

Holistic Development of the Young Child through an Integrated Curriculum: Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Research

Jeong Eim Kim*

Ulsan Junior College

Abstract

Holistic development offers a view of the child that accounts for more than mere intellectual functioning. Rudolf Steiner, who designed the Waldorf curriculum, suggests that the development of the “whole” person, especially during early childhood education, requires the recognition of a particular age-appropriate pattern of development that can be described as a four-fold human being with twelve distinct senses. The development of these senses is achieved primarily through an integrated curriculum in kindergarten education. In this way, the deep, inner life of the child meets the surrounding environment and causes the healthy unfolding of the “I”—the highest expression of a person’s soul.

Keywords: holistic development, four-fold human being, integrated curriculum, twelve senses

* jekim@uc.ac.kr

Introduction

Steiner's Anthroposophical and Philosophical Viewpoints of the Human Being

Waldorf Education's¹⁾ holistic art-pedagogy was created by Rudolf Steiner²⁾ in 1919 for the opening of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart Germany, which was created for the sake of social renewal in the midst of the chaos left in the wake of World War I. Steiner's avant-garde ideas were recognized in 1919 by Emil Molt, the director of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette company, who wished to create an egalitarian educational experience for his factory workers. Waldorf education is thereby based on the philosophical and anthroposophical theory of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophy³⁾, Steiner's most distilled philosophy, is the study of the whole development of the human being in which the harmony of thinking, feeling, and doing take precedence over the predominant pedagogy of mere intellectual functioning/thinking.

It is Anthroposophy that shows us that if we have a true knowledge of man, we see that the human being possesses three clearly distinguished members: the physical body, the soul, and the spirit. And we can only see the whole man if we have the wisdom and knowledge to recognize the soul in its true nature as clearly as we recognize the physical body, and further, if we are able to do so we are able to recognize the spirit in man as an independent being. (Steiner, 1968)

This article will review the anthroposophical, philosophical, and educational

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- 1) Waldorf Education is the largest independent school movement in the world, with over 900 established locations worldwide. It is also represented in hundreds of non-private, publicly-funded situations, mainly in the United States and Germany.
 - 2) Rudolf Steiner was born in 1861 in Kraljvek, Austria. His father was a member of the working class, a railroad conductor. The environment in which he grew up was split between the realms of nature and technology. Although he went on to study at the Technical University of Vienna, Steiner also became the curator of the research of the German scientist Goethe. Steiner's body of work is largely lecture-based, with over 6,000 lectures compiled by modern readers into over 350 books in his native language, German. His body of work encompasses information far beyond the pedagogical realm, with the spiritual science "anthroposophy" being considered his most important contribution to humanity.
 - 3) The word "anthroposophy" is derived from the Greek: "anthropos" meaning "human being" and "sophia" meaning "wisdom".

viewpoints of Waldorf Education at the convergence of its theory and practice in order to demonstrate the potential for the successful adaptation of this pedagogy, internationally, in the twenty-first century. One of the main tenets of Steiner's work is the matter of the "wholeness" of the individual, and the healthful development of this "whole" person is in every way connected to educational practices in early childhood education, where developmental foundations are being laid in their earliest stages. The holistic development of the human being hinges on an integrated curriculum and its implications inform the unique position of a Waldorf educator, who must recognize the developing child without objective or standardized assessment, as is the norm. Therefore, this article will include brief summaries of the two major streams of Steiner's philosophy as they are related to the development of the whole child: the fourfold human being and the development of the twelve senses. This article will conclude with a review of Steiner's holistic understanding of the human being, which Waldorf education uses for the development of the whole human being—physical, emotional, and intellectual. These words' meaning accords with Steiner's traditional terminology, "body, soul, and spirit."

The Four-fold Human Being

Steiner understands the human being to be fourfold, with a physical body, an etheric body, an astral body, and the "I" or ego. In his book, *The Education of the Child*, Steiner writes:

The physical body is subject to the same laws of physical existence and is built up of the same substances and forces as the world as a whole ... in common with all of the mineral kingdom. And it designates as the physical body only what, in human beings, are those substances that mix, combine, form, and dissolve through the same laws that also work in the substances within the mineral world.

From birth until the age of seven, which is considered the first period of life, the entire body is a vessel that is open to the world. Through physical activity, perception teaches the young child about the outer world. The child's perceptions are unconsciously mirrored with his or her whole body back into the world through his or her activity. For example, a child who is fascinated by an object wants to touch it, without

differentiation or awareness of inherent dangers. Limitation of experience, facilitated by a supervising adult, can potentially create passivity in the child's willingness to actively learn from its environment. The kindergarten room must therefore be full of experiences through which young children can explore basic human activities to which they are exposed to in their home. A kitchen, for example, and the activities which occur in that setting, should be available for play, in order to recreate such situations through imitative gestures and modeling.

The second aspect of the human being is the etheric body, which is considered to be the substances and forces inherent in the living creature. "Vital force works in the plant, the animal, and the human body, and produces the phenomena of life, just as magnetic force is present in the magnet that produces the phenomena of attraction," writes Steiner (1968, p.5). Art activities are strongly stressed for children seven to fourteen years old, in order for them to practice experiencing that which deepens feeling. The etheric body is the "soul", an element that responds to the beauty in art, drama, music, and religion, through feeling. At this age, children can differentiate themselves as people (the "I") from characters in fantasy or drama and can represent themes through the arts, whereas younger children (in kindergarten, for example) live in a dream consciousness and cannot differentiate.

The third aspect is identified as the sentient soul and is commonly referred to as the astral body. Sentient soul qualities are likened to an experiential vehicle of pain and pleasure, impulse, craving, passion, and so on — all of which are absent in a creature that consists of only the physical and etheric bodies, such as a dog or a cat. Specifically, humankind has a physical and a sentient body, or sensation, in common with the animal kingdom, as Schoorel (2004) observed. Though the astral body is considered to be the carrier of desires, emotions, and egoism, it does not work in the body of the child under the child's direction. During the development of the astral body, the environment of the child (family, school, friends, etc.) participates in this guidance (p.26). For example, a teacher must often play the role of mediator in order to maintain peace in the classroom, where sharing toys or food is the norm. The young child's emerging ego cannot yet differentiate between his or her own subjective feelings and the objective feelings of another. Nor can a child in a case of

difficulty in sharing be labeled as “good” or “bad” based on these social interactions before he or she has realized the need for differentiation.

Humans also possess a fourth aspect of their being, the human “I”, which is shared with no other earthly creature. Steiner says that the little word “I”, in the English language, is a name essentially different from any other name, an approach to the perception of true human nature, which is opened up immediately when declared, but is not limited to experience only through language. The body of the “I” is the vehicle of the higher soul of humankind, and perception of the “I” is developed in an integrated curriculum. By the age of twenty-one years, thinking, feeling, and willing are fully incorporated, as demonstrated by the young adult’s ability to control these three faculties. This firm foundation of a well-developed “I” thereby becomes the human being’s offering or service to society, with which to participate in the social and economic realms. At this age, opportunities for decision-making are plentiful and even demanded of the young adult.

The development of the body, soul, and spirit offers a unique situation in which educators can apply anthroposophy. In the twenty-first century, we need holistic education because the human consciousness has reached a highly evolved level and must receive an education that corresponds to it. The connection between the “I”, spirit, soul, and body is the key to Steiner’s curriculum, which necessitates the three-fold development of thinking, feeling, and doing. Gardner (1997) proposes that it is the very center of our humanity that requires and strives to establish in us the balance and harmony of functions. (p.6).

Steiner defines holistic education as methodology that requires the participation of the whole person, rather than the intellectual faculties only. The educator should be competent in handling or facilitating the intricate development of the four-fold human being in its three-fold functioning. A prime example is given by Steiner in an essay called *The Education of the Child* (1996):

Life in its wholeness is like a plant. The plant contains not only what it offers to external life, but it also holds a future state within its hidden depths.

Likewise, the whole of human life also contains within it the seeds of its own future, but if we are to tell anything about this future, we must first penetrate into the

hidden nature of the human being; and our age is little inclined to do this. It concerns itself with the things that appear on the surface, and thinks it is treading on unsafe ground if called on to penetrate what escapes external observation.

Jaffke (2004) writes that in the earliest stage of life, the child is the result of the inheritance of the parental “streams”, which form a body. Then, a soul-spirit being, a human individuality, joins with the body. The same author reiterates how Steiner observed that the human organism is divided into three systems: nerve-sense, rhythmic, and metabolic. Each system is developed during the first seven years of the child’s life. During the first two and a half years of life, the nerve-sense system provides the physical basis for thinking – as expressed in gaining uprightness in the face of gravity, walking, and speech – in that all sense perceptions are conducted through the nervous system to the brain. The rhythmic system, centered in the chest area (e.g., heart and lungs) is responsible for the feelings of the child. The proper development of this system is demonstrated through memory and a healthy fantasy life stimulated by external causes, provided that the child’s imagination transcends the found objects available for recreating the details of the child’s life. The metabolic system, living in the strong willingness of the limbs but working deep in the unconscious, is responsible for “spontaneous, willful joy ... in small children.” Around age five, children become increasingly capable and dexterous, often times working with constructed or planned play. The difficulty in this stage is that children experience boredom for the first time and often rely on adults to provide inspiration for new impulses towards creative play. This impulse could be described as an inner picture that imaginatively recalls past events, free from place, time, or people.

Each life force works in the way of a gradual unfolding during childhood. Therefore, in healthy will development, the matter of the will must be grasped by the child through imagination derived from inner pictures, which becomes more valuable to the child than imagination from play objects.

The Development of the Twelve Senses through Immediate Experience

Sense perception was an important area of research for Steiner. Play, for example, utilizes all of the twelve senses, aligning and harmonizing their development and

connecting them to each other. The twelve senses are organized into three groupings: senses directed toward the body, toward the environment, and toward the spiritual. The senses of life, movement, touch, and balance are considered senses directed toward the body. The senses of smell, taste, color, and temperature comprise the senses directed toward the environment. The senses of tone, language, word or form, thought or meaning, “I” or style comprise those directed toward the spiritual.

Schoorel (2004) describes the prerequisites for sense perception on four different levels. At the physical level is a fully developed sense organ. The etheric level requires a healthy sense organ, while the astral level requires a soul that is awake. The will to perceive is established at the level of the “I”. The fully developed sense organs begin in the embryonic stage of the human being, their health depending on their being used after birth. Healthy sense organs require a day-night rhythmic period of rest. Schoorel also writes, “all life processes work rhythmically; rhythm is *the* prerequisite for life.” A soul that is awake, the third prerequisite of sense perception, depends on an astral body that can successfully enable the soul to leave the inner world behind and direct itself to the outer world, while the sentient soul allows for impressions from the outer world, which provide us with reliable information. A child may perceive a cup with a smooth surface, but does not know that this feature is linguistically “smooth”: hence, the fundamental difference between language and perception. The last prerequisite for the twelve senses is the will to perceive. By age seven, the child is called upon to gaze upon the outside world with the “I” directing the soul in the sense-world experience. This necessity fundamentally differentiates us from the animal kingdom in that the child becomes not motivated by bodily needs.

Schoorel suggests that each sense organ covers one-twelfth of the outer world, allowing the soul to cross twelve bridges to learn about the outer world. Clark (2004) adds that it is by means of the twelve senses that the soul and spirit of the child find their way into the structural physical body. Glöckner (2004) suggests that in the young child, the life of thoughts and the life of the senses are still united and not yet divided. This explains why the young child can imitate and intuitively understand what is going on. However, learning occurs later when abstract memory awakens, when sense perceptions are separated from thinking through retrospective considera-

tions. Glöckner explains further,

We need to realize that every thought is a living reality for the child. She sees the flower and experiences the inner reality of the flower; she sees the being of the flower. The child experiences not only the outlook but also the “inlook”, the inner being of “I Am” of the object perceived. The child is not awake like the adult is. She cannot separate the inner from the outer and think about the one or the other. She is neither fully awake, nor is she asleep. Her consciousness is in between, like a dream. Yet within that consciousness it is alert to the world and takes everything in.

The most important matter is that the child, before age nine, is not “awake” enough to think abstractly about the world, but can still live deeply in the world around him or her. Jaffke suggests the following:

In the small child [sense impressions] are digested inwardly by the core of his being, the individuality, in two ways: through the imitated behavior and in the development of the yet unfinished organs. The small child is born unprotected into its new environment. His whole body acts as a single sense organ serving in an indiscriminate way to join the outer world with the inner one ... This working together of the outer impressions and the inner shaping manifests itself in that wonderful power of imitation with which each healthy child is born.

The relationship of the senses with the will is broken unless the will is taught to think. After nine years of age—the point to which Steiner aptly refers as the “nine-year change”—problem-solving capacities, in linking ideas together or following a line of thought, will reveal the amount of training the will received in the early years.

Conclusion

Holistic education for the sake of genuine intellectual development necessitates an integrative educational environment, in which the whole being of the child is taken into consideration. Conversely, the mere intellectual development found in most

general education creates apathy and loses the connection with the I-experience or consciousness. Waldorf education, in contrast, works with etheric forces that are developed through physical activity, in order to open up intellectual thinking in concert with the development of the three-fold child.

The development of children is not standardized, and even their curriculum should not be standardized. Differentiation through the twelve senses is a notion whose role has a powerful impact on modern pedagogy. To mirror this discovery, an integrated curriculum is essential. Steiner's insistence upon such a curriculum could be considered that of a post-modernist, in that it has the potential to offer narrative-based education. According to Elkind (1997), the integrated curriculum acknowledges the artificial separation among academic disciplines and argues that all are related in significant ways, inasmuch as they are derived from a particular world view and within a particular language discourse.

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