

Update: Racism in Waldorf Education

In the June, 1996, issue of the Research Bulletin, we published an article by Professor Ray McDermott of Stanford University entitled, "Racism and Waldorf Education." In this article, Professor McDermott challenged Waldorf educators to be vigilant in resisting any expressions of racism, inadvertent or otherwise, which they might encounter in their work. In that issue of the Bulletin, we also published an article by Douglas Sloan of Teachers College, Columbia University, reflecting on Professor McDermott's article in light of Rudolf Steiner's own vision of the infinite worth of every human being, a vision on which Waldorf education is based. Subsequent to the publication of this issue of the Bulletin, attempts were made by persons outside of Waldorf education to take Professor McDermott's article out of context and use it in attacking public school-Waldorf initiatives being explored in Sacramento. On learning of this misuse of his article, Professor McDermott wrote the following letter to the President of the Board of Education of the Sacramento City School District. We publish the letter here both because it brings out the fundamental commitment of Waldorf education to combat racism of every kind, and because it succeeded concretely in the Sacramento situation in clearing the air of any confusion on this score.

1 July, 1997

Jay Schenirer,
President Board of Education
Sacramento City Unified School District
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Schenirer:

I have recently been alerted that your Board is appraising the role of Waldorf education in Sacramento and that my work, particularly my paper on "Racism and Waldorf Education", is being used as evidence of a questionable belief system supporting Waldorf education ideas. This is terribly unfair to the point of my work, to the good people who use Waldorf ideas to do good things in our community, and to the people who would receive the benefits of their care.

In 1994, I headed a team evaluating a public Waldorf school in the Milwaukee inner city. The school was fantastic, and we wrote an unusually positive report to sing its praises (see *The Urban Review*, 1996). We also ran into a person who for a minute expressed an idea about the limits of learning among African American children, and I wrote a small article discussing the dangers of racism in a Waldorf context. A superficial glance at that article may allow a reader grounds for condemnation. A more careful reading would instead give good cause for pushing a Waldorf agenda in our public institutions. I offer three.

One, the success of the Milwaukee public school is undeniable. It is in the context of such achievement that a single teacher's foolish opinion could stand out so markedly. I have worked in dozens of public schools around the country over the last thirty years, and I have listened silently to racist opinions in many of them. I could not listen silently in the Milwaukee school, because the teachers there were accomplishing so much in the fight against racism. This point is made clearly in the paper.

Two, the Waldorf community has rallied around the issue and has been working to insure that racism has no place in Waldorf institutions. Please note that my paper was published in a Waldorf education journal. Please note that it contains a strong note from the president of the Waldorf education association condemning racism and promising to work against racism in all forms. They are honest caring people trying to do good things in our troubled world. Like the rest of us, they may make mistakes along the

way, but they keep trying. In Milwaukee, they have accomplished more in the fight against racism than most of other public schools around the country. Do not confuse a willingness to address issues with a confession of guilt.

Three, the educational ideas of Rudolf Steiner (the founder of Waldorf schools) are really about the wonders of all children. In 400 volumes of his thought, there are a handful of pages that to our modern ear sound terribly stupid and racist. This is a better percentage than can be found in American icons such as Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Steiner's followers can at least point out that he, unlike Jefferson or Emerson, from within the confines of turn of the century Germany, had little information and no experience with African or African American children. Please note that my article is followed by a second article by a Steiner textual scholar and a Professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, Douglas Sloan, carefully showing how Steiner's thought, at its heart and in its spirit, is not at all racist. This is not to say that Steiner (or his transcribers) did not make mistakes, but it is to say that careful reading of the work would lead one to an appreciation of Steiner's love of all children, regardless of race, creed, or color. Please note again the willingness of Waldorf people to address the issue and to clean house. I only wish that all public schools were so forthright on the issue.

This is a strong letter of support for Waldorf education. I am not a follower of Rudolf Steiner. I am interested in the Waldorf community only to the extent it delivers good education. It does that job well. As a student of education and as a parent with vested interests in the happiness and fulfillment of my children, I believe that we need more Waldorf ideas in many of our schools. Waldorf brings both a gentleness and a thoughtful structure to early childhood education, and we need much more of this in both the inner city and in the high pressure schools that dominate more affluent districts. I hope that Sacramento has the foresight and courage to continue working with Waldorf ideas.

Sincerely

Ray McDermott

Professor of Education
Stanford University