A child-centred approach to education

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Presented at the Novalis Conference: A Chance for every Child

November 2014

We have come here to talk about education and the children and particularly about envisioning and creating a bright future for the children.

I ask myself what I see when I look into many classrooms in South Africa?

I see lots and lots of assessment happening, testing has been intensified. The fear of failing has become a national paranoia and so the children suffer, by being tested and prodded, measured and sifted – and they are continuously found wanting. Because of these FATs (formals assessment tasks), ANAs (annual national assessments) and systemic tests, teachers find themselves teaching to the tests and not the children.

I see the curriculum becoming more and more fragmented, segmented, inappropriate according to age and development. It is narrow and dry.

I see teachers who are no longer creators of what happens in the classroom, but rather passively delivering pre-packaged bundles of knowledge in the form of worksheets, formal assessment tasks, ready-made answers, all driven by national directives. Teachers have become de-professionalised as they are no longer trusted to make decisions on content and pace according to the needs that they see in their individual classes. They are given prescribed time-frames for subjects, unrealistic time-table structures and content guidelines that do not speak to the realities in their classrooms.

I see children, who start off bright-eyed, excited and keen, become anxious, bored and disaffected. They fear for their safety on the playground as well as in the classroom, where they are verbally or emotionally abused, by teachers and classmates.

I see that play, movement, the arts, singing and other forms of creative expression so critical to a holistic, healthy development are compartmentalised, devoid of fun, innovation and imagination, and many times absent.

I see that teachers are struggling with issues such as discipline, lack of support, financial constraints, and parental disinterest.

I see a tightening of authority, hierarchy and control from education departments both local and national.

I see attempts to improve the skills and understanding in mathematics and literacy failing and children leaving school with very poor skills in basic writing and comprehension.

I see that better resourced schools are managing better, they are cracking the assessment codes, drawing on parental support and producing capable, but often disengaged students, while many disadvantaged schools are targeted as underperforming schools, they are compliant and lacking in leadership or autonomy.

But I also see schools that are trying to make a difference, desperately looking at ways of disengaging their children from the cycle of poverty and trying to find a brighter future.

And it is for this reason that we are also here – to see how we can be part of breaking this terrible downward spiral to bring to the children in our country the possibility of a brighter future.

I have been asked to talk about a child-centred approach to education.

The grim picture that I just painted does not indicate a child-centred approach, it is not even a teacher-centred approach – rather it directs us to a curriculum & assessment-centred approach. This is clearly exposed in the new CAPS system that South Africa has adopted: Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement. Its focus is on <u>what</u> teachers teach and <u>how</u> they assess it. It is not really about <u>how</u> they teach and very little about <u>who</u> they teach.

This approach has given rise to the situation in which the educational context finds itself. With the total overhaul of education in a new South African democracy the pendulum has gone back and forth over the past twenty years, but we just don't seem to find the right balance or solution to education. No one knows what to do to fix it. More money, textbooks, teacher training in assessment strategies, pre-packaged curriculum resources; white-boards, computers, etc. are brought in to help fix the problem. But it is not working.

It is clear that a more creative approach is needed.

This call does not only come from us here South Africa. There is a global call for a more creative, child-centred approach to teaching and learning. A child-centred approach is not new. It is described by traditional voices such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Locke, Dewey and Montessori, etc. who saw the child at the centre of the learning environment, active, involved, while the teacher facilitates the learning process in a safe and enabling environment. These educationalists promoted a rights-based education, an education based on own interest and self activities, freedom of expression and pace, holistic development of the child, experiential learning, the child at the centre of the whole education process, with the teacher as guide and observer.

A child-centred approach is developed to respect and acknowledge the child's point of view, needs, aptitudes and interests. It is a process in which the child is an active participant in the learning process and the uniqueness of each individual is respected and considered.

However, we need to be cautious here. A child-centred approach could be misinterpreted and misconstrued and lead to an unhealthy approach which allows children to develop in an egocentric way, often with a disregard for the 'whole'. The initiators and proponents of child-centred education, who talked about children learning from their own experience, brought a revolutionary approach to education, but what has happened is that it has become an ideology. It has become another formula to follow, an academic description of how children and teachers need to relate to each other and interact. In many cases, teachers are taking a back seat, they are in the background as facilitators and observers - directors to this education that happens outside of them. This leads us from the one extreme where the teacher was the 'sage on the stage', to a situation where the teacher is completely out of the scene. The teacher is just observing, not participating and often abdicating. Being child-centred is not about putting the child on a pedestal at the centre on their own; rather it is about meeting each child appropriately and developmentally.

So is there a balance? Is there a healthy child-centred approach, with a healthy role for the teacher as well? I would like to propose that there is.

Even though there are other very significant child-centred approaches to education, I would very simply like to describe a form of education, that I am and have been deeply part of as a teacher, a parent and now as a teacher trainer.

I would like to describe how the Waldorf curriculum is child-centred in ten practical ways:

1. Understanding the whole human being

The first way is that the teacher works with a dynamic understanding of the human being; not only as a physical, emotional and intellectual being, but also spirit-filled being. When you look at a child and you connect soul to soul, your attitude and feeling toward the child is very different. You meet on equal terms and with reverence. This changes the way you work; it tempers your approach to discipline, it asks that you truly connect, it calls on you to find solutions, and it helps you to be a better teacher.

> Naturally, one cannot educate adequately if one is unable to have a **feeling for the whole human being** in one's mind. (…) …if **you have this feeling, which engenders a deep reverence – then you will see that through the presence of such a feeling you can accomplish more than through any amount of intellectual theorising about what should be done.** The teacher's feelings are the most important means of education and this reverence can have an immeasurable formative influence

upon the child. (…). *Rudolf Steiner, Lecture 16.9.1920 (German edition GA 322a, p., 25, 28.)*

2. Working out of an understanding of the developmental phases of the child

The teacher understands the developmental phases of children and meets those phases through an age appropriate and flexible curriculum, suitable environment, good, healthy gestures, activities and expectations. The phases of childhood which spans over three seven-year phases each signify a certain awakening of consciousness within the child. And the teacher and the curriculum need to meet these phases with right knowledge and right approaches. However, just as the child develops, grows and changes over the different phases, the teacher too needs to change. The kindergarten child, who learns through imitation, needs a curriculum that promotes goodness and a teacher who acts as a model in the way she thinks, moves and speaks. She needs to be a person that the child can freely imitate. The primary child, who learns through imagination, needs beauty and a teacher who is a leader; the captain of the team, promoting fairness and discipline. The children need someone that they can trust, someone who is passionate and brings beauty and creativity, but someone they can follow with pride. The adolescent, who learns through exploration and judgment, needs truth on knowledge of the world and self. The teacher at this stage needs to be an expert in their subject, an enthusiast who inspires and brings healthy balance between inner and outer knowledge.

3. The Four Temperaments

When children come to primary school, they start to reveal their temperaments. There is a diversity of temperaments: choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine, melancholic that the teacher works with in a flexible and creative way, not boxing or labeling children, but using it as another window to understanding the complex child. Stories, content, work activities, remedial intervention and class discipline are all informed by an understanding of the temperaments.

4. Building community through structure and rhythm

The day is structured around the needs of children and not the needs of the curriculum. So it starts off not around the single child, but the communities of children and their relationship to each other. The day begins socially and culturally to renew the relationships between children to cultivate learning relationships as well as learning atmospheres, joyous learning atmospheres, through songs, verses and morning movement activities. That is really the warm cocoon wherein learning can grow. The structure and rhythm of the day brings security and builds resilience through exercising good habits and routines.

5. Writing and Reading

The fifth way is more specific. It deals with reading and writing. Actually writing and reading. In conventional syllabus and curriculum centred schools, children are expected to read before they write and they are reading things that are written by somebody else. But in the Waldorf curriculum

children learn to write before they learn to read and so the first thing they read is their own writing. What they create is valued. This is child-centred.

6. Following the pace of the child

This is seen in the careful, creative and imaginative process of getting children to read. Children are not marched to the beat of the curriculum, in terms of when they are supposed to read. Although it is done within a class, children who don't take quickly to reading are not pushed to read early, but are encouraged to read at their own pace even if it takes them another year – and this is okay. Each child's pace will be met and respected. The critical thing about the early years of education is not what they learn, but that they love learning. And so, if by the age of eleven or so they are finally reading fluently, they are not resentful, they've learnt to love reading. And that will last them for the rest of their lives.

7. Daily reflection and mindfulness

The seventh aspect, which might seem a little mysterious to the average teacher, is the mindfulness that each teacher has for each child and the evening ritual of lighting a candle and letting the thought of the child and memory of the child and day pass through the mind's eyes of the teacher. Just to be present for each child. Each child is thought about at the end of everyday – so where a child has struggled the teacher can spend a little time thinking about that child, and what he or she might need to do to meet that child for the next day.

8. Small beginnings

The eighth aspect might seem rather small, but small beginnings are often critical in shaping the rest of the process, the rest of the journey of the day. The children coming into the class at the start of the day are individually greeted and looked at directly and at the end of the day are bid goodbye. It's not just: 'Morning class', 'Goodbye class', but it's 'Good morning Bea', 'Goodbye Mzwai'. There is a personal connection. In the process of greeting the teacher establishes her place in the group as the leader, but also acknowledges the value and individuality of each child. This intimate moment of contact is a time for teacher and child to share quick snippets of news or information and to have the one-on-one opportunity to really 'see' each other.

9. Observation and reports

In conventional schools the reports and evaluations are very standard formats. For Waldorf teachers the process of child observation and writing reports is much more than monitoring and evaluation. It is a very personal, caring relationship that aims to be developmental rather than instrumental. Throughout the year the teacher observes and gets to know each child well and the final year-end report is written that is unique to every child. It is not standard formats or marks that matter, but rather a documented reflection of the child's journey over the school year. The report is written for the child to read and refers back to moments of inspiration, challenges and triumphs experienced. Even though the report is addressed to the child, the parent is consciously held and

included in the report process. So the child is given feedback and it is centred on the child, not just the parent.

10. Life verses

At the beginning of every year each child is given a life or birthday verse. This verse is written or found to meet the particular challenge of the child, whatever the child is facing. The child learns that verse and says it once a week (on the day he/she was born) for the whole year in front of the whole class. The child ideally stands on his own, in his own space, while the rest of the class listens respectfully and supportively. This verse which is written with specially chosen rhythms, images and structure to meet the need of the child and to enable growth and transformation within the child, also benefits the class as a whole.

These ten ways are just a small sample of child-centred understanding and moments that build up the learning and teaching environment.

However, we need to be careful of the notion of child-centered education, because the word 'child' implies individual child, but we must realise that the other side of that the child is a social being and he/she can only be a child with other children. Children learn to be themselves in the company of other children and so to develop the child, we must develop the children - and so the social, the relational, both inside out and outside in and between children is as important as the particular focus we give to meet every child. The children's relationship to each other is as important as the relationship between each child and teacher.

The Waldorf teacher is both on the centre stage and the periphery. The teacher is there to model for the children what a good, moral, upstanding human being should be. The teacher needs to model good relationships, good behaviour, good work ethic, kindness. The teacher needs to model care and concern by the way she works with the children. So the children observe her – and this is a major difference with this approach.

There are times when the teacher stands back and facilitates, but again it is not an ideology. Where it is appropriate it happens. And where it is appropriate for the teacher to step forward it happens, so that there is a movement, fluidity and weaving in the teaching and learning process. And depending on what has to be met in the child, the teacher will place the child in the centre, but not in the centre on his or her own. The teacher places the child within the centre within the whole class community - and the teacher is part of that whole and so there is complete integration of teacher and children.

The child is in the centre - in that the teacher understands the child - and the teacher and the children learn together in a free space, not dominated by tests and scores, not dominated by national directives or the child's demands or the economic needs of the society. The teacher works

very strongly out of Rudolf Steiner's indication to *'receive the child in reverence, educate in love and send forth in freedom'*.

This approach to educating the child in love is about children not having been dictated to, not having been given the formulas, children not having been given the solutions, but that they - out of their own free will can make decisions about their life because they have gone through a whole communal process of learning in a communal way - of understanding the whole and not just the parts. They have the whole picture, their decisions and how they go out into the world - and go freely out into the world - comes from a place that is not broken, but rather comes from a place that is whole.

That is what a teacher aspires to – that her children can go into the world freely - as independent, confident young people. But free as well that they can dare to be creative, dare to be different. They can be free to choose what they want to do with their lives.

The conventional notion of the 'free child' is that the child is free to explore whimsically and without structure - a kind of laissez faire notion of freedom - whereas what the Waldorf system is trying to do is to cultivate freedom within the child as a creative discipline - so it's not an irresponsible freedom, but freedom that is responsible – not unrestricted freedom, but an empowered freedom.

So what does this mean for us here who want to create a bright future for our children, all children?

It is about the little things that create connection between teachers and children (greeting each other) and then it's about the big attitudes and ways of being; the real observation of children, the reverent reflection and intervention to ensure their well being, to create safe, open free spaces for learning, physically, emotionally and intellectually. It means to acknowledge children's feelings ideas and fears and hopes with respect and openness, building self-esteem and self-confidence. It is about a true understanding of the child and of giving authentic feedback which builds rather than diminishes. It is about knowing that children have their own truth and reality and accepting it without prejudice. It is about inclusion and building community. It is about love.

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In 2000, she became the Class One teacher at Michael Oak Waldorf School and completed her seven-year cycle in 2006. During her sabbatical year she was asked to teach some study units at the CCE and has been there ever since as a lecturer and course leader. In 2014 she graduated with a Masters in Higher Education Studies at UCT.

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