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RECEIVED 20 August 2023

ACCEPTED 05 October 2023

PUBLISHED 30 October 2023

CITATION

Saar S (2023) The real teacher arrives: toward a
modern education of children and adults.
Front. Educ. 8:1280536.
doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1280536

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The real teacher arrives: toward a modern education of children and adults

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In this article I will examine the role of traditional paradigms in developing systematic education. I will then offer a modern alternative, expanding on the question what learners need from their teachers and focusing on the gestures of *intention, implementation, and impact*. Finally, I will look at how Teacher Education can respond to the changed and changing needs of modern learners. Here, the holistic Steiner/Waldorf approach offers a particularly attractive alternative to mainstream Teacher Education in its focus on the self-education of the teacher.

KEYWORDS

education paradigms, teacher education, Steiner/Waldorf, holistic, life-long learning

1. Introduction

1. What is education for?
2. What do learners need from teachers?
3. What do teachers need from their education?

2. So far

2.1. What is education for?

Since when has the education of human beings been “a thing”?

We have learned from the world around us as long as we have existed. Arguably, *nothing ever happens to a sentient being that is not educational*, often without our active or conscious co-operation or even awareness. As I think about this, resting my elbow on the desk appears to be an unconscious and often repeated action – but from it I learn that the desk is (still) able to bear my weight, so I will be encouraged to use it again for the same purpose 20 min later. Had I tried to sit on it, and had it collapsed under my weight, I would have learned through painful experience not to repeat this action with its replacement. For hundreds of thousands of years human learning has followed the same patten:

- A. Try something – succeed – repeat, or
- B. Try something – fail – correct the approach – try again – fail better etc.

To some extent, the human capacity to learn through *imitation* has simplified the process: having someone show me how to tie my laces substantially reduces the number of unsuccessful attempts at devising my own system of knots and loops. Seeing someone retch after eating an

unfamiliar toadstool will most likely save me from having to go through the same dangerous experience.

Yet, there must have been an incremental development in all cultures where humans began to consider the combination of trial, error and imitation insufficient. Everywhere in the world where human beings lived there came a time in which people decided to create spaces devoted to teaching and learning: a designated hut in the village or a temple remote from it, and in it a person considered suitable for the task, *a teacher*.

This came relatively late in human history: an overview places the first systematic schools in the third millennium BCE, or around 5,000 years ago.¹ But this cannot be where the story began: it is interesting to speculate what might have been the motivation for creating designated *education systems*: what were the “elders” or leaders of each culture seeking to achieve? Three possible aims spring to mind initially:

(a) Tasking teachers with creating “subjects”

It is a reasonable assumption that in many ancient cultures, armed conflicts were a recurring reality, whether they needed to defend their territories against aggressors or were themselves keen on expansion. Military success is built on discipline, and discipline on obedience. Wanting to ensure a maximum degree of fast action without questioning, leaders need to educate people to follow orders swiftly and uncritically. That is most efficiently achieved by training them to obey when they are young – by making them perform repetitive, illogical, even nonsensical tasks without allowing them choice or comment, and punishing them for non-compliance. Stirrings of individuality are suppressed by putting them into identical uniforms and not calling them by their given names. The purpose of such treatment is to effect obedience in battle or in the workplace, in hope that each individual in the group will regard themselves as an insignificant and exchangeable cog in a massive machine.

(b) Tasking teachers with creating “believers”

The second strategic aim education is capable of fulfilling is the creation of a generation that need not be *ordered* to obey: they will do quite naturally, apparently out of their own motivation, what their superiors expect of them. In a sense, this is the more iniquitous method of indoctrination, as it is achieved not through marching across dusty yards, nor by the threat of corporal punishment, but through a systematic narrowing of the cultural horizon. Most examples that spring to mind are infamous ones: the antisemitic lies in Nazi Germany’s schools, the class war narrative in socialist countries, the radical Islamist madrasas which teach only the Qu’uran, and only in Arabic. An early pioneer of the genre was Ignatius of Loyola in his Jesuit schools, who – probably knowingly-quoted Aristotle when he famously said “Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man.” While Aristotle was referencing a psychological insight into child development, in Loyola one can already detect an ambition: the more malleable the child, the easier they are to manipulate (even if it is for the good of their own soul).

(c) Tasking teachers with creating “winners”

While the first two narratives are easy to reject in a modern liberal society, they nevertheless leave traces everywhere: global education is still full of uniformed children and uniform thinking. The temptation is always present for those who write educational theory or deliver it in practice to try to fashion young people after their own image.

Added to the specters of authoritarianism and conformism is the modern paradigm of *excellence*. In the UK it is a brave institution that does not at least pay lip service to its pursuit. In this paradigm, a career is defined by aiming to reach the top of the hierarchy: in sport, only *winner*s can be truly satisfied, until they are themselves challenged in their hegemony. The millions of athletes, pupils, artists, executives, teachers and ordinary people who do not become winners are, in this narrative, losers. The result will inevitably be loss of self-esteem, of creative energy and motivation. If success means winning—and winning alone—then is second or third place worth trying for at all? By subscribing to the belief that effort can only be justified through achievement, we lose our appreciation of the process: we need to *be* rather than *become*.

3. However

Surfacing only relatively recently, namely over the last hundred years, there is a fourth pathway, an alternative reason for finding a vocation in teaching: it emerges when we think of the teacher’s task as *creating an environment*, an ever-changing structure of space and time where young people can discover who they are and how they should relate both to each other and themselves. The Dutch educationalist Gert Biesta, in his much-cited article “What is Education For?” (Biesta, 2015), describes three aims of modern education: *Socialization, Qualification, and Individuation*. In this he is closely aligned with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, as expressed in the opening lecture to the future teachers of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart in 1919 (Steiner, 2020a).

Here, Steiner speaks of the human being as consisting of two aspects: a *soul-spiritual* part that needs to increasingly harmonize with the *living-physical* part of its organization. Expressed in a contemporary way, one could say that one part of us is the product of nature and nurture: we are dealt a hand consisting of genetic and cultural factors that lie outside our sphere of influence, as do the various attempts our environment makes to school and shape us especially in our early years through significant positive and negative experiences. Another, more independent part is at the human core: that which we feel in us as *inalienably ourselves* and largely unattributable to outer influences and which expresses thoughts and impulses that ring true initially only to ourselves. Steiner would call this the human Self, sometimes also characterized as the human spirit. Biesta recognizes both aspects: his concept understands that an inability to learn, understand and come to terms with the laws that govern our world would leave us lonely and joyless. Cutting ourselves off from our inner voice and failing to connect with who we really are would render us aimless, devoid of agency and direction, and ready to follow whatever purpose is imposed on us by our environment.

So where do the two worlds meet? Where can human beings learn to grow into an ever more authentic version of themselves, while embracing the need to validate this human right in others, too, and not take their space?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education accessed 19 June, 2023.

3.1. This place is school

The conveyance of knowledge and skills is what Biesta calls *Qualification*: it is what happens in lessons, in classrooms. The relatively radical new idea is that skills and knowledge are only a means to an end, not an end in themselves. They serve the human being's need to socialize and individuate: to become a useful and integral part of a community while maintaining and developing personal uniqueness. The more successful the integration of these two aspects, the more harmonious our life on earth. Regarding myself as a facilitator of an integrative developmental process *that is owned by another* (namely the student) requires enormous professional and personal tact from me as a teacher. This paradigm wipes away the idea that my vocation lies in the dissemination of my knowledge to lesser mortals. Instead, I become, in Steiner's words, "a server of the light" who will "guard and cherish"² the fragile developmental journey that young people in my charge have undertaken. On this journey, what will they need from me?

3.2. What do learners need from teachers?

"Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition.
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner – what is it?
if not intensified sky, hurled through with birds and deep.
with the winds of homecoming."
R.M. Rilke (Mitchell, 1995)

The image which the *teacher* carries of the *taught* makes a huge difference. Do we regard them as empty vessels, waiting to be filled, or as separate, independent individualities able and keen to be inspired, deserving of respect and even reverence? In my own school time, I almost invariably suffered from the former attitude: adults who had studied a subject, often not with the aim of teaching but out of genuine passion for the topic, and filled with ambition (maybe) to research, to perform, to shine. What a disappointment then, to see doors closing ahead of them, and being forced to choose the next best option: if they cannot be published writers/Nobel laureates/concert pianists, they may as well put their college fees to good use and teach English/Physics/Music in order to make a living. I suspect that, as a somewhat reluctant and not very talented student, for many of my teachers I was a daily reminder of their perceived failure, and some of them let me feel this, too.

If one asks people to remember the lessons in which they gained important knowledge and skills, they would be hard pressed to conjure up a mental image, let alone the place and date. But anyone can describe half a dozen or more teachers who made an impression on them, positively or negatively. We see these people in front of our inner eye, remember their voices, their habits, their names. A colleague of mine³ once said that we remember teachers for how they made us *feel*.

Does that make it less important how good or bad they are at their "actual job" of teaching? Not necessarily – but the human being is nothing if not complex, and it would be foolishly superficial to reduce the impact of one's education to its academic outcomes. A teacher who sees themselves as a facilitator in the sense described above will regard it as their aim to enable development, and know when to give form and when to allow freedom: to be, as the cliché goes, a *guide by their side rather than a sage on a stage*.

One of the important paradigms in contemporary UK mainstream education is found in the "three Is": *Intention, Implementation, Impact*. This is a useful shorthand guide to the art of effective teaching for any school form: lack of attention to any of the three aspects will result in students' lack of engagement and therefore progress.

3.2.1. Intention

The *intention* behind my teaching informs the development of my Learning Objectives: why am I teaching students a particular skill at a specific time in their lives? In Waldorf School practice, one could find useful examples in manifold lessons on Practical Skills in Third Grade, during the students' ninth or tenth year of life. Around this time each human being goes through a developmental crisis during which we discover – for the first time consciously – that we are essentially and substantially different from other people. We have the option of not going with the flow—or doing as we are told—as long as we are prepared to accept the consequences. As important a step as this is toward emancipation and independence, it can also lead to loneliness and doubt: many children ask their parents whether they might in fact be adopted, or begin for the first time to misbehave in lessons, simply because it has never before occurred to them that they can.

The Waldorf curriculum responds to this crisis imaginatively, by telling the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, and their subsequent painful but successful attempts to fashion their independent life.⁴ Having once eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, there is now no way back to the Dreamtime of Early Childhood. New challenges have to be faced in cultivating, shaping and engaging with the earth. In Third Grade classrooms, children learn how to bake bread, sew clothing, build houses, measure length, weight, and volume and grow their own food (in the school garden).

The teacher's role in all this begins with knowing *why* this is on the curriculum – their intention will be to facilitate activities and experiences through which the child receives *reassurance*: having lost some element of trust in the hereditary and cultural forces that have so far guided them, they can replace these through self-reliance, based on the new skills they have acquired. With reference to Rilke's poem at the beginning of this chapter one might say that it is the teacher's intention to help with restoring *connectedness* – to work against feeling "cut off" and to allow the child to see that the "sky", the physical world, can be "intensified": everything around me and in me makes sense if I am encouraged to make the connections.

⁴ This specific image is of course taken from the Judaeo-Christian tradition prevalent in and around Europe. Teachers in other countries can readily find equivalent myths in their own cultures, essentially but imaginatively describing the shift from hunter-gatherers to settled living.

² Foundation Stone Verse for the First Waldorf School, 16 December 1921.

³ Julie Whitfield at Steiner Academy Hereford.

3.2.2. Implementation

The *implementation* of those intentions requires, according to Rudolf Steiner, one faculty above all else: Imagination. On just three pages in his final lecture in the foundational lectures to future Waldorf teachers in 1919, the word is used 24(!) times. Here, he says the following:

“This also tells us something about how teachers have to be. [...].

You realize that there is a moral aspect to teaching, an inner obligation. A true categorical imperative for teachers that says: *keep your imagination alive!* If you feel you are becoming pedantic, tell yourself that pedantry may be unfortunate in others, but in teachers it is actually something evil. Pedantry in teachers is immoral” (Steiner, 2020b).

What, then, is the difference between a pedantic teacher and one who “keeps their imagination alive”? Pedants insist that something is the way they have learned to see: they will not allow for other approaches. They seek security in definitions and absolutes, stifling attempts to open the doors of perception to other possibilities. As Parker J. Palmer puts it:

“The mode of knowing that dominates education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know. [...].

For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous. The intuitive is derided as irrational, true feeling as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labelled as personal and pointless” (Palmer, 2017a).

Yet imagination acknowledges and validates the human experience. We all know that there is always more to anything than meets the eye. Finding room for it in school curricula and classroom activities is not irresponsible but merely consequential. Of course, allowing for individual freedom requires increased alertness on the part of the teacher: freedom to be imaginative is not permission to be random, or to permit a bias for my personal preferences and foibles to affect the education of the people entrusted to my care. The key to remaining accountable when exercising creative freedom lies in open communication and transparency: teachers must be able to share, compare, investigate and scrutinize best practice as well as shortcomings, both in themselves and in their colleagues, in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect.

3.2.3. Impact

Students *may* benefit hugely from a teacher’s “big picture”, their understanding of the *Why* of teaching, and even more from lessons that open minds to possibilities and allow for exploration. But how do we know that this is true for all the people in the classroom?

One of the hardest parts of a profession that has such a strong performative character is the constant need to assess the *impact* of

our teaching. How tempting it is to regard oneself as a broadcaster, having planned and put on a brilliant show. I particularly remember my science teachers here, and how excited they became when the pupils in the front row “got it” and responded with alacrity. The teacher’s eyes began to shine, they took off on professional flights of fancy and opened all sorts of fascinating side bars – fascinating, that is, to themselves and a small number of talented acolytes. The response of the latter allowed these teachers to think that they had been successful in their endeavors to create interest, even enthusiasm, in their students – not noticing or caring that the rest of us had long dropped out, lost focus, failed to see relevance in what was going on at the front.

Of course the *why* and *how* are important – but they mean next to nothing to a child whom our efforts have failed to engage. One of the sentences I am most ashamed of using again and again through decades of teaching is “Stop disturbing my lesson!”, often directed with irritation at students reluctant to engage, and displaying their reality in a way I found offensive. How could I fail to see for so long that I was conducting *their* lesson, not my own? The SEN expert Ann Swain⁵ says, “Behaviour is a language!” Am I conversant enough to understand it? In the structure of my lessons, do I give students enough opportunity to demonstrate the depth of their engagement to me?

Assessment is not just something which happens in formal tests: these do of course have their place in giving me summative information and enabling me to create data sets. Habitually, I need to “check in” daily with my pupils and students, through looking at their books, their faces, their body language. Most importantly I must give them opportunities to communicate their engagement to me, *on their terms*. As well as providing summative, formative and ipsative feedback effective teachers strive to create opportunities for students to make their voices heard, to air their feelings and to share their thoughts on materials and techniques they have used. That is why, in modern education, we assess against Learning *Objectives* rather than *Outcomes*: we understand that students are on a journey, and any judgment on their engagement can only ever be regarded as a PITA: a Point In Time Assessment.

In the lines above I have referred to “engagement” rather than “achievement” when judging the impact of my teaching. The choice is deliberate: without the former, the latter becomes a hollow shell. At school I passed my science exams through a combination of last-minute cribbing, inspired cheating and pure luck. Just consider all the boring lessons delivered by teachers not interested in whether I was engaged or not: what a monumental waste of hours and effort, for all of us!

Returning to Rilke’s words, and to Biesta’s simple paradigm: as a developing human being (and aren’t we all?), I seek *connection and meaning*. I want to find the Inner in the “intensified sky”, and let the Outer speak to me in a voice I can understand and relate to. I am looking to my teachers to enable that process and to remove possible hindrances. What, therefore, needs to happen in their training?

⁵ Waldorf Direct seminar on 4 April, 2023 (<https://www.waldorfmodern.uk/waldorf-institute-direct/>).

3.3. What do teachers need from their education?

“You cannot be good teachers if you only look at what you are doing, and not at what you are” (Steiner, 2020c).

Rudolf Steiner

When elders or leaders were laying the foundations for what we today call school, one wonders what criteria they had for selecting suitable people for taking on the associated tasks. Were they looking for specific evidence of wisdom, sensitivity, authority, expertise – or was there a kind of intuitive understanding of who would turn out to be “the right person”?

If one disregards current practice for a moment, one could make a convincing case for education becoming a preserve for human beings who combine all the above qualities: what higher, more impactful vocation could there be than being entrusted with the facilitation of other people’s development? And yet, teachers in most countries will nowadays regard themselves as underappreciated, both in terms of remuneration and societal status.

Contemporary mainstream teacher education in all cultures involves academic discipline, and appreciably so. Teaching is an intellectually demanding profession, and academia—through its widely accepted international standardization—offers accessible and comparable parameters for judging an individual’s capability in essential fields such as general level of education (skills and knowledge), the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, as well as an understanding of critical engagement with the sources of knowledge.

Yet we all know that there is more to being a successful teacher than demonstrating academic excellence. In my own secondary school, there was one solitary teacher among a faculty of about 60 who had no letters behind his name: he had studied pedagogy and taught German and Biology, based on his self-taught expertise in these fields. Teaching at that level without a subject degree would nowadays be impossible, of course – however, the point of the example is that he was easily the most popular teacher in the school, the kindest communicator and one whose lessons were famously imaginative and accessible.

Waldorf Teacher Education aims to apply equivalent standards to engaging with adults as those adults would eventually apply to the children in their care – with some appreciable differences of course. What could a holistic approach look like? The route toward becoming a dedicated, inspiring, joyful, successful and life-long teacher is not found exclusively in academic excellence or critical thinking. That must be *one* of the important aspects of engaging with course content, but no course can stand on one leg. Equally strong must be personal and social development, artistic enquiry and skill building, and a keen wish to understand the development of the child out of a place filled with loving enthusiasm.

Over several recent years, senior experts in Teacher Education in the world-wide Waldorf movement collaborated on producing a paper which aims to set out the generative principles of a Waldorf approach. This initiative has the title “International Teacher Education Project (ITEP)” and the resulting paper is called “Towards Pedagogical Creativity”⁶

Its authors argue that “students should be introduced to and encouraged to practice forms of self-reflection that enable them to gain an intentional relationship to their own development. Arguably the single-most important thing for teachers to master in the course of their education is self-education” (ITEP, 2023a).

The profession “teacher” is so well-established that it seems unnecessary here to dwell on aspects that are obvious to everyone: of course teachers need to have subject expertise, love for and understanding of childhood and youth development, didactic skills and administrative technique. And yet, as Parker J. Palmer puts it,

“Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives” (Palmer, 2017b).

This highlights a crucial aspect of this vocational profession: how can I prepare for the things that simply *happen*, that lie outside my control? Any teacher knows that these are legion, and the ability to relate and respond cannot be left to chance or talent: it can and must be acquired, practiced and honed during a *life-long process* of Teacher Education. This is what Steiner’s quote and the passage from the ITEP paper both refer to. Teacher Educators must model personally and in the design of their courses the value of the transformational journey: it takes time to build a teacher, because it takes a lifetime to build a human being.

Regarding conceptual and cognitive engagement, ITEP says:

“Students should have the opportunity to become conscious of how inherited ideas are bound up in pre-existing narratives, and how they frame and so limit the way we encounter the world. This can be done through a Goethean approach based on careful observation and the inner re-creation of what is experienced through practices of exact imagination. Concepts grounded in the realness of experienced phenomena become essential in overcoming acquired biases and form the basis of an individual knowledge practice. Working in this way allows teachers to gain insight through engagement and grasp the importance of intentionality in the learning process” (ITEP, 2023b).

An important role is played by engaging in *arts and crafts* during a Teacher Education course: this is largely so because it opens up the possibility to replicate and understand an embodied learning process, which is arguably superior to reading educational theory about the psychology of learning. This is why Waldorf courses for adults, and indeed Waldorf schools for children, place such importance on the arts: not as a source of relaxation from the “real work”, but as a valid and possibly more sustainable route toward personal and professional fulfillment. A motivated and dedicated engagement in the arts can provide the *perfect polarity* to the gesture of critical inquiry: a “turning towards” complementing a “stepping away from.”

Anthroposophy, initiated by Rudolf Steiner as “a path of knowledge which seeks to lead what is spiritual in the human being to what is spiritual in the universe” (Steiner, 1924/1998) offers a number of possible pathways capable of enhancing an understanding of child development and the nature of the human being, and therefore plays a key role in all Waldorf TE courses. In line with Steiner’s expectations

⁶ A free download is available here: <https://www.goetheanum-paedagogik.ch/en/education/basics-of-waldorf-education/guidelines-teacher-education>

and contemporary thinking this does not mean that students are expected to acquire a new system of beliefs. This is how ITEP puts it:

“The balance must be found between critical analysis, working to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of Steiner’s thought, and reflecting on shared observation and experience. A pedagogical anthropology should not be thought of as theoretical understanding to be applied in the development of curricula and teaching methods. Differentiated, spiritually appropriate concepts allow us to recognize and learn from the expression of human individuality in each child and young person. This becomes a source of pedagogical insight and creativity that allows the teacher to respond to the essential beingness of the child in the process of becoming” (ITEP, 2023c).

An aspect not to be undervalued is the contribution anthroposophy can make to the “beingness” of the adult learner. The famous pioneer of UK Waldorf Teacher Education, Francis Edmunds, used to refer to “*transformation, not only information*” (Goebel, 2019). This echoes the ITEP values of “self-education” of the teacher, and the life-long integration process outlined in chapter 1.

I see it as an essential task of education to provide impulses which offer new perspectives to students *of any age*. Learning as an adult, for instance, about biographical development patterns or the psychology of learning processes from an anthroposophical perspective,⁷ allows one to better relate to events in one’s own life, and invest more agency in what is to come. An embodied adult mind can then form conscious relationships with their understanding, their emotional connection and their actions (their thinking, feeling and will) and arrive at a highly individualized form of meta-cognition. This is the modern and sustainable approach to education in general, and specifically to adult education: it enables human beings to develop themselves in an environment that offers

⁷ “Anthroposophy”: from anthropos: human being and *Sophia*: Wisdom. A distinct difference to anthropology, where logos is derived from “mere” knowledge.

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fresh perspectives, invites opportunities for experimentation and hands-on learning and encourages age-appropriate contextual and systematic reflective and reflexive practice.

Children and young people of the present age, whose social and work environments will change profoundly and unpredictably during their lifetime, want teachers to be life-long learners who are experts in their subjects and in understanding child development, who are unafraid to experiment, are willing to walk new paths and who have the initiative, confidence and empathy of effective communicators. They need people who *know* the way, *go* the way and *show* the way.

Author contributions

SS: Writing – original draft.

Funding

The author declares that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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