

**Education As An Art:  
The Role of Art in Human Development**

A project sponsored by the Waldorf Education Research Institute

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*“Our nation is not ‘at risk’ because the schools are failing; schools are failing because our nation, and our culture have entered a period of serious decline.”*

Ron Miller, Introduction of *What Are Our Schools For?*

Is education “at risk?”

Is Waldorf education “at risk?”

Is education at risk because our culture is at risk?

Is the culture of Waldorf education equally at risk?

The growth of Waldorf education and the corresponding increase in the number of children benefiting from it are a clear indication that Waldorf educators have a leading role to play in meeting the growing need for alternative approaches in education. At the same time, however, growing numbers of Waldorf educators are painfully aware of an ironic twist in this positive development: Could short-term growth pose a long-term threat to Waldorf education?

The values of Waldorf education set high expectations for the educator to transform herself as the prerequisite to serving the developing child. The viability of Waldorf education depends on Waldorf teachers cultivating an ever deepening relationship to the spiritual foundations of Waldorf education. If the outer shell of Waldorf methods is more widely adopted and practiced without the corresponding and necessary inner transformation of each teacher—the transformation of cultural assumptions, values and ways of perceiving—then Waldorf education is “at risk.”

*“You can become good teachers and educators if you pay attention not merely to what you do, but also to what you are.”*

Rudolf Steiner, Lecture 1, *Foundations of Human Experience*.

The perspectives of Waldorf education place human development and therefore child development in a broad evolutionary context which asks of Waldorf educators not merely to espouse particular pedagogical theories or practice certain methods, but challenges them to transform the way they perceive, think, feel and interact with the world.

Waldorf educators share a worldview that outlines the full extent to which human faculties and capacities can unfold in the course of time. In this context, Waldorf educators themselves can see all that has been achieved in the last eighty years to be only a beginning. Our wish to meet the real needs of our children can motivate us to extend and deepen our insight and capacities in accordance with their future developmental needs.

On first meeting Rudolf Steiner's perspectives on human evolution, a teacher may understandably have difficulty seeing the practical value of such a view for the day-to-day activity with the children. And yet holding vivid imaginations of past and future states of human consciousness can give us a sense of direction for conceiving cultural and educational goals. Cultural and educational goals today are often pragmatic, short-term goals related to monetary success and material affluence. The vision of human progress is typically seen primarily in terms of continued technological benefit and convenience. However, is material success and well-being all that our children will need for a meaningful life? What non-material needs do they have? What potentials do our children hope to unfold? With the full import of such questions before us and their implications for the education we give our children, we have every reason to actively question and reassess our assumptions about the world they will meet and the capacities they will need to.

If education is to support rather than hinder the development of our children's full humanity, we need a story and a dream to live by. We need a story that gives us and our children the full meaning of humanity's biography. We need a story that helps us understand the all-human significance of Western civilization as a force that has, for better and for worse, shaped world civilization. Could Leonardo, Columbus, or Galileo have imagined the world that has evolved from their deeds 500 years ago? Do we have a 500-year dream? What future world do we want to evolve from our deeds?

To dare to dream the future is a task that shines before me. I am moved to ask, what is humanity's real dream? And, how can the dream become reality? I believe this real dream can be articulated. I have reason to believe we can take practical, cultural and educational steps, particularly through the arts, whereby the dream can become reality. I am most grateful to the Waldorf Education Research Institute for the confidence and support they are extending to me to research and write a series of articles, which perhaps will evolve into a modest book, on the cultural issues and perspectives which shape our understanding of human development and in particular, the role of the arts in serving that development. The following are some of the areas I hope to address:

### ***Education as an Art***

One symptom that reveals the risk to which Waldorf education is exposed manifests through the phrase "education as an art." The future integrity of Waldorf education depends on whether "education as an art" becomes an ever more hollow cliché, or an ever deepening meditation. Only through the most rigorous efforts to penetrate the deeper spiritual currents and issues of human development that extend from the past through the present into the foreseeable future will such a phrase avoid being a cliché and instead become a living well of insight and creative initiative. Such a deepening requires that we penetrate the cultural forces of our time, not only so we are rightfully a part of our time, but more importantly in order to transform culture so that it will better serve future human and world needs.

### ***Education Toward Freedom***

This is another potential cliché. What is the difference between outer and inner freedom? How is inner freedom developed in the child and in the teacher through artistic activity?

### ***Education Toward Authentic, Ethical Individuality***

Parents, teachers and public officials all believe education should support the development of each child's unique individuality. Do we, however, have an adequate understanding of individuality? For example, to what extent is individuality a given, to what extent must it be developed and, if so, how? How can a conceptual understanding of individuality help to clarify the practical issues of how the methods we employ in artistic activities support or work against the development of authentic, ethical individuality?

### ***Education Toward Authentic, Ethical Community Builders***

It is also generally recognized that education is a schooling in social values and capacities. But what is our understanding of community? Does community at the local, national and international level require that individuals share common values? Or does the human reality of the present and future challenge us to develop the capacities to build community based on the diversity of individual values and gifts? Paying lip service to diversity is not enough. We must face the fact that at present humankind has not yet developed the capacities to perceive and create

community based upon the innate uniqueness of each individual. If we hold the fundamental cultural value to create community based on diversity then we must set ourselves the conscious cultural/educational goal to transform latent social capacities into actual social capacities. Central to my concern is to clarify the way artistic activities develop community-building capacities. I will elaborate the nature of authentic, ethical community and how it is dependent on the development of authentic, ethical individuality, and I will endeavor to show that the enhancement of our true individuality awakens faculties and capacities which make us more social rather than less social as many might fear.

### ***Art Subjects***

Addressing the larger issues above is essential to grasping the developmental issues of the growing child in our time. This in turn sheds light on the way those developmental needs can be served through the methods we employ in teaching particular art subjects. Why do we use particular materials and techniques? How can art teachers find their way between the pitfalls of narrow dogmatism on the one hand and personal preference and habits on the other? What are the relationships between the developmental needs of particular children and the options of artistic materials and methods? How can art teachers cultivate a living research activity for artistic method?

### ***Teacher Development through Art***

What does it mean for all subjects to be taught as an art? To incorporate artistic activity in relation to all subjects is important, but this also can slide into superficial busy-work or decoration if we lack a deeper understanding of art and the development of artistic capacities. The art of teaching any and all subjects depends on the role of art in teacher development, whatever subject the teacher teaches. I will attempt to outline the capacities developed in the adult through the various visual arts and their relevance to the aspiring teacher as well as to the ongoing development of the experienced teacher. Our children need to meet in their teachers human beings who are dedicated to developing their full human potential. To be an artist is to live and act out of one's full humanity.

### ***The Art of Forming the Educational Environment***

What is the deeper significance of giving artistic form to the physical environment of the school? How is the artistic forming of a school essential and not a luxury relative to issues such as discipline?

### ***The Social Art of the School***

How can the collegial activity among faculty, faculty and administrative staff, and faculty and parents be perceived and formed as an art? What is the nature and role of consensus in building the school community? Does consensus require common values and ways of proceeding or can we develop a form of consensus that embraces diverse values and in that way serve as living models for our children of ethical individuals striving to build ethical community?

### ***The Art of Technology***

How can artistic organs of perception serve us as teachers and parents in understanding the qualitative effects of all forms of technology, from the printed word to the Internet, from the bicycle to the car and airplane? How can we develop a qualitative perception of technological innovations which enables us to judge their influence on our own and our children's developing humanity?

As broad as the scope of this project may appear, all the issues mentioned are related to the understanding and practice of education as an art. My purpose is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding the values and goals of Waldorf education. My starting point is a conceptual reassessment of cultural assumptions and educational goals, which I hope can give new meaning and direction to our practice as educators. I will look at some of the methods employed by Waldorf educators in the light of those educational goals. In some cases, I expect fresh perspectives will affirm the value of present practice, in other cases, alternative approaches may suggest themselves.

It is my hope that my research and writing on these issues will create opportunities for the insight and experience of others to be heard as part of an ongoing dialogue. I welcome any thoughts and suggestions from Waldorf teachers and others who would like to take up such a dialogue.