

Telling Stories to Children: The Waldorf/Steiner Education Approach

著者	D. Bresnihan Brian
journal or publication title	Annals of foreign studies
volume	90
page range	109-118
year	2015-12-22
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1085/00001834/



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Brian D. Bresnihan

1. Introduction

Beginning as a single school in 1919, Waldorf schools, sometimes called Steiner schools, now make up “the largest group of independent non-denominational private schools in the world,” with over 1,200 schools and over 2,000 separate pre-school/kindergarten programs spread throughout 60 countries.¹ One characteristic of Waldorf education is the predominant use of oral narrative and stories, being told without referring to any notes or other written materials at the time of the telling, and the attention given to how the details and events should be conveyed based upon careful consideration of those who are listening, i.e., the students. As with all aspects of the curriculum, Waldorf teachers decide what materials to present and what activities to do with their students, and how, based not only on their grade or age but also on each child’s basic personality or temperament, an idea revived by Rudolf Steiner, the person who led and guided the first Waldorf school.

2. Using Stories

Steiner considered artistry in teaching to be crucial for the effective and efficient education of children, with narratives and stories playing a central role in nearly all of their subjects, not just their native language classes. For example, instead of teachers giving students a great many facts and figures and formulas and abstract theories of science, mathematics, or history, Steiner recommended that teachers bring these subjects to life for the students through narrative and by telling stories of the people, both famous and common, involved in the ideas and the implications and consequences of those ideas, then and now. He also emphasized that the telling should be done without notes. The stories and information are to come directly from the inner being of the teachers, from what the teachers truly know and can bring forth from themselves, to the children, without relying on notes or books while telling them. Teachers are to read

¹ This is according to the “Welcome to the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship” website.

up on, study, contemplate, and work over the subject matter beforehand, but once they are in front of the students, their only sources are their own thoughts, feelings, and will.

Steiner did not only consider the use of stories as being important, but also the details included in them and, especially, how they are told; their makeup and the manner of their telling. Besides being told completely without reference to notes of any kind, should there be a lot of intricate details? If so, of what? Should the tone be somber or gay or tense? Will the plot unroll gradually and methodically or jump from scene to scene? Should the main character(s) be active or thoughtful? At what pace should the story be told? Will pauses be helpful or hindering, result in heightened interest or boredom? How about gestures and facial expressions and various intonations? Steiner felt these things needed to be taken into account and the story telling adjusted to fit the unique personalities of the individual children who would hear it.

3. Temperaments

These considerations can best be addressed if the teacher knows each child's basic temperament. Steiner often spoke about this. The notion of different people having different basic temperaments is not new. However, in the present age, it seems to have been mostly forgotten, as it is not something that can be weighed or measured, as it cannot be quantified. Therefore, it is no longer prominent in people's thinking and has been, though not necessarily intentionally, put aside; much to the detriment of many children and their learning.

Although we all have at least a slight trace of each of the four temperaments within us, Steiner said it was important to try to determine each child's basic temperament, or in some cases two basic temperaments, in order to be able to understand each child well and to be able to teach and guide each child in the best ways. This is not very easy to do and takes a great deal of observing and thought to figure out. Also, at different ages, one of the four temperaments sort of tinges each person's basic temperament(s). In childhood, this is the sanguine temperament. In addition, each of the various peoples of the world, based on their nationalities and/or ethnicities, have a basic temperament that influences each person's being. And, how a person spends much of her/his time affects her/his basic moods and attention and ways of being. Finally, of course, teachers have their own basic temperament(s) and need to be aware of its (their) effects on them and on their actions, feelings, and judgments. Knowledge and understanding of all of these things will greatly assist teachers in all of their teaching, and here in the effectiveness of their story telling.

3.1 Each child's temperament

Children who have a strongly sanguine temperament will find it difficult to attend to the same thing for a long time. They will be easily distracted by things in their surroundings, and not necessarily by those that their teacher intends. So, the teacher needs to provide variety to keep the sanguine child on the task at hand. Sanguine children are most interested in and impressed by particular individuals, who they can admire and love through these people's basic personalities. This is the key to guiding the development of children with a dominant sanguine temperament.

The key to being able to lead a child who has a strongly melancholic temperament is for the teacher to be able demonstrate that s/he has had real difficulties, has gone through real pain, in life. If this is not so, then the teacher must find examples in others to bring to the child's attention in order to show that there is other suffering in the world besides the child's own pain and despair, which s/he tends to focus on and brood over. Melancholic children will only feel attracted to or sympathy with others who feel as they do, others who are also suffering. These people they will believe are worth learning from.

The children who are most assertive and aggressive will likely have dominant choleric temperaments. They like to do things immediately and quickly. Each will wish to be the leader. The teacher must provide physical and intellectual challenges and difficulties for them to overcome, but not ones beyond what they are capable of accomplishing, and must always demonstrate understanding of and competence in the situation at hand. If the choleric child doubts the teacher's capabilities or worth, the teacher will have great trouble leading the child.

To get the attention of and to help move into action a child with a dominant phlegmatic temperament, the teacher may need to speak or act sharply and/or unexpectedly. Phlegmatic children appear lethargic. They like comfort and like to continue doing whatever it is that they have come to be doing. They seem to be the least attentive, to notice the least and be affected the least, by what is going on around them. The teacher can help the phlegmatic child to develop by bringing her/him into contact with other children with a wide variety of interests, which sort of rub off onto the child and slowly arouse her/his own interest.²

One will not often find a child who fits exactly into even the very brief

² For more on temperaments, see Heydebrand, 1995, pp. 19-52; Steiner, 1986, pp. 217-222, 1991, pp. 79-84, 1992, discussions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1995a, chapter 4, 1995b, pp. 23, 47, 52-66, 1997, pp. 6-13, 2004, pp. 139-145; Wilkinson, 1977, pp. 1-19, 38-41.

descriptions of what a child with a given temperament would be like given above. In addition, all of the other influences noted just prior to those descriptions will also affect the appearances of the children and their behaviors. Yet, by trying to identify each child's dominant temperament(s), teachers will come to know and understand their students much more deeply and to be able to teach their students much more effectively and efficiently than if they do not. However, teachers should not try to fight against or extinguish a child's temperament. Doing so will not help the child nor result in better behavior or learning; exactly the opposite will be the result. Instead, teachers should try to provide what each child's temperament needs, as was indicated in the descriptions of each above, not try to change or eliminate the child's temperament.

3.2 Applying knowledge of children's temperaments

When teaching, talking to, or telling a story to a group of children or a class, there will nearly always be some children with each of the four temperaments, or at least three of them. So, a teacher cannot usually choose just one temperament to address while speaking. Instead, the teacher must adjust the telling or story telling for each group at various points along the way depending on which children s/he wishes particularly to address and to pay attention at each point.

Below are four beginnings of the same story told in four different ways that I think would be suitable to tell children who are about 10 or 11 years old. As best as I can manage, attempts are made to show emphasis and pauses, etc., that might help to make the telling more attractive and useful to children of each temperament. Each beginning is preceded by a brief description of the mood or spirit of the telling. However, these tellings are not to be done in imitation of cartoons or like movie, theater, or stand-up comedy performances.

Gestures and facial expressions should be very minimal, if any, and the spoken language should be similar to normal speech. There should be no physical jumping around or running back and forth, and nothing should be said in an overly exuberant way. All changes in tone, stress, or volume should be slight and not exaggerated. The teacher should be trying to stimulate each child to become active in her/his mind and arouse each child's inner creativity, thinking, imagination, and higher feelings, not be trying to stir up the children's lower emotions. The words themselves should be allowed to affect the children as a learning process. The telling should not be done for entertainment. Exaggerated speech and mannerisms do not allow the children listening to create their own individual images of the stories out of their own imaginations and

will. Visual images connected with stories, for example, pictures or photos and videos or movies, also have much greater negative than positive effects in the same way. They inhibit inner freedom and creativity and make children inwardly passive. They do not allow the children the freedom to use their own imagination to create their own individual pictorial images of the story.

It would be helpful to try reading each beginning aloud in the manner explained. After each beginning, various points are discussed that make this suitable for children with the specific temperament it was intentionally created for and meant to be presented for in the manner described.

Each telling begins with the same formulaic expressions. It is beneficial to begin stories in such a way to focus the attention of the children who need to and to calm down the behavior of those who need to, and to bring to bear the fact that well crafted stories are telling of something connected with the eternal. It is good to signal the ending of the story telling in a similar way. These beginnings and ending should not be said quickly or forcefully, but calmly and resolutely, and also with feeling, as the whole telling should be.

The basic facts of this beginning are the following:

- a mother (a queen) and her son (age 12) live in a house in a forest with various helpers and servants
- the father (a king) died in battle defending King Allindar before their son was born
- the Queen did not allow the boy to learn about knights

The feeling and tone of voice for the first telling, after the beginning, is to be somewhat light hearted, exuberant, and lively, and the speed of the telling a little fast. The especially stressed words are in italics, but should not be too elongated nor said too loudly, only slightly so. It is more that the teacher's inner self should feel more emphasis in these words rather than that they should be spoken louder.

Once upon a time it happened. . . . Where did it happen? . . . Where exactly did it not happen? . . . that there was a mother and her son living in a house in a *great* woods, *far* from all other people. She was a *queen*, and so they had all they needed. She *loved* her son and allowed him to do *whatever* he liked, and *every* day was different for him. On cloudy days, he liked to go *fishing*. Some days he made *toys* to *play* with. *Other* days he helped *feed* the *farm* animals. . . . He *loved* to hear the *birds* singing in the *early morning sunshine* and to gather *bouquets* of

wild flowers for his mother. She *especially* liked flowers that were *purple* or *yellow*. He would *run* from *open field* to *open field* to find them. . . . His mother was *happy* to see him doing these things rather than *practicing swordsmanship*. In *fact*, she *forbid* the servants and helpers from even *mentioning knights* to the boy, and so he knew *nothing* about them. His father, the king, had died before he was born doing battle, and she hoped her son would not die in the same way.

The sanguine child's mind is constantly taking in what is in the surroundings and is constantly jumping from one thing to another, and so this version contains a great many details and settings. The telling is cheerful, upbeat, and bright, like the child. The pauses are to help make sure the child is staying with and following the story, to urge the child to focus attention on what was just said or what will come next, and not to wander off in her/his imaginings wherever her/his mind may lead. The child may not even take any notice of the sad ending here and allow it to disappear as fast as the sounds that contained it, not to disturb the happy scenes that came beforehand.

The feeling and tone of voice for the second telling, after the beginning, is to be somewhat grave, subdued, and emphatic, and the speed of the telling a little slow. The especially stressed words should be said even less loudly than they should be for the telling preceding this one.

Once upon a time it happened. . . . Where did it happen? . . . Where exactly did it not happen? . . . that there was a mother and her son living alone in a plain house in a great woods, far from all other people. . . . She loved her son with *all her heart*, but was also very *sad* and *sorrowful*, as her husband had *died* an early *death*. . . . He had died fighting in a great battle defending King Allindar *before* their child was born. In fact, he had been a king, too, with allegiance to King Allindar, the greatest king in the land, and so she was really a queen, though *now* she did *not* live as one. . . . Since her son had been born, they had been living with only a few servants and helpers. And no one visited them. . . . She spent her days *worrying* over his health and growth, and as he got older, making sure that he did *not* find out about certain aspects of the world, like knights. . . . She did not want her son to follow her husband to an early grave. . . . Her *worrying* caused her to *toss* and *turn* at night, and to become *thinner*, and *thinner*, *weaker* and *weaker*.

This version, told in a quiet voice, is solemn and mournful in order to grasp the attention of the melancholic child and bring her/him out of her/his self-reflection. There is not much activity. Instead, details focus on hardships, anxieties, and sadness, which demonstrate how others truly suffer in life. The pauses are in places to give time for a moment's longer contemplation of the preceding statements, and, by breaking into the silence and thereby attracting notice, to keep the child's attention on what is being said instead of on inner thoughts.

The feeling and tone of voice for the third telling, after the beginning, is to be high-spirited, energetic, and dynamic, and the speed of the telling somewhat fast. The especially stressed words should be said strongly and firmly.

Once upon a time it happened. . . . Where did it happen? . . . Where exactly did it not happen? . . . that there was a mother and her son living in a house in a *huge* forest, *far* from all other people. His father had been a *king*, but he had *died* during a *tremendous battle* defending the *great King Allindar*. In *gleaming yellow armor*, *riding a huge black stallion*, his father had *led valiantly* at the *front* of the *charge*, *day after day*. *No one killed more enemy knights than he*, with his *superior swordsmanship* and *great courage* and *strength*. . . . *However*, at the end of one *particularly long day of fighting*, he ended up *too far ahead* of his men, and became *surrounded*. With his *sword crashing down* on *knight after knight*, it *seemed* he would be able to *escape*. And he *nearly* did. But his *shield broke in two*, and then his *sword*, and *then* his *opponents rallied* and *dealt him a death blow*. . . . The queen did *not* want her *son* to *die* in the same way, and so *prevented* him from finding out *anything* about *knights*, which she *feared* he would be drawn to, like his father was.

This version has a lot of fast-paced, bold, strenuous action to keep the always-vigorous choleric child engaged. Many animated details are given, and the telling is a little louder and more forceful than the previous two tellings, with only a few pauses meant to heighten the effects of what was said before and/or after them. The child will picture the vibrant scene within herself/himself and also try to imagine if s/he would be able to meet the same challenge in as honorable a way, and if s/he would have somehow been able to survive. It is possible that the child may find the ending unfair, something to take action against, which will also stimulate the child's interest and inner activity.

The feeling and tone of voice for the last telling, after the beginning, is to be calm,

even, and unemotional, and the speed of the telling slightly slow and steady. The few especially stressed words should be said suddenly and firmly.

Once upon a time it happened. . . . Where did it happen? . . . Where exactly did it not happen? . . . that there was a mother and her son living in a comfortable house in a great forest, far from all other people, but with all the servants and helpers they needed. There were a few maids to clean the house and take care of the washing, two cooks to . . . make the meals, men to plant and . . . to harvest the fields, and others to hunt for game. You see, the mother was not poor. In fact, she was really a queen, though her son did not know this. So, there were always good smells in the house and . . . good foods to eat, warm fires in winter, and carefree and enjoyable things to do in the yard and forest each day. They lived alone as her husband, the king, had died before their son was born. . . . *she kept this*, . . . and everything about knights from her son, wishing him not to die a similar early death. Instead, she made sure he was . . . happy and content and had all he needed, and she let him do whatever he liked within the surrounding woods.

As the phlegmatic child does not keep up with a quick pace nor with a great many changes and does not find great extremes attractive, this version is somewhat flat and plodding, both in tone and content. Nothing much happens, and much of what is said concerns creature comforts. The pauses, which seem to be in unusual places, and the one strongly voiced phrase are to jar the child into bringing her/his attention to what is being said. The breaks in the telling, being in odd places, slightly disturb what to the child is the background mood, and so the child's comfort. This will cause the child to come to some sort of awareness to find out why this is happening. The one loud, sudden phrase jolts the child to consciousness of what is going on. But to do the latter often will only cause the child to find it repulsive and to try to ignore it all.

4. Reflecting on the four examples

Each of these examples is like a condensed version of the ideas it demonstrates. Most story tellings will not be only 200 words long, though some will. Waldorf/Steiner teachers generally have the children sit in groups by temperament. Then, when they are trying to engage or influence the children with a certain temperament, they can focus their attention on and look at them directly; naturally resulting in what they are saying being more effective. An additional benefit of having children sit together by

temperaments is that by constantly seeing and unconsciously taking into themselves examples their own behavior from the children around them, their basic temperaments become less extreme. It is like they are seeing reflections of themselves, of their own behaviors, and they unconsciously notice the negative aspects of such behaviors, at least unconsciously. This causes their temperaments become less extreme and more balanced.

Some aspects of each temperament are similar to aspects of another. For example, very often, both melancholic and phlegmatic children do not seem to be paying attention and to be slow at doing things. On the other hand, both sanguine and choleric children seem to do things quickly and to be anxious to move on. Also, all children will have at least a bit of sanguine in them; and if they spend a lot of time watching television or playing with a computer, or do not sleep enough, it will likely cause them some difficulty in paying attention. So, it takes some time and effort to work out what each child's temperament is, and also to work out what one's own is by nature. After coming to know their own temperaments, Waldorf teachers strive to balance them, so that one of them does not dominate and so that in each situation they can make use of the aspects of their personality that are most suitable, that will be most effective and beneficial, when dealing with each particular student.

5. Conclusion

As there is a word limit for these articles, this one must end here. If there were none, the story could have been continued, and more examples could have been given to demonstrate how to adjust a story to the benefit of the different types of children, and to show how teachers can address children with various temperaments at different points throughout the story telling, how to turn from group to group though still speaking to and holding the attention of all of the students. Then, you could also have heard about some of the marvelous adventures the boy had. However, I can tell you that the boy did find out about knights, and one day he left his home to pursue his dream of becoming one, much to his mother's distress. Indeed, he was eventually knighted by King Allindar himself. Then his real trials and adventures began. They brought him to many a land, and to much treasure and fame. Among other things, he also saved his fair share of maidens in distress, and was helped greatly by not a few of them, as well. And if he has not yet gotten too old, he is still journeying from here to there, helping those in need when he is granted the power to do so. . . . This is the way it was, . . . the way it has always been, . . . the way it will always be.

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