

The Responsibility of Waldorf Education

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Does Waldorf education in the United States have a responsibility to actively engage with racial equity and justice?

Leading up to the founding and well into the development of the United States, those in power, primarily White people of European descent, have had a 400-year history of dehumanizing People of Color (POC). This includes the enslavement of millions of Black people and historical and new Jim Crow laws that perpetuated injustice and dehumanization. The evidence exists in the gaps across fields and regions, with overrepresentation in areas such as special education, incarceration, and lack of access to healthcare, and underrepresentation in areas such as wealth, leadership, and higher education. These gaps cannot simply be explained away by economics or culture. The United States also carries a history of injustice and dehumanization of Native Americans and immigrants, especially immigrants of color. However, we have not gone through a process of Truth, much less Reconciliation, as has been done in Canada and Australia. The result is that as a people and government, the US does not have a shared understanding or acknowledgement of this history and the current inequity, which is the result of this history.

I come back to my opening question: What responsibility Waldorf education has to actively engage with racial equity and justice?

Waldorf education was born out of the insights of Rudolf Steiner, described in his body of work and path of self-development collectively referred to as anthroposophy. A key concept of this body of work is the threefold social organism, which refers to finding the right relationship between values and realms of society. Specifically, Steiner spoke of the importance of freedom in the cultural realm, collaboration in the economic realm, and equity in the rights realm. What was known for centuries, but has become especially glaring in the past year in public discourse, is that in the United States, the narrative of equity in the rights realm is only that – a narrative, and that the American reality is not one of equity for people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and many others. In fact, the narrative of equity for all, suggested as the founding set of values of the country, stands in stark contrast to the reality for many. Personally, I cannot help but think that I have been living in *The Truman Show*, that I have been led to

believe in a particular reality of equity, but in fact I don't have to look very far or push the boundaries very hard to see that many people not only don't have equity, but are severely oppressed, delegitimized and brutalized.

Understanding the extent of the inequity and knowing we are a microcosm of the larger society in which we find ourselves, we have a responsibility in Waldorf education to ensure that equity exists for everyone in our communities, that we teach accurate history and racial literacy, and that we have communities that acknowledge and counter the dehumanization through policies and practices that support equity.

Waldorf education and students of anthroposophy have been in America since the 1920s, and there has been little direct engagement with this question of racial equity and justice up to this point. Internationally, anthroposophical organizations have made statements against racial inequity and generally defended Steiner's body of work while making some acknowledgement of concerning remarks. In the US, the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) engaged in the development of a public school in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Milwaukee, WI, working out of Waldorf principles in the 1990s. Since then, the public Waldorf school movement has continued to grow, welcoming in a more racially and socio-economically diverse student body, but AWSNA initially distanced itself from supporting the development of these schools. While these few examples are not the only work done in Waldorf communities on this topic, they demonstrate missed opportunities in taking a more united, active stance towards racial equity and justice.

Engagement in the work towards racial equity has changed recently, in particular during the 2020-2021 school year. The Council of Anthroposophical Organizations (CAO), a group within the Anthroposophical Society in America, has been working cross-organizationally to develop a shared racial equity and justice statement, engage in racial equity training, and study Steiner's race-related ideas. AWSNA has accelerated its work in this area, focusing on supporting schools in deconstructing problematic curricular and pedagogical endeavors and reimagining this work in light of what Steiner said and in consideration of the time and place and specific students in a teacher's classroom. There is also a focus on the transformation

of school culture, policies, and practices to be based on racial equity and justice. This is a new beginning of engagement in racial equity and justice.

What I have come to believe is that what is critical in working towards racial justice and equity is addressing and acknowledging the spirit in each human being and addressing and acknowledging the injustice and dehumanization embedded in the systems and power dynamics currently working in our country and schools. In other words, we need to address what is in our hearts and what is embedded in our policies and practices and ensure that human dignity is at the center of our work, both inner and outer work. These two threads are not mutually exclusive, rather they are best propelled forward when working together.

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