

Waldorf Education Research Institute in North America

Because of its deep understanding of human development, its rich and creative curriculum and pedagogical approaches and its years of practical teaching and institutional experience, Waldorf education has a unique potential for generating new insights and initiatives to meet our culture's pressing educational challenges. Rudolf Steiner intended that Waldorf education not be a static, fixed system, but rather a living, self-renewing and constantly developing movement. The Waldorf Education Research Institute will be central in ensuring that this potential for new insight and initiative be continually realized.

At the same time, a prime need in the present educational situation is for more open, inquiring and discerning dialogue among the myriad education reform efforts appearing both within and outside mainstream education. By entering into this dialogue, particularly out of its own active contribution to the wider conversation, Waldorf education can learn from the insights and experience of others, and come to understand better the conditions and needs of those whom it does not yet, but can abundantly serve.

The call for the establishment of a Waldorf Education Research Institute in North America has come from several quarters within the movement. In 1985 a major conference, with the support of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, was held at the Graylyn Conference Center in North Carolina to initiate a self evaluation of Waldorf education. This conference, comprising major figures in mainstream American education, as well as those in Waldorf education, signaled instead the beginning of the conversation between those two educational movements. A research fund was created through the Waldorf Schools Fund and in 1993 an ad hoc Research Steering Group met at Sunbridge College and recommended the development of a many-sided research program in Waldorf education. Over the next two years, the Steering Group initiative was carried on by Douglas Sloan and Susan Howard at Sunbridge College. They met regularly together and occasionally with others such as Henry Barnes, Torin Finser and Joan Almon to act as a clearing house for a variety of research projects, including the Urban Waldorf School study.

The Waldorf Education Research Institute has evolved from this initiative and will have two main, interrelated purposes. The first is to deepen and enhance the quality of Waldorf education in North America through systematic research into the philosophical, artistic, pedagogical, physiological, child developmental and social-cultural foundations of Waldorf education. A second intention for the Institute is to engage in serious and sustained dialogue with the wider educational-cultural community.

The publication of this *Research Bulletin*, serving as a newsletter to inform the Waldorf community of research needs, as well as providing brief discussions of research topics, questions, approaches and problems, is one of the activities of the Institute. Other major activities encompass determining research priorities and coordinating efforts in these areas, fostering the formation of research groups, working actively with and supporting the work of "research associates" of the Institute, conducting research and writing on foundational issues and organizing conferences and workshops.

The Waldorf Education Research Institute is a major initiative at Sunbridge College on behalf of the Waldorf movement. It has received support and guidance from both the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science and AWSNA, and financial support from the Waldorf Schools Fund. It also collaborates with the Center for the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Teachers College of Columbia University and other organizations such as the Science and Mathematics Association for Research and Teaching.

Co-Directors of the Research Institute are Douglas Sloan, Ph.D., Director of the Masters Program at Sunbridge College, President of the Board of AWSNA and Professor of History and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Susan Howard, Director of the Early Childhood Education and Associate Early Childhood Education Trainings at Sunbridge College and Vice President of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association of North America.

The Waldorf Education Research Institute is in the process of forming an Advisory Board with representatives involved in various aspects of research throughout the Waldorf movement. The following individuals have already accepted the invitation to join the Advisory Board: Joan Almon, Chairperson of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association of North America, Anthroposophical Society Initiative Group member and Pedagogical Section Council member; Henry Barnes,

former General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society and former Class teacher and Chairman of the College of Teachers at the New York Rudolf Steiner School; Stephen Edelglass, Green Meadow Waldorf School; Craig Holdrege, High School Life Science teacher at the Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School; Eugene Schwartz, Sunbridge College; Patti Smith, Public School Outreach Program and Center for Life Studies, Sunbridge College; Betty Staley, Rudolf Steiner College and Pedagogical Section Council member.

The work of the Institute will encompass four areas of activity:

- Support and recognition of research into the foundations of Waldorf education, in a variety of areas: those of curriculum, pedagogy, child development and the arts, as well as the social, philosophical, spiritual-scientific basis of Waldorf education.
- Self-study and evaluation of Waldorf education and documentation of the effects of Waldorf education.
- The development and coordination of resources to support teachers in their work through the review, correlation, translation and publication of existing research.
- The engagement and dialogue with the wider cultural and educational community, especially through collaboration with the Center for the Study of the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Teachers College, which will sponsor conferences and research consultations related to the broad research areas for public and mainstream educators. Publications, including this *Research Bulletin*, proceedings from conferences and consultations, articles, curricula, curriculum guides and perhaps popular books that result from the research and the associated conferences and workshops.

Areas of Research

Five specific research areas offer themselves as special priorities for the work of the Waldorf Education Research Institute:

1) The Waldorf Curriculum and Understanding of Child Development

The “Essential Waldorf Curriculum” Increasingly, as Waldorf education continues to grow worldwide and to respond to changing times, cultures and circumstances, the question arises of what constitutes the essence of the Waldorf curriculum. What are the fundamental principles of curriculum design and development? What, if anything, in the content of the curriculum as it has developed historically is essential, and what can and must change over time and in new settings, and according to what principles? These are questions that must be addressed if the Waldorf curriculum and movement are to maintain both their vitality and flexibility and their integrity and essential substance.

The Kindergarten and High School Curriculum What are the needs and tasks of the Waldorf kindergarten and early childhood care? What is their proper relation to the rest of education? What are the central considerations essential to the development of a genuinely Waldorf high school?

Milestones in Human Development An area of considerable promise is that of exploring the relations between Waldorf education and other developmental views, such as those of Erikson, Gesell, Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, Bruner. Comparative work in this area might enable Waldorf teachers to speak with great confidence to parents and others of the importance of the Waldorf theory and practice of child development.

Disturbed Patterns of Child Development This area includes both the increase in developmental disorders and the increased drug use among elementary and high school students. Some research is ongoing here, including that of Mary Jo Oresti in remedial education, Mija Pogacnik in the efficacy of the arts in countering the damage caused to sensing and emotional capacities and Felicitas Vogt on addiction and its treatment.

2) Science Education and Technology

Science Education Among the needs in this area are the need to develop and extend qualitative, observational approaches to the study of nature, the need to develop science curricula and curriculum guides in a number of areas and the need to establish links between Waldorf science teachers and other persons in the wider world of education who are also interested in an imaginative, humanistic approach to the teaching of science and math.

The Places and Uses of Technology in Education The main area of emphasis here is on the computer, the resistance to which is at its best a careful attempt to keep at the forefront the development of the whole child along with an understanding of what is required for technology to serve humanity. Also, a clear statement of the many important issues and considerations that must be taken into account in determining the appropriate place of the computer in education has yet to be developed within North American Waldorf education.

3) Multiculturalism

Waldorf education has grown worldwide from its predominantly white, European-influenced beginnings. It has been able to address powerfully the unique needs of other cultures.

The “Essential Curriculum” To what extent is the Waldorf curriculum essentially multicultural and to what extent tied to its middle-European cultural origins? Are there principles that can guide a flexible development of the curriculum and pedagogy that ensure its essential Waldorf nourishment of the developing child while fully recognizing the needs and incorporating the cultures of the children it is serving? Topics include the actual experiences of Waldorf schools in various cultural settings and the place of religion in Waldorf schools, both the place of religion itself and of specific religious traditions in education. Research into multiculturalism and the Waldorf curriculum is currently under way by Betty Staley and others and will be featured in the next edition of the *Research Bulletin*.

4) The Arts and Education

In mainstream education the arts still remain marginal and are often the first subjects to be eliminated in times of financial exigency. Nevertheless, during the last decade influential mainstream educational groups and individuals have begun to reassess the importance of the arts in education. Recently, some influential forces are becoming interested in the arts in education with a beginning awareness of the leadership Waldorf has taken in “education as an art.” Two major foci for research in this area are:

The Arts and Cognition It now becomes important to identify and bring out in detail the importance of the arts and an artistic approach in the teaching of specific subject areas, math, the physical sciences, history and so forth, as well as in promoting the healthy development of the child overall.

The Therapeutic Influence of the Arts To make a case for Waldorf’s approach and to strengthen the healing influences of Waldorf for the increasing number of disturbed and troubled children coming to all schools, a much more precise knowledge of how the arts can heal and nourish is needed.

5) Life in Schools

The Administration of Schools The challenge is increasingly two-fold: first, research on the Waldorf administrative principles that can ensure teacher-directed schools, that are now even commending themselves to non-Waldorf researchers; second, research on how the principle of teacher-directed schools can be maintained while developing ways to distribute and rotate teacher-administrative tasks.

Parent Education Are parents in need of basic parenting education if Waldorf education is itself to be most effective? If so, can and should the Waldorf schools and movement provide this training? Parenting education arose as a burning issue at the AWSNA January 1995 Delegates meeting. These two questions emerged as salient.

Deepening the Inner Life of Teachers The Institute sees one of its primary responsibilities to be working at the behest and with the advice of the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science on this task of inner development.

Other aspects of the work of the Research Institute will be described in the next *Research Bulletin*. We invite our readers to let us know of your interest in being involved.