



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcfsare.2019.3.206-210>

## MCDSARE: 2019

### International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

#### BEST PRACTICES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE FABLE USING THE WALDORF METHOD

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#### *Abstract*

Waldorf education is an alternative education system which brings out pupils' qualities, which are defined as cognitive-emotional skills and capacities, as well as artistic talents, in order to neutralise/combat negative states stemming from harmful emotional experiences. Teacher Janet Lansbury claims that there is no such thing as a bad child; there are just adults who are insufficiently informed, as well as mentally and emotionally unprepared to cope with the manifestations of the new generation of children. The Waldorf school attempts to solve these issues and provide the system with an alternative based on understanding divine creation by starting from the physical elements encountered in nature. The primordial existence of the child in the universe and his/her arrival into the world constitute the basis of the emotional manifestations he/she experiences throughout life. Moreover, subjectively judging a child by permanently harbouring negative thoughts leads to such thoughts being unconsciously conveyed to the child by the adult, as the human brain possesses the capacity to transfer impulses through the sphere of the universe. The traditional education system has registered minor changes by adopting alternative practices in order to encourage wellness among pupils. That is why, in the present article, we have set out to document the observations made following a German language lesson at a state school in Bucharest, a lesson focused on teaching and learning a fable based on the ideas of the Waldorf alternative education system.

**Keywords:** fable; waldorf school; alternative system; teaching; learning;

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The literature regarding the Waldorf system encourages teaching the fable in second grade, when students are aged 7 to 9. In reality, the fable is studied in the pupils' mother tongue, but the foreign language teacher may introduce it a year later, in third grade, when pupils' capacity of understanding has increased.



This age is characterised by Bernard Lievegoed as being the onset of an awakening: a child's thinking is capable of developing personalised visions which move from perception to image-based thought. Pupils create a closed world for themselves with inaccurate, mobile, fluctuating, active inner images. This stage emphasises memory, representation, the pleasure of rhythmic repetition, imitation. In this stage, the foreign language teacher helps children develop their capacity to receive, convey, and understand oral messages through songs, poems, games, storytelling, short conversations. The principles of foreign language teaching and learning stated by the disciples of the Waldorf school entail the following: experiencing and imitating, practising and learning, seizing on connections (Richter, 1995, p. 121). Under such circumstances, the teacher must prove very skilful – he/she needs to be an artist, a poet, a creator, as pupils expect him/her to offer vivid, action-filled stories in a manner which should enable life truths to make their way into their inner world (Lievegoed, 2011).

According to the Explicative Dictionary of the Romanian Language for Educational Purposes (Dicționarului Explicativ Școlar al Limbii Române) (2003), a fable is defined as a short allegorical story in which the author uses personified animals and objects to portray moral truths by satirising vices and traits of the human character with the aim of correcting them.

Fables make use of allegory, narration, and dialogue, description being of secondary importance or even absent. The action in a fable is reduced in size and based on a strong conflict followed by an unmediated denouement. The ending is highlighted through a moral, which can be either explicit – stated by the author – or implicit – deduced by the reader after having read the story.

The relationship between children's developmental stages and the features of the fable play a significant role in the psycho-emotional training and development of pupils aged 7 to 9. Observing certain attitudes and behaviours, understanding and verbalising them, are abilities which will naturally make their way into a child's senses and experiences. Rudolf Steiner (1977, p. 90) affirms in a study that 'talking via sounds is a localisation of total human activity'.

Third-grade pupils find themselves on the threshold between second and fourth grade, between imitation and the development of ample thinking. With children this age, a teacher will be faced with restless, aggressive (especially during breaks) and curious pupils. This phenomenon is caused by the so-called Rubicon developmental stage, which pupils experience unconsciously at the age of 8-9.

The Rubicon stage becomes manifest once children have changed their teeth and physical appearance, which leads to states of unrest, frustrations, and unusual behaviours in pupils. In the 21st century, Rubicon sets in earlier, starting with the age of 7-8, and manifests itself more intensely compared to the age of 9 – which was established by Rudolf Steiner in the 20th century.

This has been mentioned in order to enable the teacher to understand the importance of the fable and to anticipate potential psycho-emotional manifestations in the pupils. Representation, interpretation, and the involvement of the pupils in the learning act offer new perspectives and vivid spiritual experiences to children.

Animals play an important part in the psychological and psychosomatic development of pupils. According to the aspects of nature, which were created by divinity, human character harmoniously intertwines with the characteristics of the animals, insects, and objects out in the world.

A pupil's desire to know himself/herself and to understand the world around is kindled by the teacher's positive and enthusiastic attitude, meant to stir his/her curiosity. As noted by Tobias Richter (2001), a 7-9 year-old pupil is subconsciously marked by the following questions: 'can you really see me?', 'can you help me meet the world?' and guides the teacher in the search for the right answer within the latter's practice with his/her pupils.

The experiences of adults are bland, unimaginative and lack the stylistic embellishments of storytelling. Through fables, pupils discover truths and features identical to those in the world around them, which makes it easier for them to find themselves and recognise their own actions.

Fables help pupils realise that the positive and negative situations occurring in other worlds are identical to those in their own world. The novelties which permeate a pupil's spirit give the teacher the chance to remind the pupil that the latter should not behave like 'the fox' or 'the lion' in the story. Pupils enjoy identifying with the outside world more than being compared to their classmates.

Highlighting characteristics borrowed from animals and objects offers pupils the possibility of correcting their negative attitude, as, to the difference of adults, most children are endowed with a love for animals.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

When it comes to discipline, primary, middle and high school teachers are faced with classrooms full of digital pupils, who often have inadequate interests for their age and are mentally tired, upset, irritated, spoiled, and disrespectful. To what extent are all these characteristics analysed in real time? How many of the traits mentioned above pertain to mental illness, age characteristics or negative emotional experiences? Ross W. Green (2014) finds that the emotional manifestations experienced by pupils are caused by certain undeveloped skills.

As far as studying foreign languages is concerned, the traditional education system directs modern-German teachers strictly towards the development of communication in the foreign language. According to the Communication in the Modern Language 1 ('Comunicare în limba modernă 1') curriculum, pupils must be able to react to the teacher's instructions, recognise the position in space and the name of objects, show curiosity regarding the topic of a film, song or image, give renditions of short messages, songs or poems, participate in group activities involving creativity – carrying out projects such as posters, advertisements, congratulation cards, collages, photo albums. For the third grade, the following requirements are added: answering the question regarding the topic of the text..., choosing the right answer, answering questions with 'true' or 'false', carrying out simple tasks on the computer, choosing a suitable image to illustrate the meaning of the text, deciphering simple messages from their classmates, friends, teachers, filling in the gaps in a text, writing short messages, SMS messages, wishes on congratulation cards, etc.

To the difference of the traditional education system, which promotes the development of cognition, the Waldorf school capitalises on openness towards the principles of nature, which involve physical growth in harmony with nature. Based on this idea, this alternative education system stresses the child's personal development and the development of what the child represents on a spiritual level.

The teacher has the obligation to combine teaching and learning with the spiritual education and development of pupils while avoiding technological means. Pupils' development must be based on their own images, without being subject to influences.

However, despite the fact that parents seek alternative ideas for the education of their children, external factors – such as activities involving technology or fast food – influence them and make them stray from that which they truly want for their child and from that which the Waldorf school teaches them. Based on discussions with the parents and observations gathered in a report, the teacher has the task and capacity to improve the behaviour of a difficult pupil, provided that the former also takes serious steps to that effect on a spiritual level.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTION

Our research has been carried out with the purpose of providing beginner teachers the chance to realise that German language classes can be held in a creative manner, based on the ages and temperaments of the pupils, while still observing the school curriculum.

The questions posed as part of our research were limited to determining to what extent the learning process can be combined with discipline. To what extent can we have a German language lesson during which a pupil can develop that which he/she already possesses, i.e. the capacity to learn foreign languages?

As a German proverb says, 'Aller Anfang ist schwer.' – all beginnings are hard, yet one might say that they are also the most important. The teacher, who masters the art of instruction, has the capacity to make a pupil love discipline.

## 4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Involving third-grade classes in this research has constituted a step forward in the way of innovation in a Bucharest state school. The school curriculum was not completely abandoned, as the teacher did take into account the skills, applications, and proposals suggested in it.

The Waldorf school grants pupils the trust they deserve: repetition is carried out constantly through various activities and the general disposition of the class is permanently monitored. Information must be given time to 'rest' between lessons; thus, it will not be insisted on up to the point of exhausting the children.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODS

Throughout the German language classes, the observation method, activities, applications, and mobility and communication development exercises were employed. Pupils who were part of the traditional education system were involved in Waldorf-style activities, were monitored throughout the German lesson and asked to express their opinions at the end.

During the organisation part, the German language teacher introduced the rhythmic aspect which Rudolf Steiner claims in his studies kindles pupils' will and prepares them to receive the new knowledge that the day brings.

The German language lesson was carried out in a creative manner. Pupils worked together as part of the activities proposed by the teacher. The aim of the lesson was to move from one activity to the next in a natural way, so that pupils should feel the safety of knowing what they have to do and so that what they do should have an inner motivation, stemming from their own will.

The teacher advised the pupils to allow themselves to be led by their instincts, by what they feel.

Conveying, receiving and understanding a fable in German at this age is possible by following the stages below:

- processing the fable (which requires knowledge, creativity and skill on the part of the teacher). This implies modifying the original text, so that the teacher can present the pupils with a fable made up of accessible elements of vocabulary and items of grammar which are usable in conversation and can thus be perceived, pronounced, and memorised by pupils;
- the reading, reciting and dramatisation of the text by the teacher;
- creating images and turning them into representations starting from the text of the fable;
- performing a choral reading of the text, involving the students in the act of receiving and perceiving the topic, the action, and the behavioural traits featured;
- involving the students in the learning act by using role playing and creative exercises for the stimulation of language and the mobilisation of thinking.

The German language teacher focused on the fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper* during four German language classes, by employing the following activities:

- revising the previous lesson, 'Autumn' (pupils recalled the names of insects, animals, fruits, vegetables and other elements in nature);
- puppetry (creating a short play – the teacher silently handled a plush ant and grasshopper);
- encouraging the pupils to answer the question 'what have you noticed?';
- repeating the play (the teacher repeats the play using mimicking, gestures, and a short text drafted based on the pupils' ideas);
- encouraging pupils to repeat the text after the teacher and watch the play;
- encouraging the pupils to come up with a title for the story;
- portraying the characters by drawing them on a white sheet of paper;
- stimulating the pupils' sensitivity with the aid of the songs 'Herbststurm' and 'Max, der Igel, liebt den Winterschlaf', tapping the beat;
- reciting the fable with the adequate intonation in front of the class; doing a choral reading of the fable; reading the fable and dramatising it together with the pupils; doing choral readings of the fable to express different moods; the fable was sung in canon, the teacher being the one who proposed the tune;
- the didactic game 'the snake' (identifying sentences by delimiting words), the find-a-word puzzle (identifying words on the vertical and horizontal axes within a square grid containing letters), the Memory game, identifying images (which the teacher places on a desk) related to the text titled 'What is missing?' – identifying the images containing the scenes which are missing, dictation (one pupil reads while his/her desk mate draws);
- role playing – the children perform the play individually, as a group, or divided by rows.

## 6. FINDINGS

These German language classes, which spanned a short period of time, gave students the possibility to become acquainted with a different way of carrying out a lesson.

During the applied lessons, the following aspects were noted: cheerful, curious pupils, willing to learn and open to receive what the teacher had to offer. During the following German language classes, pupils felt compelled to ask: 'are we playing the game we played last time?'

Preparing the German language lesson gave the teacher the chance to carry out detailed research, find online pages with didactic materials, articles, and books on various topics characteristic of the Waldorf school. All this helped the teacher enhance his/her experience and didactic competence.

To the difference of the traditional education system, this alternative system kept the pupils in a constant state of physical and intellectual mobility. Based on the author's own experience, a teacher's lack of creativity bores pupils and makes them talk during classes.

## 7. CONCLUSION

According to Adrian Condrea, who teaches at the Waldorf School in Iași, the teacher has a moral duty, namely that of conveying more than just knowledge. Teaching a lesson using the Waldorf approach entails the use of diversified materials and activities, so that pupils should permanently have the feeling and impression that 'something new is going on at school'.

Being in constant motion can generate spiritual changes in pupils. Irrespective of the education system they are in – traditional or alternative, pupils love fairytales, stories, discoveries, and openness towards nature and all that is new.

All that a teacher needs to do is instil curiosity in pupils. With that in mind, pupils must be aware of one golden rule promoted by this alternative system: if the teacher offers something, then the pupil has the duty to offer something in return – in our case, the pleasure of participating in activities, of acquiring knowledge in a natural way, and of proving his/her knowledge and inner abilities by answering the teacher's questions.

Enriching the school curriculum with innovative teaching and learning suggestions and activities helps beginner teachers develop in a positive, free, and original way. Teachers are advised to emphasise the search for solutions and avoid labelling.

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