

# Humanistic Approach to Early Childhood Education in the Educational Philosophy of Rudolf Steiner

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*The unassailable empirical fact that Waldorf education has existed, endured and evolved for almost a century. It provides one with a legitimate propensity to engage and research into humanistic aspects of early childhood education in Steiner's philosophical and pedagogical inclinations. In that respect, the first development cycle, which refers to the education of children in early years of development, represents the foundation of any further growth, as well as of structuring a healthy qualitatively-voluntaristic personality aspect. The essential feature of early childhood can be observed in a complex interplay of a myriad of holistic and integrative elements of a child's sensitive nature during this period. The paper aims to provide humanistic insights into Steiner's pedagogical oeuvre that, as a methodological basis, reflects in a rather explicit and applicable manner the necessity of a pedagogical conception of the uniqueness of childhood and children, whose forces ought to be preserved. It is concluded that a genuine global social renaissance, starting from a given present as a relative uncertainty towards a better future as a possible certainty, i.e. towards the humanised and humanistic, is possible only if education is understood as a true social power with reformed and revalued educational system. Steiner perceived exciting prospects for human beings in the absolute freedom that is inherent in every human being as a spiritual power, so in early childhood years it is necessary to model temporal and spatial circumstances which support and generate a child's practice as a sensitive organ of a complex field of interactive exchange.*

*Key Words: Steiner, education, educational philosophy, child, development*

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## Introduction

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the humanistic paradigm in education represents a complex issue based on diverse and rather incoherent philosophical views. In philosophical and pedagogical theory, the issue of humanistic approach to education as a specific multidimensional construct is rendered topical [Aloni, 2013]. When reflecting on social reality such as education from the humanistic standpoint a human being's perspective can be perceived as an appropriate and desirable form of a continuous development of a man's lifelong cycle. This standpoint supports the view that, from the humanistic angle, education is focused on the development of rationality, autonomy, empowerment, creativity, care and concern for humankind [Veugelers, 2011]. The humanistic approach, with its epistemological and methodological framework and its social perspective on human beings, seems felicitous in regards to understanding the true needs and interests of a modern man. Modern philosophical approaches emphasize the unity of personality and universe, as well as the unity and harmony development in a new planetary-cosmic world view [Berehova, 2017:110]. Humanism, as well as other representative democratic cultures a priori should be tolerant to all people, in order to guarantee peace and unity of the world community [Khrystenko, 2016: 4]. Similarly, authors emphasize that principles of humanism as a system of beliefs that define the disclosure of human capabilities as a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of the state and maturity of social institutions, and the inherent right of everyone to free development of personality and realization of all his capabilities [Voronkova, 2016: 6].

In reference literature, the essence of understanding the humanistic concept of man is primarily observed through the prism of selective categorical references inherent in humanist thinkers and in a phenomenological model of a man: man as a whole, freedom of man, motivation, self-realisation [Fromm, 2013; Hitt, 1969; Maslow, 1972, 2013; Rogers, 1995, 2012].

By founding the first Waldorf School in Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the founder of its theoretical and methodological concepts, Rudolf Steiner [Barnes, 1991; Paull, 2011] inaugurated a rather peculiar and quite authentic humanistic approach to understanding the genesis of human beings. The central issues of Steiner's theory are concepts based on the knowledge on and development of one's individual aptitudes, as well as on taking genuine and personal responsibility by means of social and practical action.

The existence and development of an institutional Waldorf system at all levels of education for almost a century [Paschen, 2014] offers a potentially good empirical basis for researching into humanistic elements important for early childhood education. This is the aspect, which makes a difference between Waldorf education, as a humanistic oriented movement with a specific epistemological and methodological base, and other reformist and alternative movements. Bearing in mind that Waldorf pedagogy was derived from anthroposophy, and considering the conceptual and methodological basis of the Waldorf educational system, many Steiner's ideas seem either partly or almost entirely incomprehensible from the standpoint of the current scientific and methodological aspects prevailed by the positivist paradigm. Paradoxically, thus constructed epistemological and methodological base is considered the main weakness of Steiner's concept. Namely, a potential weakness of the Waldorf concept is reflected in a traditional and isolationist arrangement and attitude according to which Steiner's literature dominates the entire Waldorf educational movement. Furthermore, a good deal of Steiner's anthroposophical writings are of esoteric nature, which leads to a genuine suspicion

regarding what really takes place in Waldorf educational institutions [Ashley, 2005; Paschen, 2014]. On the other hand, certain segments of the Waldorf ethical and operative practice reveal an essential understanding of childhood, children and their true needs and interests.

### **Steiner — Waldorf Pedagogy — Humanistic Determinants**

Waldorf pedagogy was founded on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, who based its fundamental assertions on a thorough understanding of human development by dealing with children's needs in different phases of development. At the invitation of Emil Molt, Steiner founded his first Waldorf School, which was to serve the children of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory workers [Barnes, 1991: 52; Steiner, 1971: 91]. The philosophical, spiritual and scientific insights offered by this school inspired an entire movement of schools around the world with a unique and independent systemic structure — the Waldorf educational system. This system of education comprises “spiritual sciences”, terminologically constructed on the model of the German philosophical tradition, while its content is based on the view of knowledge known as anthroposophy [Schieren, 2015]. According to Steiner, anthroposophy is a demonstration of a unique life philosophy founded on a perennial synthesis of modern scientific worldviews and one's own metaphysical experiences [Steiner, 1996a; 1996c]. As a result, anthroposophy is essentially seen as a knowledge on a true nature of human beings [Edwards, 2002: 3]. The science of education cannot be conceptualised without a general knowledge about human beings who are at its core and have their ontological and metaphysical basis in anthroposophy [Steiner, 1996a, 2003]. Accordingly, Waldorf pedagogy is, in Steiner's view, a spiritually and scientifically regulated system dominated by a superior wisdom, which provides a support for Waldorf schools [Ashley, 2005].

Steiner's progressive ideas have served a purpose of establishing and affirming universal human values through institutional education, primarily with respect to fostering and understanding the true freedom of human beings [Steiner, 2011]. Steiner's visionary work was often dominated by eclectic ideas which suggested a possibility of connecting philosophy, science and art. Bearing this in mind, Steiner, primarily as a futurist and a visionary, had a macrocosmic perspective of that which he called the evolution of human consciousness. Namely, according to this author, the notion of the evolution of human consciousness represents the central idea of ontological necessity, considering the currently dehumanised, extremely materialised and estranged human nature.

The conceptual foundation of Waldorf pedagogy has its primary roots in literary works of Steiner, which provided epistemological frameworks of further establishment and development of the Waldorf theory and practice [Steiner 1978, 1996a, 1997b, 2011]. The aforementioned integrative combination of art, science and philosophy offers a peculiar perspective regarding Waldorf pedagogical concept in terms of an approach and practical work with children. Such peculiarities in work with children are primarily manifested in Steiner's deep conviction that engaging a child's imagination is a primary part of experience, which precedes conceptualisation [Hallam et al., 2016]. According to the Waldorf concept, one can most efficiently engage children's imagination through art, i.e. the primary imperative of Waldorf education is an imperious imagination [Jelinek & Sun, 2003: 4]. Furthermore, according to Steiner, the genuine cognitive power of human beings can be observed in an interplay between one's spiritual and emotional dimension ennobled by love and active direction of imagination [Nielsen & Haralambous, 2011; Mathisen, 2015: 56]. The future of humankind represented

through the Waldorf concept requires primarily a holistic approach to knowledge [Richards, 1980]. The artistic and aesthetic conceptual frame of Waldorf pedagogy represents one of the main characteristics of the concept itself, whereby Pestalozzi's holistic pursuit of educating the head, heart and hands as an integral and integrated wholeness of human beings who become harmonised through the process of education has explicitly been expressed.

According to Steiner, the essential concern of Waldorf education is perceived in its holistic dimension, i.e. handicraft, art, and music are an integral part of a curriculum [Elkind, 2001]. In that respect, an understanding of a child's early development in Waldorf pedagogy has positioned a holistic approach as its primary characteristic in early childhood education. It is important to emphasise that it was Steiner who established the essential principles of Waldorf pedagogy, which ought to be unconditionally respected and applied by adults who deal with the domain of early childhood development. According to Nicol and Taplin, one can single out the following principles: a child-centred education; imitation; working with rhythm, repetition and routine; preservation of the forces of childhood: gratitude, respect and admiration; development of healthy voluntary activities; a child — free play initiative; creative, artistic experiences by means of indigenous and artistic activities; concern for the environment and food for the senses [Nicol & Taplin, 2012: 14]. Thus perceived, early childhood development has its desirable and stimulating outcomes as a compensatory model of a possible and desirable alternative theory and practice, which have not been taken into consideration by conventional theories on education, oriented towards the cognitive sphere. This first and foremost relates to the segment of the omission of and disregard for a holistic and integral approach to a comprehensive development of man.

### **Steiner's Perspective on Education at the First Level of Development**

Holistic and integrative elements of the Waldorf concept and a unique epistemological and methodological foundation with respect to a man's development represent some of the main singularities on which Waldorf pedagogy was based. According to Steiner's teaching, the primary educational principle, which ought to be respected in the earliest phase of human development, relates to the *imitation* category, which represents a developmental necessity and a genuine need of a child of that age. Children perceive and imitate "not only people's words and actions, but also their inner attitudes" [de Souza, 2012: 52]. On *imitation* at an early childhood level Steiner wrote the following: 'We need to understand that, by the age of seven, children are first and foremost *imitators*, because they need to develop their physical bodies. Hence, *imitation* should be the primary principle of education during that period?' [Steiner, 1997b: 34; 2003: 110].

A child as a 'sense organ' aims to assimilate adult behaviour by means of *imitation*, as well as to incorporate it in its internal systems. Consequently, various forms of non-verbal communication such as gestures and movements of adults, which serve as an example of desired behaviour, are of greatest significance in the field of interactive influence of adults on developing a wholesome and healthy child's personality. The process of *imitation* in children is, as previously mentioned, the basic constitutive and qualitative characteristic of early childhood, as well as of the learning process in that stage. Bearing in mind that children are imitative beings, they are fully committed to the world around them. They imitate personalities and events in their environment, reflecting on the situations which occur [Steiner, 1997a: 8-9; 2004: 59]. In that context Steiner stated:

What you say to him, what you teach him, does not yet make any impression, except in so far as he imitates what you say in his own speech. But it is what you *are* that matters; if you are good this goodness will appear in your gestures, and if you are evil or bad-tempered this also will appear in your gestures... [Steiner, 1995: 17-18]

In that respect, children's activities need to be guided by adults, so much so that, while imitating, children primarily reflect socially desirable adult behaviour acquired in a child's immediate surroundings. The first phase of development, which lasts until the change of teeth, is one of the most significant in an individual's life cycle development. Bearing in mind human nature in the first phase of development, until the age of seven a whole individual is a 'sense organ', i.e. the entire life experience which an individual integrates in this period is of a considerable significance for the quality of the later life cycle, for example, at the age of fifty [Steiner, 1968, 1994]. It is very important to emphasise that early childhood development is a cyclic process of continuity and consistency regarding the development of healthy habits. In that regard, the basic axiological assumption of the Steiner-Waldorf education model presupposes a quintessential expression of care by adults, which is intentionally focused on a concrete child and his/her position. From the standpoint of individuality, the responsibility of an educational process observed in the domain of processuality and access to developmental phases represents a key determinant of a continuous process of growth and development. This assertion is corroborated by the Waldorf action component which is reflected in the awareness that every human being is a unique individual that goes through different phases in life, as well as that education bears the responsibility to deal with physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs in every single phase. Steiner does not make an unambiguous distinction between various aspects of internal forces development (cognitive, conative, emotional), because he observes them in their interactive synergy. They are observed as potential forces which, in an interactive synergy of an individual's multidimensional field of action, become activated in a mutually dependent and correlative relationship. Accordingly,

A central pedagogical discovery by Steiner is the complementarity of two forms of activity: the vital activity required for children to perform these elementary steps of growth on the one hand, and mental or intellectual capacity on the other. In other words, we can speak of different forms of energy: vital and mental energy which can be modelled as different appearances of one unitary, but also adaptable development potential and which seem to stand in direct competition to each other. [Wagemann, 2015: 53]

Depending on the success of adaptability and harmonisation of an individual's true needs in early childhood education, optimal conditions are created for a harmonious development of inner forces that initiate a healthy cognitive, conative and emotional development. In Steiner's lectures, one can observe a rather conspicuous and dominant fact about an integrity of growth and development, whereby the differentiation of integrity in the domain of various development phases aims to foster a genuine understanding of the complexity of human nature at certain levels of growth and development. Similar attitudes regarding the differentiation between cognitive/conative and emotional functions can be found in Vygotsky's studies on children psychology [Vygotsky, 1998].

According to Steiner, a person consists of a body, soul and spirit [Steiner, 1995: 5; 1996a: 64; 1996b: 23]. This cognition contributes to overcoming a bipartite division of a man into body and soul, which leads to a clear apprehension of a man's constitution. According to Steiner, the aforementioned bipartite division in science, first and foremost in psychology, originated from the decision by means of which the Catholic Church established its teachings in 869, and which was subsequently endorsed by humanities [Steiner, 1996a].

Bearing in mind the unity of a spirit-soul-body trinity, the main task of Waldorf education was to introduce, recognise and endorse these three principles, especially in the first sensitive development period, when the body component is predominant. Observing children as 'sense organs' implies that children receive sensory impressions from people around them with the same intensity that sense organs receive impressions from the environment [Steiner, 1997c: 8]. According to this stance, it is possible to argue a well-known pedagogical fact of an interactive and complex relationship between a child and the environment. In that respect, Steiner stated the following:

The child is wholly sense-organ, and reacts to all the impressions aroused in him by the people around him. Therefore, the essential thing is not to imagine that the child can learn what is good or bad, that he can learn this or that, but to know that everything that is done in his presence is transformed in his childish organism into spirit, soul and body. [Steiner, 1995: 18]

Accordingly, a concern and care for a child who grows in a tractable and cohesive environment is of crucial importance for furnishing those predispositions (inner forces) which ought to be realised in practical activities of an individual at the next stage of development.

Continuity in development phases is of an immense significance, and it is understood as an essential form of intrapersonal models of human beings which, in terms of actualisation, have either positive or negative dynamic and voluntary quality in different life phases. Continuity is present in every development phase in the sphere of empowering and supporting the development of a body, soul and spirit with a unique aim of fostering the evolution of a human being [Stoltz & Weger, 2012]. By emphasising the significance of continuity in development phases Steiner wrote:

A child remains a child for at most twelve years or possibly longer, but that is not the point. The point is that a child must always be thought of as becoming a grown-up person someday. Life as a whole is a unity, and you must not consider only the child but the whole of life; you must look at the whole human being. [Steiner, 1995: 5]

Hence, it is crucial to observe life in all its manifestations in order for timeliness of the pedagogical influence to exercise its true force over the overall development of a human being [Steiner, 1995]. Concretely speaking, this form of an axiom would relate to a child's preparation for the next development phase. If, until the change of teeth, a child had an adequate treatment, the forces which should appear at the next stadium would have the ground prepared for a continuous and harmonised growth and development in all its aspects.



## Steiner's contextualisation of the concept of learning at an early age

According to Steiner, the power and trust that a modern man had bestowed upon mechanistic thinking led to the loss of adults' natural ability to approach children, whereby education was reduced to experimentation and inability to approach children's hearts and souls. Due to prevalence of intellectualism and abstraction in conventional education, Steiner expressed a strong tendency towards protecting children from inordinately intellectual education, so that their hearts and feelings could receive an equal amount of education. The principal humanist idea of a true *art of education* is based on three golden rules, which Steiner postulated in the Waldorf method of institutional education: to receive a child with gratitude from the world it comes; to educate a child with love; to lead a child into the true freedom which belongs to humankind [Steiner, 2003: 276]. Accordingly, the essence of the art of education within the concept of Waldorf pedagogy is an understanding of the notion of *love*, which is perceived as an overall universal and pervasive cosmic force of vitality, available to all living things. According to this idea, Steiner believed that the category of *love* represented the greatest power of knowledge in real life and led to a true cognition of a human being [Steiner, 1997a; 1971: 6]. This stance reflects the direction of Steiner's efforts to prepare a child at an early age to become spiritually preponderant through learning, as it is its birthright: a man as a free being.

In order to be able to perceive the category of a *free being* one needs to be adequately supported and assisted in that path. In that respect, an assistant or a pre-school teacher is the one who does not offer ready-made educational contents, but reveals them progressively and transforms them so that through the form of *characterisation of a descriptive reality*, which surrounds the child, he/she instils and nourishes the driving force for a future *man*. Since children are free beings, they reflect a degree of freedom which is formed in a mutual interdynamic action at the level of interpersonal communication with social environment. Considering the fact that Steiner based his conclusions regarding early childhood education on the overall knowledge of man, his insisting upon the uniqueness of an educational approach and upon a study of the wholeness of human beings as a unique goal of the Waldorf method is quite understandable [Steiner, 1996b].

In that context, learning is understood as a complex category of human interaction in a broad field of biodiversity. Steiner insisted upon the necessity of avoiding intellectually oriented education at an early level, as well as upon the precedence of artistic forms such as primitive drawings, which should pave a path towards developing one's will, rather than one's intellect. Those attitudes were initiated by Steiner's deepest conviction that such activities engaged a whole human being and contributed to the balance of a child's individual one-sided talents, which reflected his humanistic request for educational contents that cover the domain of children's interests and needs [Steiner, 2001]. Thus, the forces which are related to a representative opinion deploy their own active synergy in the process of a child's physical development [Steiner, 2001: 92]. This is especially conspicuous in the context of forming a person's voluntary aspects. In this respect, the voluntary element plays an important intradynamic role regarding one's process of learning. Hence, the education process is perceived as a core element of a continuous psychological growth. Bruner shared a similar attitude and emphasised that the voluntary component, capacitated as a will for learning, transformed learning into a creative process. Additionally, Bruner stressed that a combination of practical learning and conceptual explanation contributed to the achievement of the most flexible skills [Bruner, 1996].

Illustratively speaking, the principle of evidence (which in this context does not have the characteristics of modern utilitarianism, but bears a character which lives in beauty), Steiner has a predominant function in building healthy intrapersonal motivation sets within a child's personality, which recurrently, through physical manipulation, leave a strong voluntary mark on a child's physical activity [Steiner, 1996b]. This position primarily relates to the mastery of bodily structure. Namely, in early years a child's movements are irregular and uncoordinated, but by imitating the movements of people in one's surroundings, his/her movements become increasingly purposeful and meaningful, which steers a child's will towards growth and development. Thus, one of the numerous Steiner's sentences which relates to early childhood learning insists upon the necessity of a correlation of such a process with a pictorial representation on the one hand, and a child's physical body on the other. Therefore, a child does not learn by means of an intellect alone, but by means of action and manipulation with objects from the environment. Accordingly, the learning content needs to be related to a concrete child and adjusted to his/her individual abilities. By stressing the importance of an individual approach and suitability of learning contents for a child's intellectual and physical abilities, another humanistic dimension of Steiner's education method has been pointed out. In favour of this assertion Steiner stated the following:

A child learns about things in a healthy manner only if those things have been presented picturesquely and if they have somehow been connected with a child's physical body. The basis of education is extremely dependent on such subtle differences in life. [Steiner, 2001: 102]

A humanistic conception is especially emphasised in Steiner's teaching on *concept building* at an early age. According to this teaching, one must refrain from forming *ready-made concepts* which Steiner called 'dead concepts' because of a child's inability to abstract the given verbalised concept, and because of a direct verbalisation in general. In that respect, a *concept* should be characterised rather than defined, i.e. a child should be introduced to the concepts which can further be *transformed* during a child's life [Steiner, 1996a]. Hence, concepts need to be alive and capable of living in a child. It is important to emphasize that all *concepts* need to be related to *man*, and that a child's perception strives towards the idea of man [Steiner, 1996a: 154-155].

The humanistic approach to early childhood attaches a great importance to Steiner's understanding of *the idea of man*, which can be understood as a homocentric aspiration towards the awakening of genuinely altruistic traits of a human character in the earliest stadia of one's development. This stance reveals its unique humanistic character in the fact that a stadium development implies a continuous and complex process of building and empowering a unique *feeling* on the importance of one's own existence as a human being in the world. Hence, the basic purpose is in the awakening of *love towards a human being and life* in all its power, whereby the primordial force of a comprehensive life experience can come to the fore in the later period of a man's life cycle.

## Conclusion

In the field of early childhood education Steiner's attitudes reflect a deep and essential conception of interests and needs of a growing and developing child. According to Steiner, the



current and future social reality reflects the germs of a man's latent dehumanisation, spiritual disorientation and tendentious suffocation of human consciousness at all levels of its practical activity [Steiner, 1997b]. A genuine global social renaissance, starting from a given present as a relative uncertainty towards a better future as a possible certainty, i.e. towards the humanised and humanistic, is possible only if education is understood as a true social power with reformed and revalued educational system. Such fact would not have been given importance had Steiner's ideas remained purely theoretical and conceptual speculations and fiction. As an explicit representative of a humanistic and holistic standpoint in the field of education, Steiner perceived exciting prospects for human beings in the *absolute freedom* which is inherent in every human being as a *spiritual power*. In early childhood years it is necessary to model temporal and spatial circumstances which support and generate a child's practice as a sensitive organ of a complex field of interactive exchange. In early years, it is crucial that children's learning models by means of imitating adults are in the function of developing a germ of moral and operational practice. Such matter has been viewed in the light of a continuous growth and development of an individual through three development phases, whereby the final outcome would be a *self-aware and reliable* person ready for turbulent challenges of the current reality.

Steiner himself was deeply critical of the civilisation of his time, believing that a spiritual power of human beings had atrophied due to predominance of materialistic culture, especially in the field of humanities. According to Steiner, the extreme materialistic fever which had affected all segments of a man's practice in a global perspective at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed a tendency to create an even larger gap in one's estrangement from oneself, and lead to a total loss of existential orientation in one's activities. In accordance with the aforementioned, education is recognised as a true force of spiritual renaissance of a man's estranged being and a possibility for a recovery of an inherent spiritual power (freedom). Although Steiner philosophy is often difficult to understand, even criticized as a mystical doctrine, from the aspect of personality education, it contains ideas of original pedagogy which is often present in romantic perceptions of pedagogical classics, while on the other side it reveals the character and the spirit of original pedagogy as encountered in pedagogical classics and romanticists [Dugan & Daar, 1994]. From this aspect, his ideas continue the spirit of human relations towards the nature of the child, they are the visionary nature in the field of upbringing and can be implemented in any educational system in the world on the basis of those forces which reflect a true concern, both on the microcosmic level — the level of an individual, and the macrocosmic level — the level of mankind.

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