

Transformations

Abstract:

When the old becomes new: issues around the development of human individuality in education

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Argument:

The paper makes two related points:

1. To exemplify how traditional European literary texts model a path of inner development that supports the idea of the emerging individual.
2. To outline some current challenges to the idea of the individual as the basis of social organisation.

Outline:

1. Educators refer to the journey through the adolescent years as a transformative process or 'sacred passage' [Staley], whereby the adolescent moves from definition by the family network, as in childhood, towards adult independence as a free, rational and moral individual agent.

Steiner teachers have considerable expertise in enabling this process, through a professional understanding of the stages of human development and through specialist subject knowledge.

Examples: age-appropriate use of texts with students (Eschenbach's Parzival and Shakespeare's sonnet/plays) showing:

- a) how the original writers designed them to work as transformative mechanisms, when set in motion by performance.
- b) how the 'pilgrimage' of the soul, modelled by medieval and early modern texts, has remarkably universal application as a model for the transformative journey of today's adolescent towards achieving individuality.

Siedentop [Inventing the Individual; The Origins of Western Liberalism, 2014] argues that this is because we still share essential ideas about the individual; but these ideas, that rest on the universal equality and reciprocal care of individuals, are now at risk:

2. In a starkly Darwinian history of Sapiens [2011] Harari asks us to "take seriously the idea that in the next stage of history not only technological and organisational transformations, but also fundamental transformations in human consciousness and identity...will call the very term 'human' into question."

- 'Are we teachers strong enough in our thinking, in our epistemology of being human, to answer?'

Siedentop argues that - out of touch with the roots of our tradition - westerners often seem to underestimate its moral content and to lack conviction. We unthinkingly reduce liberalism to a crude form of utilitarianism; or retreat into our private lives. Either way we sacrifice the emphasis on equality and reciprocity - of seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves - which gives liberalism its lasting value. - 'If we in the West do not understand the moral depth of our own tradition, how can we hope to shape the conversation of humankind?'