

Social and cultural curriculum: cultivating local, global and individual human identities.
Notes from my workshop

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What do we mean by cultural identity?

Investigating the social and cultural aspects of a Waldorf curriculum means taking a position on what we mean by culture and identity, and thus of cultural identity. I take the view that cultures are not fixed, essentialized entities but are fluid, hybrid constructions of ideas, social practices, actions, expectations and assumptions that people have about themselves and others. From a historical perspective peoples around the world have always interacted, often in hostile ways, but they always adopted technology, ideas, words from other peoples they encountered- and of course they had had children together. There are no 'pure races' and there are no exclusive cultures.

Cultural identities are often given to us by others who label us, in order to position us- think of Native Americans being called *Indians* because Europeans were confused about geography. As Stuart Hall put it, in his famous article "Who needs identity? (1996), cultural identities are how people use the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: "not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation." In other words, cultural identities arise from the stories we narrate about ourselves- thus cultural identity is a process, not a state.

In the workshop I related part of my own biography to illustrate two points; that cultural identity is complex and fluid- it is about identifying rather than having an identity. My passport identifies me as British, I choose to relate to my Scottish birth and the Scottish part of my education. Since my father was a soldier in the British Army we lived in various outposts of the former British Empire in Asia, Africa and Europe. My mother preferred to live outside the British compounds and my father had a tendency to 'go native' (dressing in local costumes, eating local food) and I played with children from many different cultural backgrounds and went to their homes. I don't recall this being a cultural or language problem. Subsequently, I have never had any interest in having a national identity. Since I live in Germany, the Brexit crisis has raised the issue for me for the first time. 'My country' appears intent on separating itself from me! I may have to change my nationality to be allowed to stay in Germany and I will certainly lose all my rights (and pension) as a British citizen because of the nationalistic madness of a few politicians and the mass media.

In the workshop I related some examples from Europe that show how nationalism remains a potent source of conflict and oppression. Clearly there are major differences in people's experiences of cultural identity. In recent years we have seen the re-emergence of nationalism and xenophobia across Europe, particularly directed against refugees and economic migrants (most of whom have to leave their homes because of what the Western developed world has done and is doing to their countries and economies).

As I pointed out, one of the key ideas Steiner had in mind when he founded the Waldorf School in Stuttgart in 1919 was to create an education that was an antidote to class conflict, aggressive nationalism and immoral capitalism. We should not forget these central aspects of Waldorf education. Even though Stuttgart in 1919 was not particularly multi-cultural, it is not a very well-known fact, but many of the workers of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory, for whom the Waldorf School was originally founded, were Armenian and Greek immigrants, with an expertise in working with tobacco. Waldorf education specifically includes people of all cultural and social backgrounds because Steiner saw the necessity of countering nationalism and social and cultural injustice. I had the impression that this aspect of core Waldorf principles is not emphasized within Asian Waldorf movements. However, Waldorf aims to educate the person and the person cannot be reduced to a social class, religion, culture or ethnic (or lifestyle) group. Waldorf aims to be fully inclusive, not just for its own sake, but because it is the best way to prevent social and cultural conflict!

In a museum in Johannesburg, I discovered an exhibition of images recalling the fight against Apartheid. In a corner I found some theatre seats and two painted boards outlining what cultural identity is not and what it is (I have included a photo of this). The authors of this display wrote that cultural identity is NOT:

- something you are born into,
- a racial biological classification,
- separate fixed cultures,
- an ethnic group or 'Volk',
- always positive.

The other board listed what cultural identity is. Culture is:

- acquired,
- binds us into groups,
- is about identity,
- adapts to change,
- creates boundaries,
- created by people,
- marks us a human,
- is shared language and customs.



I think these characterizations are really helpful to bear in mind when we are defining what belongs to our local curriculum and what is universally relevant.

What is identity?

This leads to the notion of personal identity. Obviously this is a huge subject, but I find it helps to think of identity simply as;

- the kind of person we think are in a given situation,
- how other people behave towards us,
- biography- the stories we tell about ourselves.

Many factors influence our personal identity such as gender, age, social position, economic status and culture. Identity is not the same as what Steiner referred to as the human 'I' or self (which I talk about below). The difference is between who I see myself as and how people see me and the spiritual core of my being that is in a state of emergent becoming and sustains continuity across life and lives.

How to relate cultural identity to the Waldorf curriculum?

The question as to what aspects of the Waldorf curriculum should be adapted to local requirements is complex. I find it helpful to define a few terms first. I take curriculum to mean an arrangement of learning situations, activities and contents that enable the pupils to learning and develop. What do we mean by learning? Learning is sustainable change over time of the whole human being, body, soul, mind. What and how we learn changes what and how we *can* learn. It gives learning direction. If we give learning direction, we can see this as growth and development, which is qualitative change over time in the whole person. Development may be continuous or it may occur in jumps, following periods of stasis. Significant changes in the learning situation (e.g. due to body change and growth, new experiences, new settings, such as kindergarten to grade 1, grade 8 to high school and other important transitions) change the nature of learning and the relationships of the person to her social context. These transitions alter development in such ways we can talk about

developmental thresholds leading to new developmental phases. Therefore, development is a combination of intrinsic biological and life process change and changing social contexts (including, of course, a systematic change of curriculum and learning opportunities).

No standard developmental patterns?

The notion that there is a standard pattern of child and youth development is only useful in the broadest of senses. We know that children and adults are different in many ways and that children become adults over a long period of time, marked by major biological processes such as the maturation of the brain, the change of teeth and sexual maturity. However, these are very general markers and we know that school readiness, puberty and other developmental processes are influenced by extrinsic factors, such as diet, social environment, cultural expectations, stress and health and so on. We know that the age at which girls have their first periods varies over historical time and social context. It can be accelerated or retarded. We know that people in many cultures are growing significantly taller and heavier and that this has occurred over two or three generations. If we accept the anthroposophical perspective that body, soul and spirit are interrelated, then having a rapidly growing and larger body must have an impact on our self-experience of being in our body and being in the world. Professor Remo Largo has established that the normal range of maturity at the age of 6 spans three developmental years, and that at the age of 14, a span of five years in terms of all major aspects of development (e.g. speech, fine and gross motor skills, cognitive, emotional, social skills etc.). That means that it doesn't make much sense to talk about *the* typical class three or class seven child, as if they are all at the same stage of development. I know this appears to contradict some assumptions that people have in Waldorf education, but it is a fact.

Purpose of the curriculum

The purpose of the curriculum is therefore to prompt learning processes among groups of children of the same age, but who are heterogeneous (varied) in their development. Prompting learning in the whole human being (body, inner soul life of thinking, feeling and willing, in social processes and in understanding) will activate developmental processes in the whole group, thus harmonizing their development to a greater or lesser extent. If we compared groups of pupils who have been taught together for 8 years in a Waldorf school, it is likely that the average developmental trajectory is likely to be somewhat more aligned than children of the same age taken at random from other educational environments (to my knowledge this has never been done). The Waldorf curriculum and methods are formative and normative, that is, the whole Waldorf approach brings certain learning and developmental processes about, thus providing the learning group with shared experiences. Nevertheless, there is still a need to differentiate the learning tasks for children in the same class. That is not my topic here, but one can say the basic rule is; same experiences for a mixed group, same content, same learning process but different tasks for different individuals or groups of learners.

How does this relate to the aims of Waldorf education?

What are the overall tasks of Waldorf education? The key aims of Waldorf education are:

- to enable the development of the whole person;
- to provide learning spaces and learning opportunities for each person to learn and become;
- to enable each person to contribute to sustainable social and economic life.

There is a very helpful way of looking at the aims and purposes of education. Following an idea presented by Professor Gerd Biesta (2009, 2013) all education has three basic functions. The functions are;

1. Enabling socialization and participating in cultural life:
 - learning to participate in the society we are embedded in,
 - developing cultural identity.
2. Enabling qualification:
 - enabling students to be qualified to participate in the existing social and economic order,
 - being competent in the necessary cultural techniques.
3. Enabling people to become a socially responsible person capable of autonomous judgement (becoming a person, or personal development).

So we can ask; what aspects of the Waldorf approach (curriculum and methods) enables these three functions?

Clearly socialization starts before school in the family and community, when children learn their mother tongue and how to behave and participate in the social life around them. In kindergarten and school this takes on a new dimension in that children learn to be with other children who do not belong to their family or community. Many things we do in Waldorf education (the class staying together, the class teachers, rhythms, routines and rituals) reinforce social values, such as sharing and caring, listening to others and learning together in many shared experiences. Education perhaps has more of a task in socialization than in previous generations, since many traditional forms of community have been lost.

In terms of culture, the children not only learn about their own culture today but culture in the past and in particular other cultures today and in the past. This forms a major part of our curriculum. Learning to be in a multi-cultural world is a vital part of Waldorf education and so the children need to learn about many other cultures in authentic ways. Perhaps the most important cultural learning is learning TWO other languages and learning about the cultures that speak those languages. We do this from grade 1 onwards for very good reasons (that space does not allow me to explain here but I and others have written about elsewhere). Learning a language using a natural learning approach (i.e. one that is based on how children learn the mother tongue and an understanding of the nature of language) enables the learner to experience the world in a different way. This does not happen to the same extent if we translate languages. We have to be immersed in the language and learn it in itself. Two languages create a polarity and leads children to translate into the dominant first language. Two other languages triangulates and offers there perspectives on the world.

Cultural learning in school starts with learning to read and write in the language that will be the main language used in school. I say that (rather than saying the mother tongue) because in a number of countries the language of instruction in school is different to the language the children learn at home. This is the case in India, the Philippines, Luxembourg and Namibia and may be true in other countries I am not aware of. In such countries, the language taught in class 1 may not be what the children have spent six years learning. This has to be taken into account in the way it is introduced. The (Waldorf) way reading and

writing are introduced has to vary depending on the nature of the writing. The German and European way of introducing consonants through pictures

Becoming a person

The next idea I pursued was how we become persons, or put another way, how our personal development can be enabled. Becoming a person through learning means coming into being or becoming. We are always becoming- as long as we are learning and developing. We primarily come into being through the other being. The Other Being could be a person, social situations, natural phenomena in the world). We come into being or become when;

- we meet boundaries that mark the transition from self to non-self
- we encounter other beings in the world,
- we recognize that we are different from others,
- we encounter resistance and difference,
- we make meaning through the encounter with otherness.

At the core of each human being is a core of spiritual being Steiner called the I (in English sometimes called the ego or self, in German das Ich). Being always seeks being in the world. Why? Because being in the world gives us our experience of our own being. Our highest sense is the sense of the Other as being (sense of the Ego of the other person). Mirroring being awakens our sense of being. The child becomes a self through experiencing that significant others (parents, siblings, close carers, teachers), whom we imitate, emulate or hold to be authorities recognize us. This is the basis of sociality. We recognize the other as being and they recognize us. If we identify with virtual realities, artificial, superficial or insincere 'others', we do not learn to recognize ourselves as different- we recognize ourselves as the same. This reproduces certain mindsets and prevents autonomy. If the activities we engage in are without social and cultural meaning (because they are mere entertainment or self-gratification) and we become what the poet T.S. Eliot called 'hollow men', blowing as the wind blows, offering no resistance.

In order to awaken to our being, or perhaps better, awaken our being, we need resistance and the ability to stand back. The philosopher Edith Stein, who died in Auschwitz for her resistance through being a teacher, gave us a understanding of empathy that is not based on feelings but on the physical experience that in recognizing and being able to identify ourselves with the position in time and space that the other takes up (and no two people can occupy exactly the same space at the same moment). Thus we recognize them as being and ourselves as beings with a different position. Once we become aware of this, we have entered into a relationship with the other that prevents us from dehumanizing the other. That's what the powerful and the fascists in this world do, they reduce the other to a symbol to which they can have no personal meaningful relationship, so the other can be dealt with as if they have no rights or humanity. We dehumanize those we don't want to accept, which makes it easier to demonize, reduce or destroy the other. This starts with classifying people as incapable of learning or developing, of being unsuitable for integrating into our culture or simply as being different. Therefore, they don't matter to us as much as people like us. Racism and xenophobia, brutal punishment of criminals, rejection of refugees, the poor and helpless. The argument is always; it is their own fault for not being more like us.

Curriculum (arrangement of learning opportunities) development

How does this relate to the Waldorf curriculum? In the discussions, we discovered that some of the participants think of the curriculum as ‘things one has to do’. So we changed our terminology to ‘learning opportunities’. So what are we trying to do in Waldorf education?

I started my thinking about the Waldorf curriculum resisting attempts to import the German curriculum into other cultures. Even recently I had to protest against the publication of the new German Waldorf Curriculum unless it clearly stated that this has to be modified locally. However, my thinking has shifted. I now see the risk of nationalistic curricula that only focus on local culture on the assumption that the local culture is something fixed and important to maintain. I learned the term *adaptivity* from Neil Boland from New Zealand. Adaptivity is not just the necessity to adapt the curriculum to a particular context, it is the ability to be able to adapt in any given situation. When a Waldorf teacher looks at her class and decides that they need a particular learning experience, that is adaptivity. When I walk into the classroom with a plan, and realize that the mood is not right, that I had overlooked something or that something has just happened, which changes the situation, and I modify my plan, that too is adaptivity. Thus it is a very useful idea for Waldorf pedagogy (as the art, craft and science of the relationship between teaching and learning).

So we need to be adaptive about the curriculum at the macro-level of countries, at the meso-level of school curricula and at the micro-level of teaching in a particular class. I listed a number of what I called landmarks, which are markers to help us orientate ourselves, or key thoughts about Waldorf education. They are not exclusive, indeed in my latest blog (www.learningcommunitypartners.eu) I listed a number of other landmarks. In the workshop I mentioned:

- Waldorf early years enacts meaningful practice and helps children to participate in them.
- Free play is essential- we have to work to create an atmosphere and context in which children can play without learning outcomes.
- In Waldorf primary we work through participation in meaningful social practices (routines, rituals, rhythms, festivals, calendar of the seasons, celebrating birthday, report verses).
- We work with the imagination through narrative. Narrative is our main way of making sense of the world and making meaning.
- We use stories of all kinds, not as learning objects (i.e. in order to learn specific ideas) but as imaginative experience.
- We transform experience into verbal and non-verbal (gesture and art) language.
- We let literacy arise out of orality, once the child has embodied her first language.
- We work from the whole to the parts and learn to relate the parts to the whole in an ecological approach to everything.
- We work with the learning rhythm of experiencing, forgetting, recalling, sharing, clarifying, forming shared concepts, practicing and applying (see my essay on the seven learning processes).
- We go from experience of the phenomenon to the characterization or concept.
- We use a spiral curriculum that builds living concepts and adds layers of experience and complexity.
- We relate everything to the human being and human society.
- We try to practice empathy towards others and the living phenomena in the world.

- We move from simple, transparent processes to complexity (from handwork to technology), we locate things in their context (locally sourced materials and techniques), we move from concrete to abstract.
- In the middle school we move from the imagination to observation, from myth to history, from oral texts to literature, we try to understand empathically how the world today came about.
- We assess to support learning.
- In the high school we move to the realm of ideas and ideals and the impact these have on the world and we learn to form grounded judgements and to be critical.
- We learn to be socially responsible citizens.
- We learn to recognize individual voice and seek to find our own voices.
- All learning is biographical.
- We live what we teach (and preach).
- We research our practice in collegial ways.
- We try to meet the future as it emerges in people and the world.

I made the point in the workshop and reiterate it here; if you are a beginner follow the curriculum your fellow-Waldorf teachers use and then question it later. Use the Educational Tasks book and other curriculum sources as resources and as yardsticks to assess your own curriculum ideas. The overall description of Waldorf education and the horizontal curriculum (the themes running through a single class) can be considered to apply everywhere. The vertical (grade 1 to 12) subject curricula requires adaptation.

Landscapes of learning and development

A model for looking at curriculum as expanding landscapes of learning experience

We are born into and move through landscapes of learning. Each landscapes offers us situations in which we can learn, grow and develop.



The Waldorf approach supports the construction of such learning landscapes. Cultural learning occurs through participation in social practices and through sojourning in other social and cultural practice.

In a nutshell...

Curriculum socializes (local), encultures (local and global), enables abilities and dispositions (human), enables knowledge (local, global and personal), enables identity, enables encounters with the Other through which we become persons (human/personal).