

## Learning about relationships, sexuality, gender and identity in Waldorf education: possible curriculum solutions

Martyn Rawson

### Introduction

The question of relationships, sexuality, gender and identity are central questions in education and like all important questions of curriculum, they have to be addressed in the context of the world we live in today, which has very different conditions to those when Waldorf education was first developed. We therefore have to review and adapt the curriculum in response to new developmental tasks.

This paper outlines the aims of Waldorf education in this area of life and then suggests some new curriculum approaches.

### The aims of Waldorf education

Waldorf education supports each child and young person to build healthy relationships to her own body, to other people and to the world. It does this within the framework of its overall aims of enabling children and young people in their socialization, qualification and individuation.

### Socialisation

From the perspective of socialization this means learning to be at home and at ease within one's own body. This is the basis for forming healthy relationships to others. Socialisation includes learning about personal space and social tact and includes the language we use to refer to our bodies. This means learning how to respect and appreciate our bodies and all their parts, even those belonging to our private and intimate sphere and which may be governed by tabus and feelings of shame. Socialisation also includes understanding, appreciating and respecting difference among people related to the shape, size and appearance of their bodies, to their gender orientation and cultural behaviour or social distinctions.

### Qualification

In terms of qualification, this involves learning the dispositions, bodily habits and habits of mind, skills and knowledge to understand our bodies and how to care for them. It means learning about sexuality and gender roles in the past and today and in different societies and being able to communicate using this knowledge both verbally and in text and image. Being able to articulate our identities is also an important skill. There are many aspects of biology and social and cultural behaviour that children and young people need to learn about both directly but also though being able to access literature and information about this field of human life. It is also important to be able to engage in dialogue both with this literature and with other people.

### Individuation

Beyond skills and knowledge, education has the central task of creating spaces in which young people can take steps in their individual development as people. We live in an age in which the most important task of each individual is to develop a higher consciousness that

enables them to act as ethical individuals beyond duty, the moral tenets of religion, cultural and inherited social values, whilst paying respect to these. We must first learn to recognize what sex, gender, skin colour, age, language, religion, social status and origin actually mean for us and for other people and then be able to look beyond these identities and try to recognize the other as a person. We need to cultivate the narrative empathy to listen to another's life story and be able to tell this story ourselves, to be an advocate for the other if they wish us to be so. We also have to learn to accept the choice of gender, lifestyle, family arrangements and religious practice that others make, even their political views. We don't have to agree with them and we don't have to like them but we do have to recognize their right to those choices and engage in dialogue with them not from a position of knowing better (even when we think we do) but respectfully at eye-level. And if the other is young and still at school, we have to acknowledge their identity struggles and encourage and support them in their explorations and to give them unmistakable signals that this searching and questing is normal and good.

Schools have to take this attitude towards people and create learning situations, in which we can "elicit the individuality from the other- if we're able to call it forth and make room for all that is truly is" (Romero, 2017, 31). In terms of individuation, young people have to learn to make take responsibility for their behaviour, to form judgements based on insight and to act in ethically responsible ways. In becoming a responsible grown-up, a young person needs to be able to construct coherent and stable identities, including gender identities, whilst having empathic respect and understanding for other people with different identities.

Waldorf education pursues these aims in age-appropriate ways and in ways that respond to the questions posed by the child and young person's developmental tasks, that is, the challenges that each individual faces in becoming an autonomous person in the given social and cultural context.

In early years this means providing children with a safe environment in which they can experience moral role models who act in natural and authentic ways and engage in appropriate and meaningful social and cultural practices. Children need the opportunity to experience individual adults at ease with their own bodies and gender identities, whatever they are. They should also have the opportunity to experience adults interacting in respectful and constructive ways with each other. Once children come to school and up until puberty, they need to develop long-term relationships with a range of teachers - the class teacher and the subject teachers and to experience them working as a team together. These adults guide them in learning across all fields, both in terms of formal learning and informal and social learning. The primary role of the teachers in this phase of school is to model how people engage with the world and learn how they come to feel at ease with their bodies and the world, thereby establishing dispositions to life-long resilience and habits that help regulate appropriate behaviour.

The curriculum and in particular the story material should offer many examples of relationships of all kinds. Through puberty and adolescence, young people learn to encounter the world through the perspectives of disciplinary perspectives (e.g. historical, literary, artistic, scientific, practical work-based ways of see the world). At this age they need opportunities to explore and construct identities and learn to recognize their biographical

intentions. Up until puberty the approach is largely indirect. From puberty onwards, the approach needs to be explicit.

The generative principle in the field of relationships, sexuality and gender can be articulated as follows:

Each child and young person needs to develop a healthy relationship to her own body, a respectful interest in the other and powers of agency, in order to establish a basis for socially responsible freedom.

### Curriculum matters

Curriculum refers to the whole educational approach, not just what is taught, but also how it is taught, when and where (Bransby and Rawson, 2020). As in many cross-curricular themes such as media pedagogy or science, the developmental approach leads to an essentially indirect approach up to puberty (or the end of class 5) and thereafter an increasingly explicit approach. What follows are a few specific suggestions, though not an entire curriculum. In many respects taking gender into account is closely related to de-colonizing the curriculum and so many of the points mentioned here refer to the whole area of non-discrimination.

### Early years

Children need to experience multi-role models among the adults around. Children should not have a gender role imposed on them at this age, with expectations of what boys and girls are supposed to be. Young children should be allowed, for example, to choose their clothing from a range of gender-neutral items and not corrected if they choose other gender clothes. In any case, non-discriminatory language should be cultivated, especially in relation to the body. One can avoid a sense of shame about bodily functions by cultivating healthy and hygienic habits, together with the self-evident reinforcement of socially acceptable behaviour (i.e. behaviour that the kindergarten as an institution determines to be socially acceptable and that is communicated as such to the parents). Certainly, non-discriminatory language should be cultivated and particularly in relation to the body. What adults consider intimate body parts for young children should be seen as another body part such as hands and eyes and named accordingly, as penis, vulva and anus. What families call these body parts and their functions is a matter for the family, kindergarten and school have another function socially and linguistically, forming a safe place between home and the larger world. Likewise unhealthy behaviour can also be dealt with in friendly matter of facts ways (“we don’t do that”) followed by distraction to other activities. Toys and dolls should not be one-sidedly gendered (or skin colour) and while we are at it, crayons should include black and white and paper may be of different colours and shapes and not merely reflect standard sizes.

### Lower school

In the lower school, up to and including class 5, the school should try to ensure that there is a balance of gender among the teachers and if teachers are homosexual, this fact should neither be hidden nor emphasized but rather treated as normal. In the younger classes it is important to establish healthy classroom practices in which children learn to listen to each other, respect each other’s space and possessions and learn that helping each other is both expected and normal (i.e. and therefore does not need to be rewarded or praised). Inclusion and acceptance

need to be lived and practiced, rather than talked about in a moral sense, though talking is also important when things need to be addressed.

Story material is a very important field in which social diversity needs to be represented, including a balance of gender roles. There need to be as many girls and women heroines and heroes, and people of different ethnic backgrounds or skin colour should play roles in narratives, even if the origin versions do not contain this. This is a controversial point in many Waldorf settings because of the belief that traditional tales and legends are archetypes that may not be altered. The first point is that traditional folk tales such as Grimm's Fairy Tales were often written down by scholars (usually men) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reflected the values of those times. The research shows that folktales change continuously over time, making them adaptable to many cultural situations. It is impossible today to establish what is original in any meaningful sense. Holding faith in the literal authenticity of Grimm's fairy tales (or indeed the many tales collected by Andrew Lang, a British collector from the period of the British Empire) is simply not justified, quite apart from the fact that they have been translated from German. So, the modern versions of fairy tales are almost certainly not original in any sense and it is entirely legitimate if one responsibly modifies stories in the telling.

The argument about archetypes is somewhat more robust, but still not compelling. It is true that the images in folktales from different cultures have different associations. The forest in Grimm's tales is often a place of darkness and evil, populated by ogres and witches (a sexist category if ever there was one!), whilst in Russian tales, the forest is a much more neutral symbol for the spiritual world, in which there are true and false paths to follow. In English and Celtic tales, the forest is often a place of light and freedom (think Robin Hood). This applies to many symbols in folk tales; we usually do not know how these would have been interpreted in their original cultures. Does it change the archetype, if the girl/princess has to cut her way through a thicket of thorns to liberate the sleeping prince/boy? Can Simple Jack also be Simple Gill? Can a queen have three daughters (or more likely a mixture of children) one of whom she must choose to inherit the throne by overcoming difficult tasks. Do literary fairy/folk tales from authors such as Hans Christian Anderson, Oscar Wilde, Padraic Colum, Owen Barfield, J.R. Tolkien or Selma Lagerlöf count? Their archetypes are just as valid? Indeed Marie-Louise Franz, a pupil of C.G. Jung, described a series of modern archetypes that are in a sense even more valid than traditional ones from vague sources. To some extent it depends on the intentions of the storyteller. At least since Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, we have been aware that what the cultural West calls the Orient is stereotyped, prejudiced and pejorative. This manifests itself in stories like 1001 Nights, Ali Baba and Aladdin, which are full of cultural stereotypes. In the end, we live in a multi-gender and multi-cultural world; shouldn't we pay our respects and offer tales that narrate a new world into being?

The curriculum offers us a wealth of natural aspects of sex and regeneration in farming, nature study of animals, plants and literally the 'birds and the bees'. In all these themes we relate to the human being, in the sense of, 'animals are what people have' and plants in their environment offer resources for people. Animals are guided by naturally selected instincts. Humans have the task of replacing instinct with cultural artefacts, tools, techniques, narrative, education and knowledge. When children learn about worker bees serving their queen, or stags locking horns, or sperm whales protecting their calves from orcas, or birds migrating

thousands of miles, we can find wonder in their behaviour but the message is not one of emulation because the animals have no choice and probably little self-consciousness. Rather, the message is, how wonderful and complex nature is and that we too are natural but that we are different, because we have to take responsibility through consciousness. The overriding themes are relationships and in particular human stewardship of the environment and the caring and nurturing side of this relationship.

This is why some of the most important themes in the classes 1 to 4/5 include being together in a social group, learning about boundaries, mutual awareness and consent, finding the right forms of communication and contact.



### The Middle School

The age of the onset of puberty is now much earlier in Western societies than 100 years ago. In girls the average is the age of 12, which means that many girls will have their first period before that, which means already in class 5. Furthermore, the psychological and emotion aspects of puberty do not necessarily emerge hand in hand with the bodily changes; they may manifest earlier or later. In fact, bodily development is becoming increasingly heterogeneous and the age span when significant developmental processes occur can vary considerably, Waldorf schools should not wait until the traditional curriculum says, to engage with these

important topics. As Remo Largo (2019), the famous pediatrician, says, individual developmental trajectories are the norm and the normal spectrum of developmental spans 5 years at the age of 14! So, we cannot talk about typical 9 year-olds or typical class 7 students with regard to their actual development.

Therefore, from class 5 onwards the children should be aware of the bodily and psychological changes that they are about to experience in puberty. The emphasis is not only on the biological functions but also on the social and psychological significance of puberty, though explaining why girls have periods is important, perhaps through emphasizing the many ways in which traditional cultures acknowledge this transition (though we should steer clear of those examples involving brutality, mutilation and enforcing social roles on boys and girls). Traditional role models are of limited use because youth as a developmental phase between childhood and adulthood is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, Steiner was one of the first people to identify the significance of this third phase in the life course and in particular its spiritual significance.

Steiner spoke about the young person losing her intuitive connection to the spiritual world at puberty. He used the drastic metaphor of being spat out of the spiritual world. In this phase of life, the young person comes to 'earth maturity' and engages more fully with the forces of gravity and causality. The life processes that in the first phase of early childhood have built up and established the autonomous functioning of the organism and which in the second phase following the change of teeth, transferred to building up an embryonic psychological inner life. Now these formative forces become active again in the body bringing about the transformations that emerge as primary and secondary sexual characteristics and differentiate into male and female bodies, capable of reproduction. Powerful bodily processes driven by hormones lead to a complex and unique human phenomenon, which Steiner describes as a third birth. This involves major bodily changes accompanied by a reorientation of the life of willing through new drives and urges, moods and emotions, new intense feelings and sensitivities and the emergence of a powerful intellect. The whole process involves a somewhat chaotic eruption, surprising both the young person and those around her. It is a turbulent and risky time to live through and many young people lose their way in the process, though most do find their way again- one way or another – to establishing adolescent and ultimately adult identities. It is not surprising that one of the developmental themes at this age is revolution, polarities and their resolution in the struggle for emancipation.

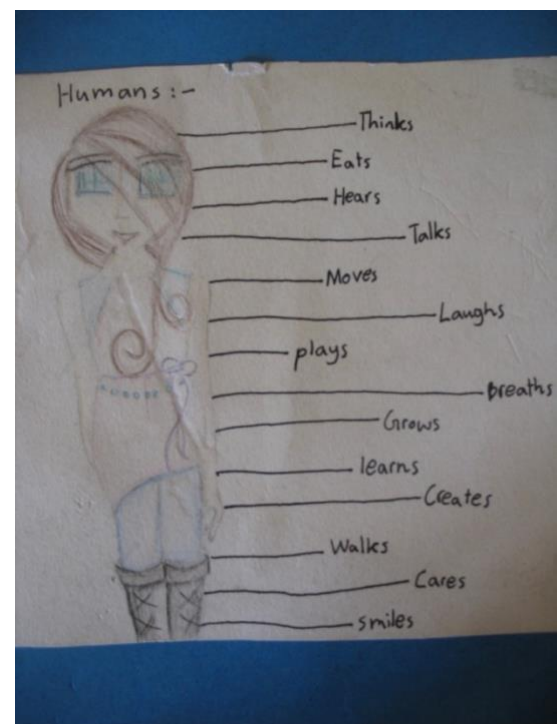
Particularly important in these times is addressing the new dynamic of peer groups within the classes, especially the way they have developed through new social media. Pupils in class 6 need to explicitly learn about cultivating relationships and the power of words, images and communication using social media.



Given the changes in social attitudes to sexuality and gender have changed significantly and many children will now be familiar with homosexual couples, indeed we may have children in our classes whose parents or co-parents are gay, they need to learn that homosexuality is a normal aspect of relationships and sexuality, and that same sex partnerships and other non-conventional forms of families and relationship are part of our social mix. This should be done by class 5 at the latest (though I recommend reference to homosexuals in story material earlier).

In class 7 the human biology curriculum needs to emphasize health, nutrition and aspects of sexuality and the role of sex other than as a means of reproduction. It will certainly be necessary to introduce the topic of sexuality *before* the classic class 7 main lesson theme of health and hygiene. Certainly, the children should know about contraception well before they start having sexual encounters. Exactly when and how this is done in earlier requires tact and good information about the students.

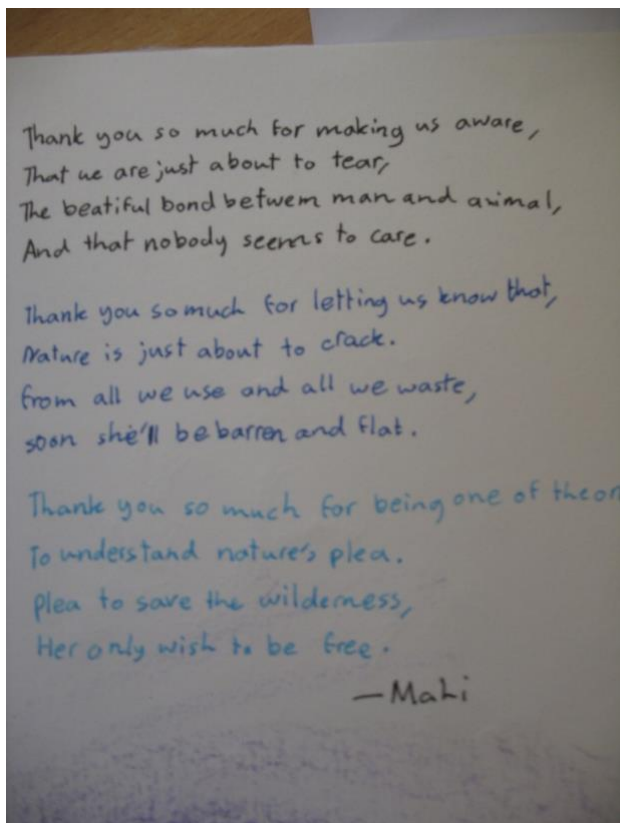
In class 7 and 8 they need to learn about gender roles and the fact that women's rights have been hard won and are not everywhere established. They should also learn in classes 7 and 8 that cultural attitudes towards homosexuality vary widely and that it is only recently that LGBT relationships have become legal in many countries. This is a belated aspect of civil rights and is still ongoing. The fact that different cultures within one country have different levels of acceptance of women's roles and homosexuality does not alter the fact that Waldorf education has to prepare children for contemporary citizenship. This may set us add odds with the views of some parents, who may have certain strongly held religious beliefs. Therefore, we need to explain our reasons for teaching the children about these things, without questioning their religious beliefs. Waldorf schools are not selective in any sense; they do whatever is necessary to explain their stance whilst accepting children from families with different stances.



### Sex and the teacher

Who should accompany this theme of relationships and the sex education process? The traditional model of the 8-year class teacher has its advantages but also its disadvantages. Among the disadvantages today are the new demands of puberty and the need for young people to develop high levels of social skills and self-directed learning. A class teacher who organizes everything for the pupils in a maternalistic/paternalistic way may inhibit the

learning of the very skills the students need in terms of self-directed inquiry, team work and projects. It may lead to a kind of passivity which keep the students at a somewhat immature level than they actually need to reach- it is easier if someone, such as a parent or class teacher – takes active responsibility for everything. This general aspect of learning impacts learning in the field of sex and relationships. The process of maturing to the earth, its practicalities, its requirement that young people take responsibility for their actions and relationships (in anthroposophical terms, they can create their own karma), may be retarded and keep the young people in state of prolonged dependence. Of course, they still need guidance and role models, but what they need role models of change.



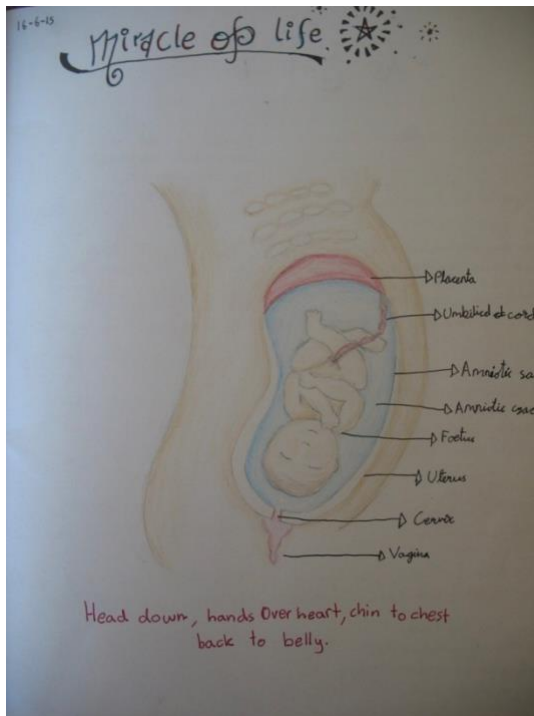
Young people need to learn to take responsibility for their learning, for their social processes and relationships and that means they need opportunities to practice these, including dealing with the resistance and difficulties that arise. We cannot separate the learning related to sex and relationship from the development of the whole person. They need to learn the skills related to managing relationships, such as non-violent communication and conflict mediation, but they also need authentic practice in problem solving. If they neither have opportunity to learn the skills and techniques, nor opportunities to practice, they don't learn to face the consequences of their actions and decisions. They then allow their new soul forces free rein and this can manifest in bullying, exclusion, building of cliques and other behaviours that show a lack of empathy, self-control or sense of consequences for their own actions.

I personally think that this is field requiring expertise and therefore it may mean finding people outside the school who have trained and specialized in relationship education to take on this theme. It is also a question whether the classroom is always the best place for the many intimate discussion that accompany this theme. Schools need to consider what is the best way to provide safe, appropriate spaces.

If class teachers insist on their 8 years, they also have to learn how to teach and guide young people in puberty. Models in which other teachers supplement the main lesson teaching, perhaps in subjects that are not the class teacher's particular strengths, enables the students to emancipate themselves. However, more important is the kind of learning culture that develops and practices that are used, with a strong emphasis on teamwork, authentic tasks, taking social responsibility.



Outward bound experiences are also very important at this age, so young people can learn to test and push their strength, face new challenges and learn practical skills including navigation and survival skills, both literally and metaphorically. This is not something that class teachers are usually equipped to offer since the health and safety aspects require trained professionals and the relevant equipment.



### The upper school

From classes 9 to 12 there are a wide range of aspects of relationships, sexuality, gender and identity throughout the curriculum, so many that I can only highlight a few aspects briefly.

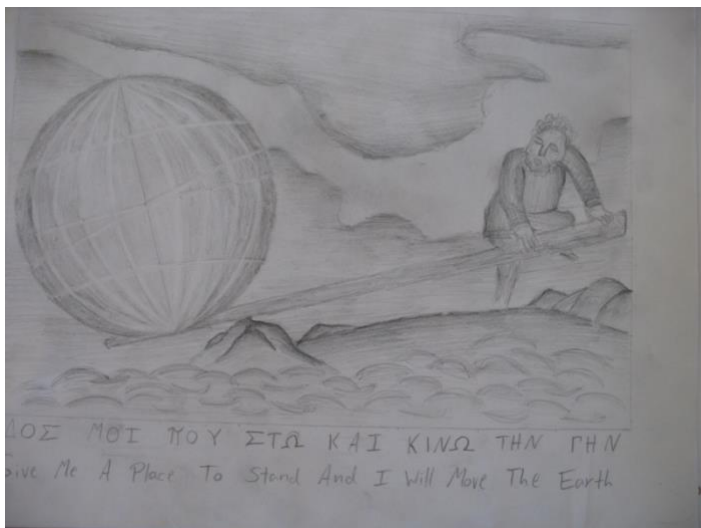


In class 9 students should have opportunities to learn about the struggles for emancipation and civil rights across the world, including the whole question of colonialism and post-colonialism in history, culture and society. In drama and literature, they can experience the nature of attraction, human psychology, power and sex and different cultural responses to this. particularly the question of power and its abuses is a theme at this age. To balance this, the study of art and aesthetics offers different ideals of the body and its effects.

In class 10 one of the key developmental themes is the origins of human societies. This is an opportunity to learn about how societies since earliest times have dealt with questions of life, death, procreation, nurturing and living together. The differences between patriarchal and matriarchal societies can be explored and also the nature of blood relations, ethnic identities and the emergence of communities who break with orthodoxy and the rise individuality as a counterpoint to centralistic societies. The transition from myth to literature also offers perspectives on the emergence of individual voices in history and literature.



In class 11 the overriding theme is biographical exploration and the quest for personal identities. This includes the question of gender. This can be explored in literature, film and in creative writing. In biology the theme of genetics prompts questions about inheritance and determination. In art the engagement with portraits is another perspective on identity and individuality. In my experience this is an age at which students can speak openly about their experiments with gender and transgender and non-binary forms of appearance and behaviour. They are probably more willing than the teachers to engage with this theme, but it is important to provide opportunities, even if the teachers have no experience.



In class 12 philosophical issues of the nature of being human and selfhood, life, death and the meaning of life. Questions of identity and gender are very much part of contemporary and post-structuralist, feminist and queer philosophy. It would be a shame if the students didn't have the opportunity to get to know these important ideas.

## Conclusion

The reader will by now have noticed that theme of relationships and sex education is not merely a question of a biology main lesson but is interdisciplinary and runs through the entire curriculum. It is much a question of the attitude of the teachers as specific information and knowledge to be learned. Nevertheless, there is considerable knowledge that is required, though of course this knowledge has to both contextualized and applied as skill as well much as possible.

At the macro-level of curriculum, we are engaging with the developmental tasks common to all human beings and the themes that enable us to focus on them. Given the dramatic nature of socio-cultural change in our times, even these universal tasks have significantly changed. They have no doubt done so in culturally specific ways. Some cultures have embraced difference, changed laws, introduced programmes of inclusion and integration, others are more reluctant to change. In such countries Waldorf schools have to be among the pioneers of change, not by preaching but by simply practicing inclusion. At the meso level, the state often requires knowledge and policies, and Waldorf schools have to meet these requirements and do so in pedagogically intelligent ways. Teachers need to be well-informed about the lives of children and young people. It is part of their collegial responsibility to become informed and to cultivate collective and individual understanding of maturation and changes in society. At the micro level each teacher has to be alert to opportunities to include the theme of relationships and gender.

As one of the leaders of critical pedagogy Joe Kincheloe recalling a conversation with Paulo Freire,

Teachers, he told me, cannot deny their position of authority in the classroom. It is the teacher, not the students, who evaluates student work, are responsible for the health, safety and learning of the students. To deny the role of authority the teacher occupies is insincere at best, dishonest at worse. Critical teachers, therefore, must admit that they are in a position of authority in their actions in support of students. One of the actions involves the ability to conduct research/produce knowledge...In relation to such authority of facilitators of student enquiry and problem posing. In relation to such teacher authority, students gain their freedom- they gain the ability to becomes self-directed human beings capable of producing their own knowledge (2008, 17).

This is true in all aspects of pedagogy and in particular in the neglected area of relationships, gender and sexuality in the curriculum. This starts with self-criticality, interrogating the tacit understandings and assumptions we have as Waldorf teachers. A shift in attitudes can only come if each of us makes the effort to be honest and look at what we know and recognize what we don't know. This requires a research attitude and research practice, which can start by informing ourselves.

And it requires a whole school approach and intensive work with parents, though as I have noted above, consulting with parents is important but in the end curriculum is a question for the school to decide and then clearly communicate and explain.

This article is an initial attempt to formulate a curriculum and is an initial attempt. I would welcome feedback and suggestions.

### References

- Bransby, K., & Rawson, M. (2020). Waldorf Education for the Future: A framework for curriculum practice Retrieved from <https://www.steinerwaldorf.org/steiner-resources/>
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Critical Pedagogy* (2nd. ed.). New York, NY.: Peter Lang.
- Rawson, M. (2020). De-colonizing your curriculum- some tips for auditing. Waldorf Resources, 2020. Retrieved from [http://www.waldorf-resources.org/single-view?tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Bnews%5D=8582&cHash=2dbc788a2edf780c3204815255941972](http://www.waldorf-resources.org/single-view?tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=8582&cHash=2dbc788a2edf780c3204815255941972)
- Romero, L. (2017). *Sex Education and the Spirit*. Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks.

Photos from students' books printed with their permission.