



Pedagogical Section
at the Goetheanum

Journal



Easter 2015, No. 54

Class Teachers in the Waldorf School

Efficient teaching in Waldorf Schools and a new class teacher profile for the 21st century

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Taking stock

Preamble

There has been discussion about the position and importance of class teachers in Waldorf schools for some years. Class teachers have, on the one hand, been given too much weight – to the detriment of subject teachers – leading to noticeable imbalances in the social make-up of schools. Some class teachers, on the other hand, struggle with older pupils and pedagogical tragedies ensue, which, according to surveys carried out among former pupils, have long-term effects even after the end of school.

Some schools have introduced a new middle-school concept where class teachers specialize in the middle school, taking over the class or joining the initial class teacher for classes seven and eight (sometimes also nine), a step that has brought some alleviation.

In other countries the class teacher period was even split into three parts: classes 1 to 3, 4 to 6, and 7 and 8, with a "specialist" class teacher at each level (known as "looping" in Anglo-America). It has even been suggested to have one specialist class teacher for each year. Last year, a colleague took on a class 5; she was their fourth class teacher and the school allowed her to keep the class to the

end of year 6. Some schools have good experiences with a method called "co-sharing", where one class teacher holds the main lesson from Monday to Wednesday and another continues on Thursday and Friday – or other combinations.

And there is still the image of the "good", successful class teacher who reigns supreme behind closed doors – with or without collateral damage. The question is: does the idea of class teachers who stay with their classes for as long as possible belong to the past?¹ What did the class teacher concept originally involve? And is the class teacher system part of the identity of a Waldorf school?

What are the arguments in favour of changing this characteristic element of Waldorf Education?

1 Efficient Teaching

If one observes life in a Waldorf School for some time, one can have the following impression: A class is working towards its final exams (e.g. A-Levels) and many pass the exams with surprisingly good results. The teachers know they have spent fewer lessons on exam preparation than specified – and yet the results are astonishingly good.

Rudolf Steiner always thought that the learning process should be made as efficient

¹ Cf., for instance, GA 311, *The Kingdom of Childhood*, Lecture 4 of 15 August 1924; or GA 301, *The Renewal of Education*, Lecture 5 of 26 April 1920.

as possible: the way lessons were taught, the liveliness and focus of the presentation should awaken forces in the students that facilitate fast absorption and comprehension. He was convinced that an artistic approach to teaching in the lower school would accelerate learning in the upper school.²

Looking at schools more closely, one also realizes that this efficiency is lost as soon as main stream methods are introduced into the lessons. The uninspired teaching that arises from such methods can eradicate this living efficiency in the long term and lead to the excess of catching-up lessons that attract so much criticism.³

The class teacher principle is part of this educational efficiency.⁴ Teachers, who can oversee the teaching material over years, build up knowledge and skills step by step and incorporate deviations that lead to the goal faster than the straight route, will work efficiently.

Take as an example a situation which is often seen as purely theoretical but which can be, and has been, practised: Pupils in class 3 ask, for instance, why in the autumn, when the leaves have fallen off the trees, the moon follows them as they walk along? The teacher says, "That is too complicated to explain now, but I will tell you when we get to class 7!"

This may be dismissed as Waldorf romanticism, but Rudolf Steiner attached great

pedagogical value to educational questions that are allowed to lie dormant for a long time. And, of course, this can only be done by a class teacher who stays with a class for many years. (More on this in paragraph 7)

2 Generalists vs. Specialists

The question we must ask is: can lower school pupils thrive in the care of specialist teachers or do growing children need the generalist's approach? (We know that in state teacher training specialization is being promoted. Teachers specialize in languages, maths, history etc.).

How do children learn in the lower school? They learn because they are immersed in an atmosphere of becoming. The teacher is learning with them. The secret of education is self-education. Lower school children are on their way and the atmosphere of *becoming* facilitates their learning. The teacher is not a person who teaches but a facilitator, who creates the right climate for learning. Once this climate has been created, young children 'love' their teacher, and it is this, rather than academic knowledge which inspires them to learn. It all depends on the teacher's character, that is, on self-education.

No teacher has ever taught a child to read! Children learn reading by themselves, but they need the right atmosphere for this, and this atmosphere is conveyed by the teacher, by the teacher's relationship to learning. For him or her, everything is new, too!

2 Rudolf Steiner often asked for economic teaching so that the art of teaching could really unfold its potential. Cf., for instance, *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*, GA 300a, the meeting of 16 January 1922.

3 See Randall and Barz's empirical study on former Waldorf pupils (*Empirische Studie ehemaliger Waldorfschüler*, Wiesbaden 2007)

4 Cf. Rudolf Steiner: *Practical Advice to Teachers* (GA 294), Lecture 6, 27 August 1919 in Stuttgart. See also *The Foundations of Human Experience* (GA 293), Lecture 11, 2 September 1919 in Stuttgart.

A (lower school) teacher who knows everything loses the joy in conveying contents and the children are not inspired or motivated to learn.⁵ And what is even worse is that this can lead to learning difficulties. (Why doesn't she get it? It's so easy!)

Up to the beginning of puberty, children need a "learning companion" for learning, and this learning companion needs to be an all-rounder. At that age, specialists can inhibit the learning process.

3 The Reliable Attachment Figure

This concept from resilience research⁶ receives increasing attention: children when they are born need a *reliable* caregiver for their development. Each child needs basic stability in life. In many families we see minor or major fluctuations nowadays, with some children being torn entirely from the security of a family. Someone who accompanies such processes reliably in the background is without doubt a real asset in a school community. And this kind of "reliability" will gain ever greater importance.⁷

Our society, on the other hand, is developing in the opposite direction. If we look at many processes in the social life and in education, we see more *fragmentation* than *unification*.

The same applies to families. As well as families in the conventional sense, we see an increasing number of "patchwork" and single parent families. This fact alone speaks for the

class teacher as the *reliable attachment figure*.

Dividing up the class teacher period is a gesture of fragmentation, one could even say of *disintegration*. These tendencies are characteristic of our time; they have less to do with competence than with *responsibility*. We can also say the prevailing increasing rationalization and structuring puts us in charge of segments only. There no longer is such a thing as overall responsibility. But overall responsibility is the only true responsibility, and it needs to be rooted in moral autonomy. Its presence interferes with democratic processes, with processes that are seen as "proper". The Dutch professor of education, Gert Biesta, has investigated this problem.⁸

The class teacher principle is the antidote for this tendency.

4 Artists of Education and Attachment

Looking at the role of the class teacher over the last twenty or thirty years, one realizes that "parent work", as I indicated earlier, is a growing and increasingly difficult factor. For the sake of clarity it needs to be pointed out that "parent work" does *not*, in this context, mean the attempt to convince parents of the value of Waldorf education. What is meant is the subtle and often time-consuming and intensive task of inviting parents to be partners in the education of their children. This process sometimes involves no more than a conversation, in other cases it means years of devotion and concern. (This task is no longer restricted to the lower school. All teachers

5 Rudolf Steiner, *Human Values in Education* (GA 310), Lecture 5, 21 July 1924 in Arnheim. Also very emphatically, even before the Waldorf school was founded, in GA 192, *Geisteswissenschaftliche Behandlung sozialer und pädagogischer Fragen*, Lecture 2.

6 Cf. Pedagogical Section Journal No 33 of Summer 2008

7 Joachim Bauer, *Lob der Schule*, "there is no education without relationship".

8 Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, Pluto Press, 2011

are increasingly required to be learning companions in the wider sense;⁹ because upper school parents in particular tend to adjourn their educational tasks more and more, while in the kindergartens we see a growing number of parents who seek help with bringing up their children.)

The fact that teachers, as well as being educational artists, have to become relationship artists. This will increasingly determine the success or failure of the class teacher principle. The teacher training centers need to take this on and they need to cooperate with the schools. Of course, the teachers must become aware of this task and not see it as "a nuisance" or as not being their responsibility. As it is, "parent work" is still too often seen as a "persuading job".

5 Diversity as an Inherent Human Quality

Any class teacher will have had the experience that *they, too, are affected* by the material they present, convey, and work through. We are different people depending on whether we teach a math or a grammar lesson. We are more sanguine, mobile, a little excited, when we teach maths, while we tend to be more phlegmatic, reflective as language teachers, explaining things calmly at the blackboard. We enter differently into a geography main lesson than we do into a history main lesson. With geography the human and spatial aspects predominate, while with history the aspect of responsibility, the historical consciousness is more prevalent.

Rudolf Steiner asked for this. He wanted children to experience human versatility in their class teacher: their ability to develop enthusiasm for a variety of fields. This supports the concept of the class teacher as

'multitasker', because through him, or her, students learn that versatility is an inherent human quality. (It is therefore a pity that some schools leave form drawing, painting, or the class play to specialist teachers).

6 Lifelong Learning or the Ability of Adults to Develop

Once a physics main lesson in the lower school has been taught, the teacher's preparations will no longer be needed and the same is true for all preparations throughout the eight years: What has been developed and prepared is no longer relevant after eight years because everything has changed. The teacher is eight years older, the pupils are new and different from the those in the "old" class. Everything changes. The teacher's ability to convey substance may also have changed. In short: what the class teacher conveys in his lessons has a short half-life.

This has its disadvantages because preparation is part of working life. For a Waldorf school in the true sense it is vital. Replacing preparation with established methods is the death of living education.

But it also has its good sides. Having to take hold of and invent the same tasks in a new way again and again, creates excess mobility which, in turn, emerges as flexibility in dealing with all kinds of situations, even those that seem impossible.

To cut a long story short. It is this mobility of the ether body that counts. It allows teachers to grow with their pupils. We enliven our ether body, for instance, by studying anthroposophy in such a way that it becomes second nature. Those who are artistically gifted tend to find this easier than others.

9 Cf. the sociological term 'expanded youth'. Young people become adults later today than they used to twenty years ago, a fact that has an impact on upper school education.

It then becomes possible for teachers to grow with their pupils. This growing always involves *leaving old habits behind* that are no longer suitable for the children's age, or rituals which they left behind years ago.

This includes details such as how we address the pupils, how we shape the morning ritual (if there is one), how we speak, how we say good-bye to the children: every school year – which is for the children a year of development – needs its own habits.

Most problems we observe, often acutely, in the way class teachers deal with their pupils in classes 6, 7 and 8, are rooted in such habits rather than in a lack of professional competence.

This complex situation has to do with the ether body's capacity for development after the third seven-year period. It seems that teacher trainings need to urgently hand budding class teachers the tools they need for keeping their habit body flexible.¹⁰

If my habit body becomes rigid I will struggle as a class teacher and I need to do all I can to avoid this.

7 Responsibility in time: Implementing the Curriculum

As one of the arguments in favour of the class teacher principle Rudolf Steiner mentions the possibility of being able to look back to what the children have learned before and to anticipate what lies ahead.¹¹ He repeatedly referred to the situation where the teacher will say, "Dear children, this is something you cannot understand yet, but we will talk about it again in class 7, and then you will understand it." According to

Rudolf Steiner it is of immense pedagogical value to open up such forward-looking perspectives in children. (It happened to me more than once as a class teacher that pupils reminded me, when they were in class 7 or 8, asking for the promised explanation.

This fact gives us the chance to look at wider dimensions of development. We need to take responsibility in a new way; we do not bring fragments to the lessons that need to be put together, but create a whole, a living structure – because that is what the curriculum is. Seeing the curriculum as an organic, living being means implementing it in an organic way. That needs time and it needs an awareness that can stretch over long periods of time.

8 The Image of the Class Teacher: A King in his Realm

The Waldorf school will soon be a hundred years old, and we will see that, in many respects, Rudolf Steiner's art of education has become part of the overall culture.

There have been one-sided developments, shortcomings and even counter-images to the real art of education on the way, but they were necessary.

One such distortion is the image of the class teacher as the sole and unrestricted ruler in his kingdom: nobody knew what happened behind the classroom door, but it had to be a "good" class teacher in there. Only gradually would the signs of collateral damage seep through classroom walls.

Such class teachers did not usually feel the need to question their work or to admit to

¹⁰ In my view, this is the reason why Rudolf Steiner never specifies 1 to 8, but always says, 'as long as possible'.

¹¹ Rudolf Steiner: *Practical Advice to Teachers*, GA 294, Lecture 6, Stuttgart, 27 August, 1919.

themselves that they were struggling with the one or other pupil. But because they were otherwise "good" teachers, the shadows they cast – also over their work with colleagues – were ignored. This is the old class teacher image and it was, to an extent, also justified.

When we favour the class teacher principle in elementary education, we do not mean these kinds of class teacher, because they belong to the past.

9 Another Class Teacher Image: *primus inter pares* – The First among Equals

The class teacher principle needs new people, people who know that everything grows from *cooperation*, from *responsibility* and from actions that are entirely *transparent*.

Even if the door of the classroom remains closed, the new class teachers will show parents and colleagues what they are doing, and why they are doing it. They are team players who have the well-being of the school and of the whole community as much at heart as the wellbeing of the group they lead and its social context. They will lead their classes but they will be happy to do it together with a subject teacher. They speak with the German teacher or with the Eurythmy teacher about the particular interest they have in this class. They will speak about the children together, meet parents openly, offer a weekly "surgery" for parents and open their classroom doors when they are teaching. We need *open door education*. Parents know the teaching practice only through hearsay. Let's invite them to take part in the lessons whenever they wish to come.

Practice has shown that none of the intimacy of the lesson is lost, but there is a sense of relief: Oh, this is how it's done! *Such* experiences have been proved to be convincing: experi-

encing daily life in the classroom tells parents more about Waldorf than lengthy presentations. ("Open days", on the other hand, often have a "show" character and are not real reflections of everyday school life.)

By aspiring to such a new class teacher image we might be able to remedy another kind of damage that has crept in and assumed rather ugly forms unworthy of a Waldorf school.

I am referring to the kind of division into class teachers and subject teachers where the latter are seen as "second-class" colleagues (usually in the lower school). Subject teachers, in fact, often need to be pedagogically more competent than class teachers because they have to achieve a great deal in shorter periods of time and at different levels in the school. It is highly necessary that subject teachers are more integrated.

Why not allocate one subject teacher to every class teacher, so that they share the responsibility for a class?

More questions that need to be worked on remain:

- What do we need to do to inspire people to take long-term responsibility in a 'floating society'?
- Research is needed to find out if there is evidence in mainstream schools that generalists are better in the lower school than specialists. (The study by John Hattie gives some indications).
- The question of competence: How can teacher training programs convey broad general knowledge? (This question is identical with that of learning through studying anthropology.)

- The question of the enlivening of the ether body after the third or fourth seven-year period is one that involves spiritual-scientific research.
- A pilot project would be desirable on class teachers and subject teachers sharing the responsibility for a class.

Even if things are being done differently in many places, for good reasons, it is – more than ever – the class teacher principle that meets the social demands of a new educational system.