

Waldorf Education as Preparation for Successful Crisis Management

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Educators in Waldorf kindergartens know the phenomenon that the free play of a group of 3 - 6 year old children is subject to atmospheric fluctuations: occasionally there is calm, sometimes even a lack of initiative, suddenly there is a warm urge to create and it hums like a beehive, and sometimes there is great nervousness and aggressiveness. Often, as an educator, I could not clearly determine the reasons for the mood swings, and the search for culprits and the denunciation of bullies did not seem to make any more sense to me than being angry about a thunderstorm outbreak during a hike. But it was important for me to perceive the mood well, to hear the key and then to harmonize through non-verbal means what had become one-sided: Music, light, intervention in the spatial design, movement, etc.

In the way the Covid-19 crisis was managed by the respective leaders in the different countries and at the different levels of society, in the way we all behaved since the beginning of the pandemic, one could also perceive a certain large-scale weather situation in which enormous tensions were occasionally built up, which then erupted in storms of relationships: in the family, in schools and institutions, within certain professional groups, and so on.

Some atmospheric phenomena that kept coming up, for example, were:

- Encouraging sensible behavior by making people afraid of danger
- Losing sight of the overall context in light of individual aspects of a dangerous situation.
- Not listening to those who think differently and feel differently, or excluding them
- Allowing only one theory, only one form of analysis, only one form of interpretation of the situation.
- Setting one ethical-moral value above all others
- Having the opinion that the only way to get out of the crisis is through a tight hierarchical organization.

These phenomena can be observed not only during the current pandemic, but also in other crises affecting society or individual organizations.

Some think that certain groups or individuals should be held responsible for this. However, educators know from daily experience that when a one-sided mood repeatedly occurs in free play or when a socially tense situation occurs at school, there is usually no single, isolated person responsible. Direct intervention and admonishment of individuals can only limit the damage. It is rather as the Swiss philosopher Michael Esfeld characterizes corona measures: "It is a trend that has formed out of contingent circumstances and which then drags more and more social actors along with it."¹ In order to harmonize the situation permanently, patience and perseverance are needed, as well as a threefold rhythm, which Waldorf teachers practice again and again:

Firstly, they try to get as accurate a picture as possible of the phenomena and "perceive the trend". Even if they personally would have the tendency to fall into anger, fear, or domination about it, they avoid this in the kindergarten and in the school and try in a second step to empathize with the children involved, to understand them, and also to feel their pedagogical ideals once again with

¹ Michael Esfeld, "Vaccination Passport - a Path to Freedom or to a Closed Society". In: "Goetheanum" N° 18/2021

enthusiasm and warmth. In a third step, they then hope that after a meditative review of the situation from a certain distance, as educational artists they will think of a gesture, a look, a song, a story, a game, a movement, an activity in the following days that will have such an effect on the group of children that the mood and the social situation will be rebalanced.

So there is a lot to be learned from educators for crisis management. The even better news, however, is that if one reconsiders some of the essential features of Waldorf education in the light of the Corona crisis, it turns out that they represent long-term homeopathic preventive measures against the psycho-social inflammatory side effects of crises in civilization. Let us imagine that there is a crisis, but the great majority of those involved have grown up in their childhood and adolescence in an atmosphere that can be described by the following characteristics:

1. From kindergarten to high school, interest and the relationship with educators are the driving forces for learning, not fear of punishment or desire for reward.² This is practiced for hours in free, self-initiated play in kindergarten, deepened in listening to the descriptions of the beloved teacher, and then strongly anchored in interest in subjects related to one's own existence and life during middle and high school. If in all pedagogical institutions of the world "child development and school learning would develop in trust-borne relationship of the child to the teachers to the surrounding space and in the perception of the world", would we then still need social coercive measures³, so that all fellow citizens show a reasonable, meaningful behavior?

2. Already in kindergarten, cultural techniques are always practiced in connection with life, in connection with a larger context. For example, increasing vocabulary, grammar syntax, through stories, puppet theater, through intensive use of language in communication during free play. Even in the choice of toys, one prefers those that allow children to start from wholeness (plasticine, clay, dough, unspun wool) to those in which a wholeness is created by combining identical individual parts. In school there is no chopped up timetable, large subject connections can be deepened over a longer period of time and even in arithmetic and in the understanding of the essence of number, the unity is assumed, which is subsequently differentiated.⁴ If the majority of the population were accustomed from childhood to "going from the whole to the parts"⁵, would we still lose sight of the complex social and ecological interrelationships above an acute partial problem?

The importance of empathy and tolerance is not only preached, it is above all experienced and practiced daily. The young child has constant opportunity to have differentiated experiences with the body senses ("The sense of touch has the task of establishing a healthy mobile middle position between too strong and too weak impressibility, openness and limitation, sympathy and antipathy").

² There are only three means of education: fear, ambition and love. We dispense with the first two ... " Martin Carle, "Fear, Ambition and Love in the Classroom," in: Erziehungskunst October 2019; <https://www.erziehungskunst.de/en/article/who-educates-whom/fear-ambition-and-love-in-the-classroom/>

³ " Key Characteristics of Waldorf Education ", <https://www.waldorf-international.org/en/key-characteristics-of-waldorf-education/>

⁴ Claus Peter Röh, Robert Thomas: "Unterricht gestalten", (Shaping curriculum) Verlag am Goetheanum, 2015: "It is important that we start from the One as the divine primordial unity from which the following numbers are derived." (S. 71) „

⁵ Op cit., p. 73

It is a preparation for "sympathetic interest from unthreatened self-confidence." ⁶) And in free play, it practices cooperation and compromise every day, experiencing the joy and increased possibilities when they succeed, and the pain of the consequences of one's own bullying or shyness.- Because there are stable class communities in the school over the years, the teacher can work thoroughly with the children on social skills⁷, placing a great emphasis on music and drama: here listening to one another, paying attention to one another, and including the disruptive and surprising can be practiced especially well. - If our social skills and our willingness to listen were also physically and artistically rooted in us in this way, would we still want to hysterically exclude those who think differently?

For years, nature is intensively experienced as something that can be seen, smelled, tasted and touched, and to which everyone in kindergarten is allowed to express the most diverse theories: It is getting dark because the sun is now getting tired and going to sleep, or: maybe someone is sitting behind the mountain and pulling on the sun with a string? If in school a mental understanding is to be developed by systematic learning, this is prepared by detailed consideration of the phenomenon and never ends in a definition, which is to be learned by heart, but in a characterization. The teacher in the upper school is then also someone who sets the phenomenological intellectual framework in which the young people themselves find terms and definitions. If we always, when we are confronted with new and unknown things, start from the phenomena in this way, wouldn't that be a good contribution against dogmatism and against the claim to sole explanation of any scientific direction? ⁸

In the course of the first fourteen years of life, the child has not been confronted with a moral-ethical value system, the principles of which have been learned intellectually, but has had the opportunity, through a multitude of stories and mythological-religious narratives, to sympathize with the good depicted there. With the fairy tales, the descriptions from Hebrew, Germanic, Indian, Egyptian, Greek and still other mythology, with stories from Islam and Christianity, the child feels that the devotion and love to a divine world and the commitment to the good can have different forms, different weightings. The child experiences role models that help it to become morally and ethically independent. If we had learned to mobilize our moral-ethical forces ourselves in this way, would we still be in danger of adhering to a value declared as absolute by scientific or political authorities?

6. From the cradle to high school graduation, through free play to artistic, athletic or scientific project work in the upper school, children and young people have experienced that cooperation and improvisation sometimes go through difficult phases, but that in the end everyone could even increase their personal abilities through successful teamwork. In addition, the educators were role models for successful cooperation in the organization of their own work: In the way the school is run, a team spirit prevails that gives room for individual initiative and at the same time allows each individual to grow beyond oneself. - If we could manage to have "all [in a school] develop significant non-hierarchical forms of cooperation" and if we jointly practice "transparency and accountability

⁶ Henning Köhler, *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children: A Spiritual Perspective to Guide Parents*, 2013. Waldorf Publications

⁷ Valentin Wember develops this in detail in his introduction to a collection of Steiner quotes on "social capability," in *The Five Dimensions of Waldorf Education in the world of Rudolf Steiner*, published by Stratosverlag 2018.

⁸ "Absolute claims ...tend to make one intolerant. With the claim to absolute truth a dogmatism effect arises." Ulrich Kaiser, "The Narrator Rudolf Steiner", Info 3 Verlag 2020, p. 60

(instead of personal and institutional power) ⁹," wouldn't that be the best preparation for a crisis situation? Wouldn't we then instinctively feel that greater intelligence and dynamism is generated by forms of collaborative leadership than by solitary decision-making, by a few whom we have made into big bosses?

We are all responsible, not only "the others". We all have to learn, have to develop and change if we want to go through this and coming crises more confidently. Waldorf education can provide important support in this process.

We could be motivated by the Corona crisis to work to rediscover and implement it more creatively in Waldorf schools and kindergartens, and to benefit an ever-increasing number of children in other institutions and contexts.

About the author: Philipp Reubke taught kindergarten in Alsace, France for many years before becoming a member of the Coordinating Group of IASWECE. In October 2020 he took a new position as co-leader of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum. He advises kindergartens and colleagues working together in many countries, especially in Europe, organizes world early childhood conferences at the Goetheanum, and lectures on Waldorf Early Childhood education. He was a keynote speaker at the WECAN East Coast conference a few years ago. He lives in Lyon, France, when he is not at the Goetheanum or traveling.

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⁹ Essential Features of Waldorf Education, Section : The School Community. Living together. In: https://www.waldorf-international.org/fileadmin/downloads/1605_Characteristics_IF_Arles.pdf