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The humane education of Waldorf

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In this perspective paper I propose to explore the remarkable humanity-centered education designed by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), along with his legacy in the form of the Waldorf schools that still serve children aged 3–18. Steiner was a polymath who could have been influenced by figures including the Roman playwright Terence, a freed slave who valued “humanity,” as well as the 16th Century Humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was in favor of humane education. International Waldorf education is now over 100 years old and Steiner’s focus on educating the human being in a healthy and integrated manner remains central. This paper provides an exploratory overview of Steiner-Waldorf education and offers a critical reflection on issues sometimes raised against its theory and practice. I have interviewed 43 Waldorf teachers from schools in Germany, the US and the UK covering their individual evaluation of human and humane-focused Waldorf pedagogy. The paper concludes that, given external government support, it can remain a visionary movement and a stimulus to other educational systems.

KEYWORDS

Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf education, developing free human beings, three-fold nature of the human being, creative curriculum, education for the future

The origins of humane education

I am aware of the humane studies of the wider European tradition (Plato included), but here I wish to draw attention to those who initiated the idea of being humane (like Terence), and those who restored it in the Renaissance (like Erasmus). In the early modern period “humane” was used as equivalent to the Latin “humanus” (the word used by Terence). The phrase “humane education” is accordingly used in this paper in a sense recognized for several centuries before Steiner. Steiner was probably aware of the contributions of Erasmus, if not also Terence, but even if he was not, it is worth imaginatively reconstructing the pathway that links them.

Many people look back to the Roman dramatist Terence (second century BCE) as the founder of humanist education. Terence, a freed slave from Africa, in his humanitarian play “*Heautontimorumenos*” (The Self-tormentor), gave one of his characters the famous (Latin) line “I am a human being, and I regard nothing human as alien to me” (Darwin, 1968, p. 541, I, i, 25). Terence meant no aspect of human language or culture was to be considered unworthy of study or consideration in any sphere of life. This line of Terence has echoed across the centuries, fostering humane education (in the sense of the kind of education of which everyone was worthy) to eventually be given a new prominence.

In the 16th century Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam was another polymath and a proponent of broad and humanistic education (in the sense of broad non-technological education). He supported teaching children the classics of ancient Rome and Greece.

He encouraged schools to teach about Roman writers such as Cicero and Livy so that students would have access not only to logic and theology but also to poetry, history and cultures beyond their own experience. Yet these schools were usually restricted to well-connected boys. In the time of Erasmus, the recent invention of printing with moveable type meant that it was possible for multiple copies of books, including ancient books, to be accessible to the literate public. So, pioneers such as Erasmus could propagate new forms of education based not on rote-learning but on pupils' direct acquaintance with works that could fire their imagination, as was to happen a few decades later with a schoolboy from Stratford-upon-Avon whom we now know as William Shakespeare (Livingstone, 1977).

Rudolf Steiner

Despite being brought up in a working-class family, Steiner was educated in a learned environment. At 18 he secured a scholarship and became a scholar of multiple disciplines. He founded the spiritual scientific philosophy of human wisdom, or "Anthroposophy." Steiner set out principles for social reform in his "Threefold Social Order." "Liberty," one part of this, related to the freedom of culture, religion, and education (Briault, 2018). Steiner also published an essay entitled "The Education of the Child" which laid out how to facilitate through education the natural growth of children as free human beings (as capable of creativity and not conditioned mechanistically), and to provide an education for the future. Steiner established the first "Waldorf" school in Stuttgart in 1919 when he set up a beacon school for the Waldorf Astoria Factory workers' lower-class children, as well as for the factory owner's own son. Both boys and girls were welcome. Steiner applied his creative curriculum to enable the teacher to value the whole child who faced them (Dahlin, 2018). There are now 64 countries in the world with Waldorf schools (Waldorf World List, 2022).

Steiner explained that the phases of childhood map onto the "three-fold human organism," that is three educational and chronological stages of Kindergarten, grade (or lower) school, and high (or upper) school. He also identified the ways that children learn, through the "soul functions" of will, feeling and thinking (Suggate and Suggate, 2019). In addition he contended that the human being matures through four developmental periods—thus realizing the "four-fold structure of the human being"—which can ultimately constitute an experienced and accomplished human being (Goldschmidt, 2017).

Common values of the humane education of Terence, Erasmus, and Steiner

The notion of holistic study is central to Steiner's philosophy. Terence believed that no area of study should be withheld from learners, no matter the status afforded to it. In a parallel way, Erasmus wanted to facilitate wide-ranging opportunities for students to learn subjects previously outside of formal education. So, Erasmus introduced a new literature base which incorporated multi-dimensional thinking. Other educationalists, Comenius among

them, further developed this innovative approach (see Livingstone, 1977). Steiner, for his part, wanted people to be able to think for themselves and for children to gain a sense of autonomy regarding the choices available to them for future study or career; children therefore needed a holistic education in all disciplines, ranging from the sciences and mathematics, to the humanities, languages and law, and to movement, and to crafts (Darwin, 1968; Livingstone, 1977; Steiner, 2020).

In a related vein, Steiner required that this education was taught creatively and that all means of learning were treated equally. Terence had implied that all types of knowledge (or at least those available in his day) ought to be considered and made available for learning, with no area of study considered worth less. Erasmus had corresponding ideas: he rejected learning via the conditioning of memorization and repetition, and he promoted learning where the source of knowledge could become meaningful (Darwin, 1968; Livingstone, 1977). Steiner's creative curriculum meant that, at all learning stages, students would learn simultaneously by means of "head, heart and hands" (Steiner, 2020): that is with cognitive, intellectual investigation, by perceptual and imaginative personal engagement, and physically by practical enquiry (Goldschmidt, 2017).

Another of Steiner's possible connections to Erasmus is his crucial notion of experiential learning. At the time of Erasmus, the Bible was becoming available in vernacular languages like English, which enabled teachers to provide direct learning encounters with its stories, morals and legends. Like Erasmus, Steiner believed in fostering meaningful discovery for students and initiating understanding that was personally rooted. In a similar way, Steiner highly valued the notion of children participating in biographical learning, involving study of the formative background, cultural upbringing, and life-circumstances of relevant thinkers. Erasmus advocated the study of famous scholars such as Cicero and Livy which allowed for students to absorb unfamiliar cultures and histories (Livingstone, 1977). Steiner similarly advocated the biographical study of prominent figures (critically undertaken), so that students would see themselves in the development of others (Steiner, 2020).

Steiner particularly believed in all-inclusive pedagogy. Terence implied that all disciplines held importance, whatever their different statuses. Erasmus was able to facilitate education for a variety of learners using a new corpus of literature that they could understand intelligently (Darwin, 1968; Livingstone, 1977). Steiner incorporated these values, educating children from diverse backgrounds. He highly valued the input of women colleagues in developing this education, including Millicent Mackenzie, professor of education and a suffragette (Paull, 2013; Jenkins, 2014). Steiner intended his education to spread to different countries, but without it becoming ethnocentric; instead he advised teachers to use the local cultures, histories and languages in their teaching (Steiner, 2020).

As a young adult Steiner was a tutor to four children, one with an evident barrier to learning (Steiner, 1977). Consequently, Steiner formulated his "soul economy" (Rawson, 2021), thereafter a universally-applied Waldorf teaching method which required the teacher to absorb their topic deeply, and to creatively recount the central facets to enable the child to progress. The same child with a learning delay eventually became a medical doctor (Steiner, 2020). The "soul economy" could have contributed towards the modern teaching and learning approach of the "Universal Design for Learning" (Orkwin and McLane, 1998) where in both cases the needs of those with the

greatest barriers to learning are prioritized, thus embracing all learners.

Steiner declared that each human being developing themselves freely remains fundamental to Waldorf education (Steiner, 2020).

Methods

This research into Waldorf studies is here scrutinized using conventional social scientific methods. Three sets of qualitative international interviews were held with 43 participant teachers altogether who had expertise in the three stages of Waldorf education and they were asked about their practice. Ten teachers were interviewed at kindergarten stage, 15 at grade school stage, and 18 at high school stage. Participants were teachers across three nations. Of these, eight were based in Germany (G), 14 were in the US (US) and 21 were in the UK (UK). Qualitative research looks for individuals' experiences and perspectives, and therefore it is immaterial that numbers of participants in each country are different. Sample participants conveyed their own knowledge and experiences of Waldorf education. The findings conveyed patterns and contrasts, allowing for overall critical scrutiny and reflection (Silverman, 2022). Some operational contrasts within countries were apparent, yet what was more striking was that cultural similarities emerged between countries.

Findings

Modern Waldorf education is complex at every stage. The fundamental aim of the humane values guiding this education is purposefully considered in every aspect of practice. Examples selected for their current relevance to humane /humanistic education are highlighted here; and the above keywords are explored in turn. The overall aims of this research are to explore specific examples of modern Waldorf education and assess them critically and thematically with regard to their value and promise.

Waldorf education encompasses the three educational stages of kindergarten, grade and high school from ages three to 18. Teachers reflected on what they feel Waldorf education offers at their own stage. A kindergarten teacher stated, (UK) "children at the center of what you are doing develop a sense of awe and wonder for the world, and for each other." A grade school teacher summarized, (G) "Waldorf education is about respecting the value of the human being." A high school teacher observed, (US) "if you have one more human than yourself it is a mixed class." In embracing students' varied means of learning, teachers engage all students through the values of learning in a three-tiered way, (UK, grade school) "interactively, intellectually, and emotionally." After appropriate assessment Waldorf education was found to be about children recognizing their own and their counterparts' place in the world, through all students being intelligently educated to become multifaceted, thoughtful human beings.

The three stages of Waldorf education are designedly correlated with the three-fold nature of the human being. In kindergarten (US) "the child's *'will'* develops unconsciously"; young children learn through "doing" life through guided teacher-led and child-led activities. At grade school students' perceptual instincts mean that

(UK) "children see the beauty of the world, in *'feeling'* what they learn." At high school students are invited to use their developing intellect and to question: (G) "You start to see children yearn for more logical *'thinking'*, reasoning, analyzing" but also it (UK, high school) "does not just require intellectualization, it requires experience, feeling, expression and thinking." The findings of this research support the claim that the three-fold human organism allows children to learn at natural stages of development, but in a way that requires the traits of doing, feeling and thinking to mature throughout their education (see Steiner, 2020).

Waldorf education is seen to have a curriculum that enables creativity at its core. At kindergarten (UK) "children do not realize they are learning," and at grade school in (UK) "experiential activities ... you are (facilitating) sensing, engaging and connecting, in wonder and discovery" and through this (G) "we keep their imaginations and creative capabilities open." By high school it (G) "is a transformative place. Students are super-confident; it is a positive, joyous experience." While the enthusiasm of this respondent may need to be qualified, students of some schools can choose what they study beyond traditional academic subjects, which makes the educational experience dynamic and stimulating, as the New Zealand Certificate of Steiner Education bears out (SED, 2024).

Schools have however been criticized by the wider Waldorf movement for implementing a literal interpretation of the curriculum of Steiner of 100 years ago. One high school teacher stated that amongst American Waldorf schools, (US) "the curriculum was Eurocentric; we started a pioneering social justice group to advocate change." This response raises the important issues of Eurocentrism and the wider issue of diversity and inclusion. Steiner himself has also been accused in modern times of having been racist, and this has been fervently debated by Waldorf academics for decades (for example see Rose, 2013, and see also Zander, 2009; Martins, 2023). Steiner appears inconsistent in his advocacy of universal inclusion and his simultaneous assumptions about the roots of human races (Selg et al., 2021).

Waldorf teachers discussed Steiner's educational purpose of producing free human beings. Teachers felt (UK, kindergarten) "we need kindergartens because we are closing down children's worlds in this race to be reading and writing by 3 years old." In addition, self-regulatory restoration occurs throughout: (UK, grade school) "Anti-social behavior is challenged, and students are required to recognize the effects of their actions, through reverence for one another." However for this to work, this depends on the parental support of such values. High school teachers reported that school leaders attending university are advanced, (UK, high school) "because we allow them to find their vulnerability, and what their strengths are, and therefore their voice." One high school teacher summarized: (G) "young people who emerge from this education are able to give direction to their own lives." Throughout their education students are gradually encouraged to become self-regulating, independently minded young people (Dahlin, 2018).

Waldorf education is widely regarded as an education for the future. All 43 teachers interviewed across Germany, the US and the UK spoke repeatedly of the humanizing nature of this education; (US, grade school) "kids are academically sharp, but also creative, and they are interested in the world and in problem-solving." Equally other teachers commented on their countering societal negativity: (US, kindergarten) "We bring values of less egocentrism, less judgement, and less indifference to the world." High school teachers reflected on

their educational investment in students. (G) “I try to imagine these individuals at the age of 40 or 50,” and (UK, high school) “we want students to have fresh ideas in a big way for humanity.” By the age of 18, students are holistically knowledgeable as well as specialists, creative and imaginative, and leaders focused on new possibilities (Thewaldorfs.waldorf.net, 2024).

Conclusion

Rudolf Steiner was a farsighted scholar and educationalist. He was informed by esoteric, spiritual ideas, which may feel eccentric in today’s secular climate. However in Steiner’s day, many scholars were influenced by their spirituality. His underlying spiritual philosophy of Anthroposophy is never taught to Waldorf students; rather, it informs the teacher’s appreciation of the child. Practices such as designing one’s own curriculum found in some Waldorf schools may seem unconventional, but sometimes serve to inform other education systems.

Waldorf education remains exclusive, and inaccessible to many in countries without significant state support. This position contradicts Steiner’s intention of his education becoming available to anyone so inclined. Steiner attempted the ambitious, ideal social reform of promoting humanity in education, perhaps influenced by Terence and Erasmus among others. Waldorf is available as a potential example for other educational systems. It is poignant that a 100-year-old education movement is still considered influential and can contribute to the widescale reimagining of education.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of agreements with participants of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to kattfield@cardiffmet.ac.uk.

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Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Cardiff Metropolitan University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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