

Basic Schools and the Future of Waldorf Education

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I would like to give you a sketch of an idea that is both simple and complicated, one that is both new and obvious. The idea came to me through my encounters in Africa over the past fourteen years, but also through my experiences with Waldorf schools in Germany, Brazil, Russia, and other countries. I have seen wonderful Waldorf schools—big schools with 12 or even 13 classes, with almost 1000 pupils, beautiful buildings, and a staff of 70 to 80 teachers. I have been teaching for 36 years in one of these schools—my own beloved school in Kassel, Germany. But I have also visited tiny Waldorf schools with up to, perhaps, 6 classes—in simple huts, with a few teachers who are provided with salaries enough for a sparrow's living. And I have seen many places without any Waldorf school at all.

Observing the quality of change in our modern life, I will now express my deepest concern briefly—that is, the increasing worldwide maltreatment, not to say abuse, of the children of our time by systems of state schooling. There is no time to lose. But our forces are limited. In South Africa we cannot afford to develop large numbers of such schools as Michael Mount [a larger South African Waldorf school], given the worldwide shortage of Waldorf-trained teachers, the lack of money, and the absence of support from the authorities.

So let us build a picture of a school reduced to the smallest possible size, a mini-Waldorf school, or, as I call it, a “basic school” of four school years combined with a kindergarten of three years. So we have a picture of a school of seven years for children from ages four to ten.

What happens with the children, when they turn ten? We have learned from Rudolf Steiner that the children cross a “Rubicon,” which means

that at this stage of life they have achieved the foundations for a secure and stable immune system. They have developed their own particular organism of health. The children have gained what we call resilience—in other words, a coat of armor to protect themselves from threats and temptations to come. When, now, children have to leave a Waldorf school environment, along with the wonderful education they have received from their teachers, they will be armored against whatever happens to them in any other school they attend.

So, let us look at these three years of pre-school and kindergarten, together with four years of school, as a full and complete pedagogical support for the children, not merely as a fragment of what has to be completed over a period of seven, eight, or even twelve years.

Look at what children do during the first three years of school. The curriculum contains the most wonderful topics, with the journey of learning to write, to read, to calculate, all thoroughly worked through according to Waldorf methods. Children are allowed to work with joy, slowly, quietly, peacefully, and free from competition and stress. Each child has the opportunity to be imbued with the whole spiritual quality of Waldorf education.

But who can do this? My answer is simple: mothers who have matured through the realities of life, especially those who have not been academically trained. Such women with common sense will be able to teach to write, to read, to calculate, to knit and stitch, to draw, to sing, to dance, to exercise in rhythm, to play, to garden, to do housework, and to tell stories. All these, all the curriculum contents of the first four years, contain a basic education for each human being.

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With a certain amount of training complementing the common sense and sound educational experience of these women, who may well have raised children of her own, such a teacher will then have the abilities to work with a group of children.

How many African women have said that anthroposophy has brought them back to their own roots; that anthroposophical knowledge can link directly to the traditional wisdom of Africa? I believe that only Waldorf education, springing from anthroposophy, can really respond to the needs of African children—and to the social chaos of South African society.

When looking at our picture of a basic school we have to ask ourselves: Will parents have trust in a school where their children will reach only fourth grade? Only life can answer such a question. We have yet to appeal to those parents who would appreciate an offering of four wonderful years of school as a complete educational program in its own right. We usually promise to go up to at least eighth grade, and often further. Of course we would have to fulfill our professional responsibilities in using the fourth year as an adaptation year to prepare the children for any school of their choice—if there is such a school at all.

This picture can easily be modified. Imagine a school with five school years. Why not? This does not change the basic idea.

What we can see and agree on are the untold numbers of children waiting for Waldorf education. A huge amount of educational competence lies hidden below the surface of life, often unused. “Everything that the government schools bring is dead!” said Credo Mutwa, the famous sangoma

[an African shaman] and artist, whom I recently met.

It is not my intention to persuade you suddenly to found a number of basic schools. I know that all of you are overloaded with the commitments you have to fulfill. But if there is a group of people with initiative to start a school, I would like to encourage them with the idea of a basic school, to make it small, because “small is beautiful,” as the saying goes. In the meanwhile, the development of fully extended Waldorf schools from grades one to twelve must go on without being affected by the idea that “small is beautiful.” Better to call my proposal a basic school, working with elements of Waldorf education, rather than to call it a Waldorf school. My proposal addresses the question of concentrating our limited forces and limited financial means to the utmost and asks us to focus on the necessary task of our times.

Peter Guttenhöfer, who has a PhD in history, including the history of literature and the history of art, has been a teacher at the Freie Waldorfschule Kassel, Germany, since 1972. For the past 26 years he has also been engaged in teacher training at the Seminar für Waldorfpädagogik, Kassel. He is also a member of the Pädagogische Forschungsstelle beim Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen. Since 1980, Dr. Guttenhöfer has educated teachers and advised schools in many countries around the world.