

THE WILL of the CHILD

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One of the most important points of views in Waldorf pedagogy is Dr. Steiner's framework of the soul qualities of thinking, feeling and willing. This three-part division characterizes distinct areas of our soul life and how they influence each other. The will aspect refers to soul qualities that includes, but are not limited to: controlling one's lower impulses; the role of a morally guided wish; organizing and planning; and staying with a task. The table on the last page – Phases of the Will — outlines how teachers work every day to move the children from instinct to intention.

The refinement of the will is a designated goal of education that has been considered for centuries and yet still remains a deep mystery. We can research this topic in Steiner's texts on education and find countless references. In this article we will highlight some of these references and also what teachers have shared about their more successful practices for building healthy will forces.

ROAD MAPS: Child Development and the Senses

Waldorf Education is a developmental curriculum. Before terminology such as brain integration, working memory and cognitive functioning were embedded in educational literature, Waldorf pedagogy highlighted the lower senses, also called the bodily or will senses, as a foundation for more mature processing such as language, decision making, processing, memory and the ability to stay on task. Each lower sense: touch, life, movement and balance is the basis for recognition of the individuality of another person, the thought process, language and hearing, respectively.

The foundation for the ability to develop the will occurs especially during the first seven years and is dependent on healthy lower senses and developmental milestones. A path of child development that enriches these lower senses allows the freeing of thinking so that it is not tied to bodily reactions. The first seven-year stage is the primary window for establishing essential capacities: however, many of the developmental milestones of the first seven years can be recapitulated, educated and nourished at later stages of childhood and even adulthood, although this often requires a very targeted program of intervention. Indeed we all have blockages to or incomplete areas of development.

CREATING SPACE

Establishing a strong developmental foundation for future free activity and will development depends on creating a thoughtful and rich environment for the child. Sensory experiences that occur through free and safe exploration rank highly in early childhood education. Room to move, careful use of language, time to explore, and rhythm in the home, for instance, are good first steps.

In our world that includes so many removed experiences, sometimes it seems that reality and creativity are taking a back seat and real hands-on, person-to-person experiences become even more necessary for healing and balancing. Dr Steiner spoke of education as being “a rescue” from materialism, which of course still exists today. It comes to mind that, in our new age, information for AI, once gleaned from human data collection, is getting so removed from human input that replicates seem to be replicating and it's possible now to move very far from humanity and from human thinking.

On Beauty:

“There are kinds of gaudy substitutes for beauty that we've become hypnotized with that are associated with that word... Beauty is an emergent function and it cannot be copied. It has to come from the infinite. And that's why I think that it is such a liberatory [sic] orienting principle. It's because of its irreducibility. And when you're just shuffling the bits, which is what AI does and to a large extent what our culture does, when you are cut off from life, from the infinity of being, then you just end up recycling things and beauty is lost. Because beauty is contextual, it has to draw from something outside of what already is.” — Charles Eisenstein

If we are to truly take on the task of Waldorf Education, then our dedication to providing complete experiences on a “slow roll” seems inherent to our teaching. One example that strengthens the sense of life, and its future connection to the thought process, is the early childhood practice of experiencing the steps for how wool for crafts is made: a trip to the sheep farm, washing the wool, carding the wool, spinning it, and then doing finger crochet. Or growing a few vegetables in the garden and then making soup with them.

Another practice is the simple and traditional morning gesture when the teacher shakes the child's hand, greets the child, and signals the human encounter by prompting the sense of touch.

We can also include here even earlier stages of childhood that are identified as immature movement patterns or reflexes and which exist for our survival. These reflexes are present in the womb and inform the movement system during the first year

of life – with some extending beyond the first year. During these early years, involuntary responses or reflexes gradually become integrated into the central nervous system. If not, the will development can be blocked and hindrances to higher levels of learning occur.

For instance, if an infant does not have sufficient “tummy time”, the core muscles are not strong, which eventually effects the senses of balance. Higher cortical functioning is dependent upon balance.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

A story I have shared previously is a personal one from one of my first years of teaching. An anthroposophical center was providing courses in the same area as my school. Many international pedagogues visited. One day it was my privilege to escort a highly regarded educator from Dornach. The bell had rung for recess. As we were going down three long flights of stairs in a narrow hallway, and approaching the outside doors, four boys came barreling down the the stairs and banged open the doors. What a ruckus.... Without thinking I followed them out, called them back in and requested that they practice how to leave the building. Of course then it dawned on me that I had left the guest standing in the hall. After I apologized he responded very emphatically “But of course you had to do that !!!! Education is bringing order to chaos.....over and over again.”

Some examples:

Chores done consistently and with care.

Being mindful of how the bean bag is caught - not grabbing but in a receiving gesture.

Care of the classroom – putting away materials, picking up bits paper, wool, etc. off the rugs each afternoon before dismissal.

When standing for an exercise, paying attention to the position - are the feet aligned with each other? etc.

LANGUAGE AND STEADFASTNESS

This example is not from Waldorf pedagogy but it conveys the importance of examining our language when we are guiding children with assignments and projects, and trying new things. It is from the “grit” movement writer Carol Dweck’s “Mindset: A new Psychology of Success”

How do you comment on work done?

Do you set a mood of “praise for effort”?

“You got 9 out of 10 right. You must have put some thought into this.”

“This handwriting is quite well-formed. I can see you were being mindful.”

Or do you praise for ability?

“You got 9 of 10 correct. You must be really smart at this”.

“This handwriting is quite beautiful– you are quite the artist.”

The first approach creates a mood of the importance of striving, putting in an extended effort. It recognizes that most accomplishments in life do not magically appear. Accomplishments are achieved through persistent attention. This is a growth mindset.

The second approach sets a mindset of praise for something innate. Praising for ability creates a mindset that if a task is not easily mastered, it is not worth working at. So basically praising for ability will hinder the will. This is a “stuck”, inflexible mindset.

We must keep in mind that some children, those with challenges or societal prejudices such as color or race, will not always be successful in the future even with dedicated striving. There is no easy answer to this. However, we can instill a pride in work that is thoughtful and mindful of process.

ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

Expectation: In *Practical Advice to Teachers*, Dr Steiner writes “ ... It will have an extraordinarily good effect on the children to have spoken to them as early as the first lesson about writing, reading and arithmetic and how they cannot do these things yet but will learn them all in school. As a result of this the hope, the wish, the resolve form in the child and through what you yourself do, he finds his way into a world of feeling that in turn acts as an incentive to the realm of the will “

Connecting to goodness, beauty and truth: How can we build the “wish” element” to do better next time? Building and strengthening the will is dependent on a living connection between the doer and what is to be done. What better way than to continue the relationship to these three pillars of inner life: goodness, beauty, and truth?

Self-observation: Children get engaged when they feel they are making or doing something that is beautiful, has a positive impact, and is truthful. This is very important. One example is how a teacher comments on written book work for an early grades child.

One might say “This B is quite beautiful... I see that it has a very straight line and even curves. I will come back and then you show me another well-made letter and tell me why you like it.”

We see in this example that the teacher is using the child's attention to recognize beauty and effort in an objective and concrete way. Where there is attention, there is an active higher self and will engagement.

Chunk: Some children need help to break down tasks into smaller doable parts. When a task is basically within their capacities the attention/will can stay engaged. One example is with form drawing.. When drawing line of curves, the harmonizing aspect will only be effective for as long as the child is engaged. Perhaps 3 curves made with full attention is better than a whole line with half of the curves sloppily done.

Planning Skills: Ask questions that reinforce inner speech such as “What do I already know about a sentence construction? What does it need?” These are the types of questions that help a child manifest the wish to do better.

Teacher's inner attitude: There is a kind of inner excitement that you are sharing what you know about the world. It's beauty and synchronicity, with the feeling that my soul joins the soul of the world.

MORALITY AND WILL

Raising the level of impulse to one of free will is strengthened when an act of kindness or a virtue is involved. So for instance, after the Extra Lesson activity of Straight Line and Lemniscate, have the child remove his/her paper from the drawing board and then tape a new clean one on the the board for the child who will use it next – even if we don't know who is arriving next.

“Gratitude is a definite moral experience in relation to our fellow men.....then from gratitude we develop the capacity for love and the feeling of duty.” Rudolf Steiner *Spiritual Ground of Education*.

“We enter with our will into our organs, and in our will we must develop a sense or feeling for what is brought to us in the way of ethics and morality.“ Rudolf Steiner: *Education for Special Needs*.

OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT HELP THE WILL

Walking forward and backward while speaking. Dr. Steiner gave this exercise which accomplishes many goals: As you walk forward, say one word with each step, For instance while carefully walking eight steps forward, say “I go the way with strength and courage.” Then feet together and pause. Then walk backwards and with each step say the sentence backwards. “Courage and strength with way the go I.”

You can use this method with spelling, times tables, hardness scale for minerals, days of the week, etc.

Form drawing: Curved lines are will builders while straight lines strengthen thinking. For more information on therapeutic drawing see *Dynamic Drawing* by Hermann Kirchner.

Provide information to parents about encouraging independence and problem solving.

Extra Lesson by Audrey McAllen. This body of work will assist children in organizing themselves and help with many situations where impulse control is lacking.

Early Childhood activities such as the game “Red Light, Green Light” or the song “My Hat It Has Three Corners” where words are left out.

For adults: In the evening, go through your day backwards. During the day, follow a common thing or food to its source – for example, when getting gas, think about how it got there: tank, truck, loading dock, refinery etc.

The will is complex, yet we have many reliable resources to help develop the will each and every day. Many of the practices are already embedded into the curriculum and other opportunities are present and ready for us to bring forward. I hope that this article, in some small way, will inspire you in your resolve to deepen your understanding of the will.

PHASES of the WILL

Notes from *Foundation of Human Experience* Rudolf Steiner Stuttgart 1919

Spirit Man	RESOLUTION When soul is freed from body functions Resolution has its seat in the Spirit Man
Spirit Self	INTENTION Wish becomes more concrete “I ought to have done better” “ I wish to do better next time“ - is something of the Spirit Self and it remains after death Mental picture of how to act influences intention Feeling and will penetrate motive Subconscious influences are also present with intention
Ego	MOTIVE Instincts, impulses and desires when taken up by ego become motive Only in humans does motive in the will develop Observe the wish element emerging, not mental image or concept We could include here the effect of when we act as the ego to instill habits so that child has motive and intention. This requires repeated practice.
Sentient Body	DESIRE Instinct and impulse are lifted into consciousness, through the influence of the sentient body, and desires arise. Has more soul character than impulse. It comes and goes.
Etheric	IMPULSE Etheric body which lives in the physical, influences instinct, and instinct becomes impulse More inward
Physical	INSTINCT Will is instinct when the bodily influences predominate. “Stamped from the outside” – think of an animal characteristic