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THE ROLE OF STORIES IN WALDORF EDUCATION: MEANING, PRINCIPLES AND METHOD

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Abstract:
The subject of the article is the meaning of stories as an essential part of the Waldorf (anthroposophic) educational approach. Firstly, the meaning of stories as an educational tool is described, followed by an understanding of their educational and human value, especially for children of elementary school age. Subsequently, the article reviews the use of stories as an integral part of the educational work in Waldorf schools. In this educational stream, the story serves as a main methodical means for conveying abstract concepts and supporting the development of children as well as supporting different challenges in classroom and school life. Last but not least, the story in itself serves as a kind of mental treasure of images and processes that can help children understand the world and impart meaning to their lives.

Keywords: role of stories; Waldorf education; Steiner education; anthroposophical education; method of learning

1. Introduction

The subject of the article is the meaning of stories as an essential part of the Waldorf (anthroposophic) educational approach. Firstly, the meaning of stories as an educational tool is described, followed by an understanding of their educational and human value, especially for children of elementary school age. Subsequently, the article reviews the use of stories as an integral part of the educational work in Waldorf schools. In this educational stream, the story serves as a main methodical means for conveying abstract concepts and supporting the development of children as well as supporting different challenges in classroom and school life. Last but not least, the story in itself serves as a kind of mental treasure of images and processes that can help children understand the world and impart meaning to their lives.

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> "*Man is always a storyteller. He lives surrounded by the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through these stories, and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story*". (Jean-Paul Sartre)

2. The meaning of the story for the child's development

According to his book "The Forgotten Language" (Fromm, 1951), there was an ancient language, a language in which we have spoken to each other since the beginnings of humankind, a language of meaning and depth, and it has been forgotten. "*It is a universal language, the only language ever developed by mankind, and it is shared by all cultures throughout history*" (p. 12). It must be deciphered in order to understand the "*meaning of myths, legends and dreams*" (ibid). Fromm goes on to argue that this language is also extremely important to modern man, who has forgotten it because it is the only thing that can lead him to the depths of his own unconsciousness and from there to recognition and knowledge of himself.

Egan (1997) describes this language with the term "*mythical understanding*" and characterizes it using the following criteria: binary construction, fantasy, abstract thinking, metaphor, rhythm, narrative, and imagery. According to him, processes of understanding, both in the history of humankind and in the life of the individual during his or her childhood, go through four distinct stages: mythical understanding, romantic understanding, philosophical understanding, and ironic or somatic understanding. Expediting learning processes related to adult understandings only, regardless of the ways of understanding the child in his early years, as is done in schools today, has a heavy price: "*The comfortable belief that any gain in skill is achieved without a price and without a potential loss is simply not convincing... This is, in my opinion, the situation in which we are, we lose much more than we should lose*" (p. 80). Among other things, the children, he claims, lose their direct and intuitive connection with the world. It is "*a process of disengagement from the natural world due to the rational takeover*" (p. 120).

Therefore, Egan argues, we must stop seeing the curriculum as a body of rational knowledge and technical skills, because "*the children understand what is happening around them in a mythical way*". We, therefore, should speak to them in their own language: "*The construction of stories as the outstanding characteristic of mythical understanding". This means that we must turn the curriculum into "an array of 'great' stories... and refer to elementary school teachers as 'the storytellers of our culture*'" (p. 87).

Bettelheim (1994) sees the importance of stories first of all as a means of imparting meaning to children's lives. This is bestowed upon the child by the adults around him, "*… and second, is the cultural heritage, if it is instilled in the child correctly, and literature is the one that carries this information in the best way*" (p. 10). Bettelheim specifically notes the importance of fairy tales, mythology, and religious stories for the proper development of the child. "*These feed the imagination of the child... and answer his important questions, and they are at the same time a main means of socialization*" (p. 26).

Cohen describes the importance of literature for the educational process as follows: "*Literature gives the reader mental experience by sharing, that is, the mental experience*

embodied in the book revives the reader's soul, hence his direct and great influence on the reader and his important educational value" (Cohen, 1990, p. 63). In describing this experience, Cohen writes that "*… the reader penetrates the reality described, adores it, and lives it. He identifies with the hero and may adapt to his experiences and values*" (ibid). He also emphasizes middle childhood as a relevant age group in this regard: "*In childhood, identification is possible only with a living or literary human figure and not with abstract ideas*" (p. 64).

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of Waldorf Education, in his educational writings, also introduces stories as one of the most important means of fostering educational and teaching processes (Goldschmidt, 2017; Harwood, 1969; Steiner, 1965; 1978). In this educational stream, the developmental line serves as a central axis for understanding the child and the pedagogical methods on the various educational levels (ibid). In this context, Steiner mentions the middle of childhood, ages 5, 6 to 13–14, as a period in which there is a special sensitivity to internal images and messages provided through stories. During this time in their lives, children develop their emotional-moral experience and the world of imagination and creativity, and these qualities are directly related, according to Steiner's teachings, to internal stories and images (Goldshmidt, 2017). How these principles are applied in the educational field in Waldorf schools is the main issue discussed in the next chapter.

2. Implementation of stories at Waldorf Schools

2.1 Stories as an educational-moral narrative

Understanding the importance of the story and its significance as a central means of educating the emotional-moral worldview of children, especially at elementary school ages, Steiner recommended that stories be incorporated as a significant part of the curriculum (Richter & Rawson, 2012). In his work as a pedagogical director and instructor during the founding years of the first Waldorf school (Hemleben, 1984), Steiner designed a unique narrative curriculum, from kindergarten to the end of eighth grade (Goldschmidt, 2017; Richter & Rawson 2012). He recommended, especially in the first grades of elementary school, to tell a story every day, so that the storytelling process would pass as the second thread through the days of the week and the months of the year and accompany the students in their growth and development.

The curriculum recommended by Steiner in the field of narrative has undergone many changes and adjustments over the years (the first Waldorf School was founded in Germany in 1919), as Waldorf education expanded to many cultures, languages, peoples, and countries across the globe. In every culture, language, and climate, Waldorf educators endeavor to link this program to local mythology, the stories of the people, and the tradition in which the children live (ibid). At the same time, an understanding of the principles of child development also reveals parallels and similar lines between the different countries and cultures (Richter, 2006):

First grade – legends and fairy tales from diverse cultures, Bible stories told freely in the context of holidays and events.

Second grade – animal fables, stories of animals in nature; stories of Saints and holy people related to the culture, tradition, and religion from which the children come.

Third grade – The stories of the Bible, from the beginning of the book of Genesis to the end of the Book of Exodus. The stories are told freely, usually by the teacher, and still without reading the Bible itself.

Fourth grade, 5th grade – Mythologies of different cultures, with an emphasis on Greek and Middle Eastern mythology.

Sixth grade – Historical stories.

7th grade, 8th grade – Continuation of historical stories, biographies of scientists, explorers, inventors, and leaders.

The principle behind this curriculum is that stories are an important means of learning, understanding, identification, and moral development for children (see introduction), mainly for children during their elementary school years. Therefore, the field of narrative must be treated like any other field of study: it must be cultivated, given a place and time, and brought to children in the most earnest and profound way possible (Steiner, 1965; 1978).

Another goal of the literacy curriculum is to enrich the pupils' worldview with vivid images and dynamic processes in a way that corresponds to them and their experience of the world (Egan, 2009; Cohen, 1990). In many places in his writings (see, for example, Steiner, 1956), Steiner referred to the fact that children should acquire the content of the world first in a story and parable, and only later, from adolescence onwards, will these internal images be penetrated with abstract understanding and thinking.

In Waldorf Schools, it is customary to teach the different fields of knowledge over long focused periods, usually 3 to 4 weeks, so that the same field is taught day after day during a long lesson in the morning (usually between 8:00 and 10:00). The focal field of study changes every 3–4 weeks, so that the pupils learn only one area of study, in a concentrated and integrative form, every day (Edmund, 2004; Easton, 1997). In the first classes, grades 1–4, it is customary to tell the stories freely, as much as possible, not by reading from the book itself, at the last part of the "main lesson", or alternatively, during the last lesson of the day. Telling the story in "freeform" allows for improvisation, creating eye contact with the children, expanding or condensing the story in certain places, addressing the children's questions, and letting a conversation arise naturally from the story.

The storytelling part of the lesson usually begins with a class discussion about the content of the story from the day before or the last lesson, raising important points, questions, and dilemmas, and encouraging conversation about moral questions. Only later do we continue with the story. When time allows, it is also possible to draw pictures from the story, act out scenes from it or write short stories related to it (ibid).

2.2. Stories as a teaching method

As teachers, we face the challenge of bridging between any content or skill that we want to convey and the children's capacity for understanding, and this is no easy challenge. At

school, many pupils experience disconnection or detachedness between themselves and the learning process in the classroom, and the study materials are also detached accordingly. The question of method is the question of creating the bridge; it is the art of building mental and spiritual bridges to the children's souls (Harwood, 1969; Easton, 1997). The story can serve as a bridge – anyone of any age, country, or culture can feel some emotion when hearing a story that touches his heart, a story he or she can identify with and which opens their soul. The child by nature lives and experiences in an internal world of his own, which is more closed and subjective than that of the adult. At least until a certain age, entirely different laws prevail in his inner world than those operating in the adult world. The story appeals directly and naturally to the child's soul and can serve as a powerful educational tool for conveying knowledge (Steiner, 1965; 1978).

In a Waldorf School, and especially in the first classes of elementary school, any educational content first becomes a story. The teachers, as Egan proposes, are "The Storytellers of Our Culture" (2009, p. 87). Students learn abstract content belonging to the adult culture every day: the symbols of letters and numbers, the laws of grammar, arithmetic rules and mathematical formulas, the laws of science, and much more. These abstract concepts were acquired during human civilization for thousands of years and through the efforts of thousands of people. The expectation that children between the ages of six and twelve will internalize these concepts and turn them into skills is for many children unrealistic, difficult, and sometimes frustrating. When done forcefully with all the institutional power of the school system, it can have very serious consequences (Egan, 2009; Holt, 1970; Kohn, 1999). Children's sensitivity to internal images and stories during this period and their identification with them can serve as a bridge to these abstract concepts, facilitate their digestive and internalization processes, and help the pupils to connect with them (Harwood, 1969; Steiner, 1965; 1978).

In this developmental approach, the teachers at Waldorf schools are called upon to create stories as an introduction to the learning process of abstract concepts. Thus, stories fill the child with internal images that serve as a kind of precursor to the content studied. Some examples: the letters of the alphabet are learned in a process that lasts three days for each letter and includes a vivid story on the first day, drawing the story on the second day, and separating the concept (the letter) from the painting on the third day (e.g. a story about a fish, drawing of a fish, and then the letter F is taken from the shape of the fish in the water and drawn separately); The symbols of arithmetic operations (+ - X :) can be learned from the story of four dwarves who help people cross a bridge (the equal sign =). The study of tenses in the language (past-present-future) can be preceded by a story and then painting a flowing river or a tree at different seasons (Masters, 2005).

It is important to note that in Waldorf schools one does not use textbooks and the teachers create the learning processes out of the connection that is built between them and their pupils. Therefore, the stories for each subject are not fixed but are created on a case-by-case basis and are appropriate for the specific children with whom they work. The examples I brought can of course change and take completely different forms (Masters, 2005; Edmunds, 2004).

2.3. Moral or metaphorical stories

Children's intense connection and identification with stories and the process of internalizing the story can also help address the developmental and moral issues they bring with them (Joshua & DiMenna, 2000; Mellon, 2019; Rubin, 1978). This is done on various levels in Waldorf schools and kindergartens. The thought behind this work is that it is possible to use the forces of identification and internalization with which children listen to a story to cultivate and encourage forces and talents in their souls (ibid). Educators try to adapt a story or write and create a story that corresponds to the challenge facing the child. This story is told to the individual child or the entire class. Wherever possible, it is advisable to repeat the story over and over again, and thus it may provoke healing forces in the child's soul (Mellon, 2019).

In many cases, moral or metaphorical stories are told to the students of the lower classes in Waldorf schools according to the current circumstances. For example, they can help improve the work of the entire class by fostering a warm social atmosphere and social connections, and by allowing crises and difficulties of various kinds. The educators also tell stories tailored and aimed at a particular child or group of children in the classroom. It is usually better in the lower age groups that the children are not made aware of which children and for what purpose the story is told so that it will act and affect the depths of the children's unconscious soul (ibid).

Another possible course of action is to write and create stories as part of the end-of-year assessments. For children in grades 1 to 3, the educators write and sometimes also draw and illustrate a story, which metaphorically brings the picture of the girl and the challenges facing her. Thus, the children receive a narrative-picture assessment which is not brought directly to the forces of consciousness but can operate in the less conscious realm (ibid). In the higher grades of primary school, Waldorf class teachers often use short poems that resemble a short story, deliberately addressing the challenges facing the child. These poems are written for a particular girl or boy and given to him or her on their birthday or as part of the evaluation process at the end of the year.

Some examples:

"Like a flower whose petals close tight for the night,
But who opens them up to the sun's loving light;
May my heart open up to the sun every day,
That by its light I find my way."
***
"The cold dark night is over,
The raging storm has passed,
and I am full of hope once more
For dawn has come at last.
The winding road is beck'ning me
To start upon my way;
With joyful heart I go to seek

the promise of the day."
***
"In the dark and gloomy wood,
Grows a flower sweet a good,
Whose fragrance fills the forest glade,
Whose glance dispels the deepest shade.
Like the violet may I bring
Joy to every living thing."

To conclude, metaphorical stories intend to make use of the healing powers inherent in the story. These powers are amplified if the story is written for a particular child or a group of children. The story's images are internalized into the depths of the children's souls and can inspire forces such as overcoming difficulties, empowerment, and optimism (Joshua & DiMenna, 2000; Mellon, 2019; Rubin, 1978).

2.4 The field of storytelling in Waldorf teachers' training

As indicated by the above descriptions, elementary school teachers in Waldorf schools work with stories daily and intensively – creating stories and telling them as a central teaching method, as a possibility of bringing healing powers to problems and challenges in the various aspects of classroom work, in supporting the development of children and as a means of evaluation. It is therefore understandable that storytelling and story writing are important parts of the Waldorf School's teachers' training (Gebert, 1961; Richter & Rawson, 2012).

First, the students learn the psychological and spiritual background of mythologies, folk tales and narratives of peoples and cultures. This is done to know diverse and different stories and also to understand the symbols and processes that are encrypted in mythologies and stories around the world as consciously as possible. This understanding can enrich teachers' lives by bringing them more depth and meaning, connecting them to stories, and inspiring the children who listen as well.

Second, students practice telling stories freely, without relying on a written text, and in a way that corresponds to children's development over the years. Free storytelling allows teachers to create eye contact with the pupils, change and improvise, and expand or condense the story according to the group with which they work. During their years of training, students undergo storytelling training in different ways and forms.

Third, the students create stories and practice writing stories in different styles, in particular how to adapt the stories to specific learning materials and to the challenges and difficulties the children face (ibid).

3. Summary

The realm of stories forms a very significant component of educational work in elementary schools that work in the spirit of Waldorf education. This educational approach intends to endeavor to meet the children wherever they are – physically,

mentally, and spiritually – and to speak to them in their own language (Edmonds, 2003; Steiner, 1987). During this time, children's imagination and emotions are sensitive to internal images, so stories can be used as an essential educational medium.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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