

## Building blocks for a diverse, anti-racist Waldorf education

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How can anti-racism be anchored in Waldorf curricula in a way that sensitises students to exclusion and defamation? In addition to general empathy education, the authors advocate, among other things, dealing with racial theories that arose in the age of the European Enlightenment. For this, they suggest the ninth and twelfth grades, when the great ideas of freedom, equality and solidarity are also addressed.

"The Waldorf movement is white, wealthy and weird" - this is what African-American Monique Brinson said in an interview on *Zeit Online* in February 2020. Brinson was until recently headteacher of the first intercultural Waldorf school in the USA in Oakland/California, a public school with an extremely diverse student body of Latinos and Latinas, African-Americans, Asians, Euro-Americans and Americans. In the Waldorf movement, Brinson said in the interview, she herself is a small minority: People of colour are rare and the few that do exist come from the middle class.

With her reference to the lack of diversity, Brinson exposes a wound in the school movement. The data is scanty, but one thing is not in doubt: the most disadvantaged group in the German school system - pupils with an immigrant background from economically weak social classes - is hardly represented in Waldorf schools. The student body at Waldorf schools is relatively homogeneous and is by no means a representative sample of society, in which more than a third of the children and young people now have a migration background and/or are Germans of colour<sup>1</sup>.

It is necessary to give appropriate weight to such a statement against the backdrop of the current discourse on discrimination and racism. The view that racism is associated with Hitler, the Ku-Klux Klan and the setting on fire of refugee shelters, and that it is limited to deliberate racist acts, has rightly been exposed as inadequate in recent years. Instead, it is precisely the non-intentional forms of exclusion or discrimination of groups "on the basis of actual or ascribed biological or cultural characteristics"<sup>2</sup> that are more effective socially. In such cases, one speaks of structural racism and thus points out that forms of social rule have developed over centuries through colonialism and the nation state that systematically disadvantage people on the basis of their appearance, language, religion or origin; if this systematic disadvantage regularly occurs in certain organisations, sectors or branches - for example in the police and judiciary, in the housing and labour market or in education - this is called institutional discrimination.

Against this theoretical background, how can the Waldorf movement be classified? It cannot be denied that, with regard to the composition of the student body, selection is present here, although not intended, but it does exist in fact and it is therefore quite justified to speak of

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<sup>1</sup> There are no direct figures on this, but the latest study of graduates by Randoll and Peters shows that 97.5% of former Waldorf pupils aged 18-39 at the time of the survey grew up in a purely German-speaking home, 0.7% grew up bilingually and only 1.8% came from a non-German-speaking household, see Randoll, Dirk /Peters, Jürgen (2021): *Wir waren auf der Waldorfschule*. Weinheim Basel: Beltz Juventa, p.21

<sup>2</sup> Philomena Essed, cited in: El-Maafalani, Aladin (2021): *Wozu Rassismus? Von der Erfindung der Menschenrassen bis zum rassismuskritischen Widerstand*. (Why racism? From the invention of human races to anti-racist resistance) Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, S. 15.

institutional discrimination against people with a migration background in the context of structural racism.

In Germany, the Intercultural Waldorf Schools in Mannheim, Berlin and Dresden are trying to realise an alternative practice with far greater diversity; in addition, a working group of intercultural, socially integrative initiatives has been formed, which calls for a decidedly anti-racist Waldorf education. In this context, elements of the curriculum and the present teaching materials are also to be critically questioned. First considerations and examples are given.

The curriculum offers children and young people the opportunity to deal with the developmental tasks that lie ahead. Some of these tasks are biographical and have to do with the ability to build stable and coherent identities, while others are in the social and cultural field and relate to the skills and knowledge necessary for peaceful coexistence in society. Considering that we live in a culturally diverse and multiply interconnected world, these are the skills of empathy and narrative empathy (the ability to tell another's story from their perspective), an understanding of cultural, religious and ideological diversity, and the capacity for democratic participation.

In this context, holistic learning should be pursued, involving the whole person, not just the intellect; children learn through imitation, participation in social practices and, above all, through their emotional lives. This means that they need teachers who model cultural diversity and school cultures that are truly inclusive. It also means that the material in which adolescents are immersed includes cultural and gender diversity. In view of this objective, some of the traditional teaching content will need to be reviewed and possibly modified. In history, for example, the challenge is to teach events from a "pluriversal" and thus also post-colonial perspective.

For the Middle Ages, this could mean including African history. Then the kingdom of Mansa Musa (1312 -1337) in Mali and West Africa would have to be dealt with, whose capital Timbuktu was one of the centres of Islamic scholarship; the king himself - so several sources report - was pious, generous and immensely rich and spent so much gold on a pilgrimage to Mecca that the price of gold lost considerable value as a result of the sudden gold glut. Or there would be the extensive transcultural trade with its centre in Asia to be dealt with, which already took place around the year 1000 and in which an Arab ship, built without metal from wood and cordage, coming from Bengal, sank at Intan in the Java Sea, loaded with a cargo of tin ingots from Indonesia, industrial Chinese ceramics and mirrors, Buddhist and Hindu objects, the remains of ornamental doors from India, cast-iron pots, glass beads from Arabia and gold jewellery from Cambodia. The major religious movements - indigenous religiosity, Chinese religiosity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam - should also be taught, not only to provide a basis for understanding the cultures that have been shaped by these ideas, but also to sensitise students to the interconnectedness and interdisciplinary nature of these religions and cultures<sup>3</sup>.

It should also be considered that a large part of our current global situation is the direct or indirect consequence of European colonialism. Therefore, the colonial era and its consequences for those affected should be dealt with in detail from grade 7 onwards and

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<sup>3</sup> See Schmelzer, Albert / Schmitt, Angelika (2021): Die Weltreligionen – Vielfalt und Zusammenklang. Stuttgart: edition waldorf. This important book should be urgently translated into English (MR).

brought into a direct connection with the problems we are confronted with in today's culturally diversified-networked and yet polarised world.

Furthermore, it seems useful and necessary to deal with the racial theories that emerged in the age of the European Enlightenment and were differentiated in the 19th century. This could be done, for example, in grade 9 and then in more detail in grade 12, when the great ideas of freedom, equality and solidarity are also addressed. For racism represents something like a shadow image of these impulses; its emergence makes clear that the revolutionary struggles for human rights in America, and in France were initially driven by privileged whites, that numerous People of Colour were excluded from them, and that their struggle for emancipation still continues today. At the same time the truly revolutionary uprising of African slaves and indentured servants on Haiti (1791-1804), as well as the resistance of Native peoples across many European colonies, and the impact of these on America and Europe has been neglected by the curriculum. Likewise, the fate of those nations that gained their independence and the long legacy of postcolonial struggles are rarely mentioned. History teaching today should make young people aware of these historical processes.

Some teachers may see little need to address racism because they believe that Waldorf education is per se non-discriminatory. In doing so, they point to Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of freedom, which sees the development towards individuality - beyond gender and ethnicity - as the crucial element of modern humanity. As true as such a statement is, it seems essential to add that Rudolf Steiner also formulated the motto of social ethics, according to which healthy social conditions can only come into being if the whole community - and this can also mean the world community - is reflected in the soul of the individual<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Waldorf teachers should take the struggles against institutional racism, gender discrimination and economic marginalisation seriously and lead them (as victims or allies), and Waldorf students should understand what racism is and how it still works. As Susan Arndt writes:

For centuries, white people kept white spaces white without being bothered by racist (speech) acts or the underrepresentation of BIPoC. Not invited in the first place, BIPoC could not even be uninvited. In the end, the cancel culture debate is about white indignation, about feeling that traditional privileges - such as an independent presence, power of definition over spaces and discourses, and freedom of action in the direction of those discriminated against - are being called into question (2021, p.417)<sup>5</sup>.

The Waldorf school movement cannot stay out of the debate on racism, only (and precisely) because it does not consider itself racist. Klett Verlag, one of the largest publishers of educational textbooks, is revising all its publications from a postcolonial point of view. Even a textbook on the geography of Africa was modified in 2021 to change terminology and perspectives (<https://www.klett.de/alias/1141261>). Do the Waldorf publishers do the same?

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<sup>4</sup> See Rudolf Steiner Social Ethic: "The healthy social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community is shaped, and when in the community lives the strength of each human soul." cited in "Understanding the Human Being", selected writings of Rudolf Steiner, Edited by Richard Seddon, Rudolf Steiner Press, Bristol, 1993,

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, Susan (2021): Rassismus begreifen. (Understanding Racism) München: C.H. Beck.