

Preparing to be a Teacher

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A Vocation

Many people are drawn or called to the vocation of 'teacher', perhaps recognising it as a task second only to parenting. Some remember with warmth the joys of school and childhood and want to contribute in this sphere. Others recall bad experiences from their schooling and wish to redress the balance both for themselves and for future generations. Others have been parents and, having seen and supported their own children through school, feel very close to the task.

Although not everyone who starts training joins the ranks of those teaching, all learn much of benefit to themselves along the way. So what does being a teacher involve?

In what follows I give my picture of what it means to be a teacher in a Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School.

What is the Role of a Teacher?

A child may approach her very first teacher sparkling with anticipation or wide-eyed with uncertainty, this being her first major step away from home. The teacher receives the children into her care, in a homely and safe environment, full of reverence for the emerging human being. Rudolf Steiner put it in brief:

Receive the child with reverence,
Educate the child in love,
Send the child forth in freedom.¹

Our task is not, as frequently seems to be the case, to fill their minds with predetermined information in order to fit them into the most appropriate economic slot in our society's framework. Our task is to *support the individual spirit of each child*, not to *imprison its soul in conventionality*.

The Social Aims of Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner indicated that the education he inaugurated had deeper social aims for the whole of society in our times.²

In the Kindergarten, children before their seventh year are in the care of adults whose endeavour is to make every action worthy of imitation. Striving to create a homely, wholesome environment for the young child, appropriate activities such as preparing food, baking, watercolour painting, drawing, circle games, cleaning and tidying are

¹ Cited in Trostli, Roberto (1998), *Rhythms of Learning*. SteinerBooks. ISBN 0880104511. pg xiv

² *Education as a social problem*. Six lectures, Dornach, Switzerland. August 9-17, 1919

offered. The child is not taught but ‘imbibes’. Imaginative faculties are stimulated with stories, especially simple folk and fairy stories, and through the exploration of ‘free’ creative play. Here ‘play’ - bringing into ‘reality’ what lives as a picture in the mind - is **work**.

Through her attitude the kindergartener leads the children towards a reverence for all creation and an experience that the world is good (of god). This childhood experience of reverence and freedom to play transforms in later life into a reverent respect for the freedom of each individual human spirit, which is the basis for an INDEPENDENT CULTURAL LIFE in adult society.

In the Lower (Primary) School, by approaching thinking not abstractly but through pictorial descriptions, stories and artistic activities, the teacher develops in the children a feeling for beauty and for what is fair or just. The stories can come from all cultures and continents: fairy stories, fables, folk tales, legends, myths, the Bible, etc. as appropriate for the age. For motivation, the joy of one's own and of other's participation and achievement is fostered rather than personal ambition (egotism) via competition and examinations. When it is a matter of discipline, developing a pictorial understanding of the consequences of one's actions, remorse for hurt feelings and the desire to do better is used in rather than intimidation, discrimination or negative comparison. For instance, if there has been an instance of teasing, a story picturing a similar situation can be told where the feelings of the victim are graphically depicted and a healing process is worked through. Such a process can help the perpetrators to develop better social skills. This maintenance of dignity in personal relations lays a foundation for the feeling of equality between human souls, which is the basis for a HEALTHY RIGHTS LIFE in adult society.

At secondary level in the High School, students continue their studies in all subject areas, balancing the academic with artistic and practical activities. The emphasis now is on seeking the truth, true knowledge - knowledge of one-self and knowledge of the world. From an awareness of the true needs of the world and of one's own capacities arise the call of vocation. A COMPASSIONATE WORLD ECONOMY in adult society will grow when our work (production) focuses in a brotherly-sisterly way on meeting the needs of others rather than satisfying ourselves.

In this way Rudolf Steiner’s educational paradigm supports the renewed social ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity [Freedom, Fairness, Fellowship].

The Teacher for Different Ages

As children grow through the various ages and stages of development, quite different characteristics in a good or effective teacher are called for.

For young children under the age of seven (before their hard permanent teeth appear) their inner organs are still developing and maturing. The child is like a sense organ imbibing in its ‘environment’ all that goes on. For this the Early Childhood worker or Kindergartener needs to be a model, an example in the way that she thinks, speaks and moves, in her moral uprightness: a person that the child can freely imitate.

For the primary school age child before puberty, the teacher needs to be a leader, a creative, passionate guide to what is beautiful and fair; a person that the child can trust, follow like a disciple, be proud of, look up to and revere.

Secondary school aged young people are now developing their ability to stretch their intellect, to weigh arguments and judge. For them the teacher needs to be a knowledgeable enthusiast who is excited by all that is to be found in the world and is prepared to explore, investigate and experiment without prejudice, a thinker seeking the truth; willing to walk his talk: an inspirational and role model for young people.

Further, in a changing balance, the teacher needs, on the one hand for the younger children, to be nurturing, motherly, holding the children close and safe, to affirm and accept them. On the other hand as the children grow older, the teacher needs to be outwardly gazing, fatherly, getting young people to face and enter the world outside the home, challenging them and making demands on them, developing self discipline.

The Inner life of the Teacher

The child's moving outward into the world is mirrored by the teacher's exploration of the inward world, striving for inner discipline and insight, for insight into what are the daily soul, spiritual and physical needs of the children in his/her care. Each night before sleep, teachers openly 'picture' their children as they appear, asking what situations and challenges each one needs, and preparing by exploring possible solutions. Then in the morning on awaking, they listen or tune into any answers that arise for them as a confirmation or guide for their actions.

I recall the struggle of a student to grasp a mathematical concept and my consequent struggle to find a way to present this, exploring many possibilities. Then one morning I pictured her discovering the concept for herself with the help of a 'hands-on' process. I was thus guided to an idea which worked - to the joy of us both.

This regular activity where the teacher pictures the children, forges the invisible link which Rudolf Steiner described, between teacher and child and their guardian angels. A supersensible link, which Rudolf Steiner considered, was the basis of a truly human education. These are spiritual aspects, which no computer or audio-visual module can emulate!

Preparation for Teaching

At first this picture of a teacher may seem unreachable like a distant star. However it is the striving, the journey, not the arrival, that is important.

For those preparing to teach, the words: "Know Thyself; Know the World" is as true as it was for novitiates of Ancient Greek Mystery Centres. What does it mean for the Waldorf teacher? It means a striving for self knowledge achieved through inner exercises and art, and world knowledge achieved through a transformed life experience.

Self knowledge

Rudolf Steiner gave six basic exercises³, for training the thinking, feeling and will, which are an important basis for the soul hygiene of the teacher. In short these are clear thinking; initiative of action; equanimity; positive attitude or abstention from criticism; open-mindedness; thankfulness or harmony.

Working in the arts, especially those of modeling and painting, music, speech (poetry and drama) and eurythmy the teacher develops powers of imagination, and within these encounters gets to know aspects of herself and her temperament. And, of course, she attains some of the skills necessary to teach these subjects in the classroom.

Rudolf Steiner's insights into the make-up of the human being and the stages of development of the growing child sharpen our observation and awareness. It is hard, at first, to recognise what is happening for the children one is teaching and to adapt and balance accordingly. Skills of observation need to be developed and practised. The developmental stages are a primary guide to what children need in their education – the teacher's observations and reflections give individual pictures of each child's needs.

It is useful to learn how other teachers have met these needs, and to learn to apply creative curriculum solutions. Eventually the teacher becomes the 'author' of her own solutions. She learns to perceive, understand and meet the child's questions and needs. Such a teacher becomes a true 'authority' for the children, an authority which is granted and recognised by the children themselves. It is not the authority associated with repression or imposition imposed by a power without.

A teacher is like the leader of an orchestra. He has to become aware of his own temperament and modify it to suit the music, the day, the subject, and the children.

At the end of his training course for the first Waldorf School teachers⁴ Rudolf Steiner gave the following challenging admonitions:

- The teacher must be a person of initiative in general and in detail.
- The teacher must be interested in every aspect of the world and of humanity.
- The teacher must never make a compromise with what is untrue.
- The teacher must never become stale or grow sour.

World Knowledge

The gift the teacher brings is life and world experience. The struggle and striving in the journey to be educated and to solve life's questions is important. The fruits of this journey that can be shared with the children are of the greatest educational value.

For example in history and the history of the visual arts, literature, music and architecture we follow the evolution of human consciousness which enables us to get a perspective on

³ *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment*. ISBN-13: 978-1564597359.

⁴ *Foundations of Human Experience [Study of Man]; Practical Course for Teachers and Discussions with Teachers* given to the first teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart from 21 August to 6 September 1919.

the events of our times, of interweaving human destinies and perhaps a glimpse of the forces shaping the future. People sharing history in autobiographies is a sign of our times.

In geography we relate to the living being of the earth, the landmasses, oceans and atmosphere, which shape the outer environment and conditions under which we live our earthly lives.

In science the sense of wonder and the art of observation of the world around us is cultivated and, through interpretation, the ability to make judgements and form concepts.

In mathematics we learn logical thinking and sense-free thinking – the link between Natural Science and Spiritual Science.

We need to know which subjects, and the way we treat them, will help the child to breathe in, concentrate or focus, and which help to breathe out, relax and enter the world of imagination.

We need to recognise when each is necessary in the rhythm of a day that will bring health and balanced growth to children.

Consider taking up this wonderful vocation!

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