effectively out of the principle, plus questions for further research. Principles include: taking the spiritual dimension seriously (#1); a particular form of block teaching (#7); artistic teaching (#11); and the responsibility of the teachers themselves for the educational leadership of the school (#16).

Gilad Goldshmidt’s (2021) recent article, *What should Waldorf look like today?*, contains three key suggestions on how to further Waldorf pedagogy. He argues that, on a continuum between form and life force (flexibility), Waldorf pedagogy has moved too far towards the form pole over the last 100 years. By emphasising Waldorf traditions, the education has, to a greater extent, lost its liveliness. Goldshmidt argues that Waldorf pedagogy needs to regain an inner dynamic to refresh itself. He identifies three means to do this: esoteric work; researching contemporary Waldorf practice; and extending the Waldorf impulse to as many children as possible worldwide.

Between 2017 and 2019, a number of colleagues worked on the International Teacher Education Project (ITEP) under the auspices of the Pedagogical Section in Dornach to help to “ensure sufficient consistent and high-quality teacher education to support the need of Steiner educational initiatives for well-trained and well-supported teachers” (Boland & McAlice, 2020, p. 2). ITEP identifies nine core areas for teacher development, including the arts, self-development, an expanded understanding of the human being, and context sensitivity.

Finally, we want to mention the article by Eugene Schwartz, *Reflections on Steiner’s Death Day* (2022), written in the context of the United States. Schwartz argues that the spiritual foundation of Waldorf education (Anthroposophy) will necessarily manifest in different ways at different times. Like Goldshmidt, he sees that the Waldorf movement is weighted down by bureaucracies and has moved too far towards the ‘form’ pole. In the near future, he expects a revitalisation to occur through more Waldorf charter schools being founded as well as “‘homeschool pods’ and ‘micro schools’ serving families who, for the most part, want their children to receive a ‘real’ Waldorf education, rather than the simulacra” currently offered in too many schools. He comments unfavourably on ‘woke’ responses he observes in North American Waldorf practice and instead asks that people do the hard “work out of Anthroposophy.”

To sum up: when addressing Waldorf education and development, unique characteristics are identified: Anthroposophy is the spiritual foundation of Waldorf education; Steiner education involves a specific artistic approach to teaching which is responsive to the context in which it happens; the form in which Waldorf education manifests cannot be fixed; and teachers are jointly responsible for the school they are teaching in.

We take these points to reconceptualise how Waldorf education manifests over and through time. We hope this will be a helpful process and one that opens up new ways of thinking and “a language of critique and possibility” (Giroux, 2020, pp. 67-68). In particular, it is a way of conceptualising the idea of the ‘renewal’ and ‘revitalisation’ of Steiner education which appears in many authors’ writing.

Development and Time

Development is a change over time. It matters how much change occurs in which amount of time. And the main question is always: What is the entity itself which is changing? What is its core, its unchangeable inner self? Regarding Waldorf education, it is the question of the “I” of it and how it is “incarnating”.

In Western societies and Western scholarship, time is commonly approached linearly: past ► present ► future, moving from one to the other in a linear fashion, commonly thought of as moving either forwards (behind = past, in front = future) or from left (past) to right (future). Steiner education was founded in the past, has developed into the movement we now have and will develop further into the future. Additionally, such linear development often brings with it the idea of moving from the less developed to the more developed, from the basic to the advanced.

Yet, this conception of time is not universal, nor has it always been perceived like that. In Māori philosophy, time is conceptualised as flowing backwards, from the past (in front) to the future (behind) (Rameka, 2016). This has obvious attractions. We can ‘know’ the past; we have lived through it. When we think about the experienced past, we can ‘see’ it in our mind’s eye. It clearly follows that this past should be placed where we can ‘see’ it – i.e. in front of us. The same with the present, which can also be seen and experienced; it is also placed in front. On the other hand, the future is unknown. We move towards it as if into an unknown space – an experience expressed in Māori philosophy as walking backwards. It is interesting to note in this model that there is no strong division between past and present – both are able to be known. A similar notion is found in Madagascar (Dahl, 1995) where the future is seen as flowing into the back of the head, or passing from behind like a breeze.

In the broad discipline of Futures Studies (Fergnani, 2019; Miller, 2018), various temporal models are put forward. Among the best known of these is Voros’s Futures Cone (2017), founded also on a linear way of thinking, and which aims to show as clearly as possible the range of outcomes facing us as we look into unknown futures; it takes its departure at the starting point of now, and offers a range of possible futures from the projected, probable, and preferred, to preposterous. However, this linear model has been expanded by Christophilopoulos (2021) using Special Relativity theory to explore “interconnections between different futures, different pasts and the present” (p. 83).

Buddhist notions of time are seen as cyclical, often over a longer time scale than is considered in Western thought (González-Reimann, 2016). There are other traditions which emphasise the primacy of the seeking to live always in the present, as stated in the Majjhima Nikāya (written around 2000 years ago):

Do not chase after the past; do not seek for the future.

The past is already no more; the future is not yet.

And see the elements of present in every place, without attachment,

Without moving – yet clearly see and strive in the present.

(in Miyamoto, 1959, p. 122)

This Buddhist notion of the eternal present brings us to a conception of time which we want to spend time on here: the notion of eternity.

Eternity

In Plato's *Timaeus* (360 BCE/2015), time itself is contrasted to the idea of eternity, αἰών, which stands outside time in a timeless state, atemporality.³ Within this timeless, absolute state exist forms or ideas. These, which can also be called archetypes, do not exist on a physical plane but remain as non-physical archetypes of things which can then become physically manifest within the flow of time. In his dialogues, Plato states that it is only through gaining and understanding (i.e. experiencing) of these Forms that humankind can ever achieve knowledge (Meinwald, 2016).

Notions of the eternal and its relationship to time can be found in countless discussions of philosophy and contemplations on spiritual life (for a broad, multi-cultural overview, see Chase, 2014). It is interesting to compare these with what Steiner and others have written.

Steiner (1901-1925/2002) writes in 1907 of there being two distinct flows of time, one from the past towards the future (*evolution*), and the other “the occult-astral” (p. 15) going in a contrary direction. This second stream has its source in the spiritual world and is a stream of *involution*. Involution is the process of eternal impulses coming into earthly reality from the spiritual world. Awareness of this stream is then “a precondition for all spiritual vision” (p.15).

In 1912, Steiner put the link between eternity and the passing moment like this:

Here ends the world of the senses, and here begins the spiritual world, but everywhere the spiritual world permeates sensory existence, so each passing moment, in accordance with its quality, is permeated by eternity. We do not experience eternity by coming out of time, but by being able to experience it clairvoyantly in the moment itself. We are guaranteed eternity in the passing moment; in every moment it is there. (1912/1981, lecture 5)

This highlights the close connection between spiritual experience, spiritual perception (here termed clairvoyance), the eternal, and the experience of the passing moment. There is always a steady movement from the past to the present. But in the very moment of presence, there is the freedom of choice of what will be realised. It is the moment of the New, a coming into being and a being which is gone almost as soon as it emerges. This moment, when eternity touches the steady flow of time, is the foundation of all meditative experience.

When considering the flow of time then, we need also to consider non-time; to past, present and future needs to be added eternity. “What underlies existence – the passing moment and eternity – is everywhere and forever” (1912/1981, lecture 5). “Eternity is a permanent Now” (Hobbes, 1662). This moment can be represented as two intersecting lines, two axes, one past-future and the other eternity-present.

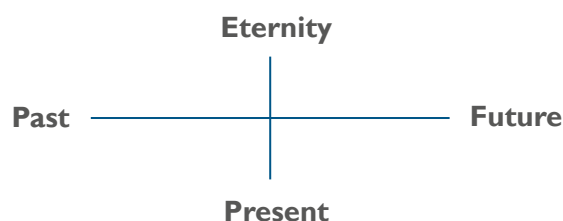


Figure 1: Two axes of time

3. We note the difference usually assigned to the eternal/eternity and the timeless/timelessness. Something which is timeless exists for all time; it stands within time but lasts forever. What is eternal exists outside of time, without beginning or end, on a different plane (Ramelli, 2020).

These are ways in which to think about the intersection of these two axes. We do not claim originality with this diagram. Instead, we use it to consider if it can offer additional lenses through which to conceptualise the development of Steiner education.

Considerations

Being happens in the present. What is of primary importance is the link between the present and the eternal; it is in the eternal that we find the essence of Waldorf education. This essence is always there, always alive, does not change, but one has to strive to get a hold of it again and again; one cannot depend on connection at some time in the past. The essence of Waldorf education exists but cannot be possessed. We can invite it into our teaching, but it cannot be forced to assist like a physical tool. It is something which needs to come into existence anew at each single moment from its spiritual source. More specifically, to connect successfully to the essence of Steiner education in the realm of the eternal, one needs to take a guideline of Anthroposophy in order to distinguish Steiner education from other forms of education: teaching in a way that best suits the specific demands of specific children/students in specific historical circumstances in specific societies at specific places anywhere in the world.

Without this connection between the physical realm and this specific area of the spiritual world, Steiner teaching will undergo a slow process of dying away, of decline. It will become ‘boring’, anodyne, a recipe to follow. Students will not experience it as in touch with what is happening in the world. Denjean puts it, it becomes a “worn out path, then tradition and finally a mere list of norms which have to be adhered to” (2014, p. 20).

On the other axis, Steiner talks in *The First Teachers’ Course* about the importance of moving with the times, of being contemporary. “Teachers must understand the time they live in because they must understand the children entrusted to them in relation to that time.” (1919/2020, p. 163). Considering these two axes together you then have the stage on which Steiner education can manifest itself.

Viewing the development of Steiner education through this lens of time allows important insights to be gained. It shows that change can happen within Steiner education in different ways. Relating change to the fourfoldness of time – eternity, present, past and future – we can distinguish between four different types of development.

Changes which occur through a connection with the *eternal* involve working out of a state of contemplation, an awareness which Steiner called “*Intuition ... the conscious experience, within what is purely spiritual, of a purely spiritual content*” (1894/1995, pp. 136-137). Or, as he puts it in *An outline of esoteric science* (1910/1997), “To have knowledge of a spiritual being through intuition means having become completely at one with it, having united with its inner nature ... In intuition, we penetrate into the beings themselves” (p. 338). “The kind of thinking in which the content appears in direct connection with the formal [formative] element has always been called ‘*intuitive*’” (Steiner, 1886/2008).

In teaching, intuition happens at moments of high awareness and concentration. To facilitate this, one has to prepare as well as possible before the teaching itself starts (regarding students, context, content, outer requirements); only then is there the possibility for intuitive moments to arise and for Steiner education at its highest level to take place. Working with this degree of understanding (as an ideal) allows teachers to modify what they do to meet contemporary situations. This may happen steadily over a long time period or quickly, as for instance responses to the current pandemic. Acting with *presence* of mind and in connection with the *eternal* qualities of the education allows colleges of teachers, national federations of schools or similar to consider major changes, while remaining connected to and working out of the founding impulse. In this way, we could say that Steiner education is able to be ‘incarnated’ ever anew.

Changes can also occur which are not influenced by the eternal in the education – compliance with state requirements for instance – or outer changes coming from a different stream of education which can loosen or weaken the connection to Anthroposophy. Authors who express the need for Waldorf education

to be “revitalised”, receive “fresh impulses” and so on, we believe are emphasising this need to reconnect with the eternal nature of Waldorf education. This is expressed as teachers needing to live “by the spark of the spirit” (International Forum for Steiner/Waldorf Education, 2016), “take the spiritual dimension seriously” (Rawson, 2021); intensify esoteric work (Goldshmidt, 2021), prioritise self-development (Boland & McAlice, 2020), and “work out of Anthroposophy” (Schwartz, 2022).

Besides this, there are other situations which call for gradual, steady development. Forward planning needs to be discussed in depth and happens over extended periods. This relates to a *future* still to come.

And finally, there are changes which are needed to meet contemporary situations but which may be put off or avoided. Old forms and ways of thinking can be retained beyond their natural lifetimes. Established traditions can be continued beyond their time, out of affection or familiarity, traditions which no longer meet the needs of the present day, or of present-day children. When Steiner education is introduced in new locations, traditional forms and practices can be transferred from elsewhere without necessarily considering whether they meet the needs of the situation. Actions such as these relate to a past which has already been gone for a while.

Considering the image of the crossing axes, it becomes clear that what is right at one time, is not necessarily right at another time. What is right in one set of circumstances (one place or culture), is not necessarily right in another. Responsivity is constantly required. As Steiner puts it:

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 realization—it will turn into a wrong in the course of time. (1917/2008, p. 66)

Final words

This article is a brief unpacking of what is a multifaceted and complex area. To close, we pose a short series of questions as provocations to encourage an extended dialogue.

- What are the eternal qualities of Steiner education?
- What (if any) strong present-day characteristics or happenings need to quickly be taken into Steiner education?
- What (if any) characteristics of contemporary life, contemporary thought and knowledge, and contemporary values are missing from Steiner education?
- What (if any) Steiner traditions, practices and curriculum content are no longer appropriate in current contexts?

We believe that viewing contemporary manifestations and calls for development and change of Steiner education through this fourfold lens of time is both profitable and worthwhile. Calls for ‘renewal’, ‘revitalisation’, modernisation, increased contextualisation and similar can be approached anew by considering how ever-changing and increasingly diverse contemporary situations interact at different speeds and in different ways with what is eternal in Steiner education.

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