

Waldorf Education in México

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Waldorf Education first came to México largely through the work of Hans Berlin and the first Waldorf school, La Escuela Nueva, in México City, started in 1957. That school eventually closed, but a seed was planted – there are now fourteen schools striving to become Waldorf schools and several more that have incorporated many attributes of a Waldorf education into their more traditional curriculum. Throughout Mexico, there is an ever-growing interest in Waldorf education, partly in response to the inadequate education provided by the public school system and partly in recognition that the future is calling for something new – it seems that every month a new initiative is born somewhere in México. Most of the Waldorf schools go through sixth grade, but there is one that goes up to eighth grade and several others who are exploring the feasibility of starting a high school in the future. In some schools, the parents have started an eighth or ninth grade for their children (many of whom have been in Waldorf schools since nursery), trying to continue to provide the youngsters with a Waldorf curriculum.

Waldorf schools in México are faced with many of the same challenges that confront Waldorf schools around the globe. Except for the very wealthy families in the larger cities, México continues to be an economically poor country, and sending a child to a private school would be prohibitive were it not for the sacrifices of the faculty who, in order to ensure full enrollment, accept long hours of work, very low salaries (around \$400 a month) and no benefits. As in so many other countries, the state also obstructs the growth of Waldorf education; it is now a law that all children three and older attend school, and the curriculum set by the Secretary of Education (SEP) is highly academic. In my travels through México, I have seen several Waldorf schools where even the nursery children spend part of every day sitting at their desks working in their workbooks. A further complication is that if a child has not been matriculated in the state school system by three, they are considered to have not been educated (homeschooling is illegal), and entering into the system later means taking

many placement tests and waiting for a space to open in the class.

To support the living impulse of Waldorf education in México, the Centro Antroposófico opened its doors in 2000 to offer teacher training for adults wishing to become early childhood or class teachers, and the vast majority of teachers in Waldorf schools in México have trained there. Located in Cuernavaca, the Centro offers a five-year, part-time training for three weeks each summer. Master teachers from Switzerland, Argentina, the United States, and México make up the faculty and students come from all parts of México, Latin and South America, and even a few from the United States. Each year about eighty students are enrolled and one can only applaud their dedication as, year after year, they give up their summer vacation (typically, Mexican teachers have four weeks off in the summer) and time with their families to attend classes.

To give you an idea of some of the happenings with Waldorf education in México, let me tell you about a few of the schools there. These are schools that would not normally be considered Waldorf schools, either because they are too young or their teachers are not trained or their methods are a bit unconventional, yet their interest in Waldorf education is very strong. Colegio San Miguel, located in Monterrey, is a very small program started by one of the Centro's students, Carmen María, when she first started her training three years ago. Carmen María is a middle-aged, simple woman, deeply and naturally reverential, who comes from a very poor, uncultured family and received very little education. It has been a struggle for her to grasp Steiner's thoughts, yet each year she spends her evenings studying and discussing Anthroposophy in preparation for her next class. The faculty of the Centro have marveled to watch the unfolding of new capacities and a deepening of commitment on her part; she takes little credit for her hard work and gives it all to the spiritual world who, she feels, guided her to Anthroposophy and supports her in her work. Carmen María is constantly challenged with making ends meet in her program and every

month she wonders whether she will be able to continue, yet somehow the children themselves give her courage to keep trying. Many of the children that have been drawn to her small program are autistic and Carmen María, with no remedial training, has been very successful in guiding them into the world. When asked how she does it, she answers that she prays a lot and loves them with all her heart.

Colegio Ser, still struggling to define its pedagogical direction, is doing some very interesting work with abused and abandoned children. Located in Queretaro, it has, last I knew, about eighty children, half of whom were removed from their homes because of abuse or were found on the street. These children live in two group foster homes that send all their children to this school. The owners of the homes, when I was there several years ago, were very interested in Waldorf education, attended several lectures, and, after discussions with myself and the directors of the school and the Centro, removed televisions from the house with the youngest children, eliminated computer time for the little ones, and expressed their support in any way they could. Because these children have attachment disorders and are naturally unable to trust adults, the school has established a small farm in the adjacent property where children ride horses and burros and take care of the animals, in the process forming relationships based on trust and kindness. Interestingly enough, many of the children whose birthdays are unknown are given Michaelmas as a birth date, in recognition of the courage they have in their present incarnation.

In every country it is a challenge to adapt

Waldorf education to the culture of the land, and Ak'Lu'um, a very new school in Quintana Roo, is taking up the challenge. Just two years old but with a solid financial base, this international school has a special focus on renewing the culture and the language of its indigenous population. Classes are taught in English and Spanish, but time is regularly given to singing and telling stories and poems in Nahuatl (the Mayan language) from traditional Mayan sources, and they are working to adapt the Waldorf curriculum to reflect the local and indigenous history. David Barham, from the Pine Hill Waldorf School, helped them start several years ago during his sabbatical year and offers ongoing mentoring support to the teachers. With several other Waldorf-inspired programs in the area, Ak'Lu'um is becoming a center where these often-isolated teachers can meet and support one another.

These are just a few pictures of the many devoted teachers and schools/programs in México. WECAN, as a North American association, is also the national association for Canada and México and is always looking for ways to support our neighbors. There is a commitment on the part of WECAN and AWSNA to translate literature into Spanish, to provide mentoring and evaluating support whenever possible and to offer scholarships to a few Mexican students each year. For the last few years, a few Mexican Waldorf early childhood teachers have been making the effort to attend the East Coast February Conference, and WECAN does everything possible to reduce their expenses while here. Yet our neighbors are in great need of support as they find their way into creating Mexican Waldorf education. Perhaps your school or program

could sponsor a child to attend a Waldorf school or a teacher to train at the Centro, thus entering into a more personal relationship with an individual over time. A pen-pal program could start with children in the early grades of your school with a similar class in México, or perhaps the older classes in a school could take a class trip to México to help with a building project or to work on a farm. Many US early childhood



programs are now fundraising for travel funds for teachers to come to the IASWECE Conference in August, and parents in some schools are donating money to Mexican schools in need. One teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School in Manhattan asked her parents to forego giving her a Christmas present and instead to collect money to assist Mexican teachers to attend conferences, and the parents raised \$900! There are many ways we can extend our consciousness outwards, share our resources, and enter into more collegial relationships with our neighbors to the south. And in the process we

open ourselves and the families in our schools and programs to the riches of the Mexican culture.

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