Identity and Governance

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It is a rare Wadorf school that does not struggle with questions of governance at some point in its life. Today many schools find themselves in the midst of such struggles. To some extent these struggles revolve around questions of authority, questions that at their worst spiral downward into struggles for power, or they reflect a loyalty to forms that have been handed down as appropriate for Waldorf schools. In some cases we recognize in these forms the inability to create and sustain viable structures out of a sense for the whole. At the center of all of them lies the question of the identity of Waldorf education.

This question of identity has grown more pressing over the course of the last fifteen years as the number of Waldorf schools has grown and as a new generation of teachers has moved into positions of responsibility within the schools. It has been accompanied by a concerted effort toward institutional stability and assimilation into the greater educational landscape. This push has embraced forms of school development and quality assurance that are ubiquitous in the mainstream, while making efforts to adapt them to the special situation of Waldorf education with its focus on individual learning. Although it has resulted in stronger institutional forms and a somewhat more professional face for Waldorf education, it has also exacerbated the increasingly existential question: What makes a Waldorf school Waldorf?

The questions of school identity and of school governance are inextricably connected. This is what Rudolf Steiner indicated to the teachers of the first Waldorf school when they gathered in Stuttgart for the brief, intense training in which Waldorf education was first articulated. The passage in which he speaks about the way the school is to be governed is brief and cryptic:

Therefore we will structure the school not governmentally, but administratively, and manage it in a republican manner. In a true teachers' republic, we will not be able to lean back and rest on the directives of a headmaster; we will have to bring to bear what gives each of us the possibility to take full responsibility for what we have to do. Each must be fully responsible. The role of the headmaster will be replaced by this preparatory seminar in which we will work to acquire the spirit that will unite the school. If we work hard, this seminar will engender in us our spirit of unity.[1]

A careful reading shows that Steiner speaks here about three aspects that are necessary to the school's success. First he speaks about the *organizational structure*: it is to be administrative, not governmental. Second, he points out that the *governance model* should be republican, not dictatorial. Then he speaks about what it will take to replace the *unifying force* of the headmaster or principal.

Translated into contemporary language, Steiner is speaking about the three basic functions in an organization: leadership (the unifying force), management (governance model), and administration (the way an organization is structured in order to get things done). The latter should not be confused with the various administrative functions in schools. These are present in all three areas. In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* Steven Covey explores these three functions and their interdependencies. He points out that all three are necessary and proper but need to know their own strengths and weaknesses. This also applies to what Steiner sketched out that evening in Stuttgart.

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The most fragile and exciting part of this sketch is contained in what Steiner says about the collaborative path to finding a unified center. The shared experience of the "preparatory seminar," if everyone works hard, will serve to "engender in us our spirit of unity." If we stop to consider that neither management nor administration can function without leadership, Steiner's vision of teacher-guided education stands or falls on the question of this collaborative learning experience. Without it, the school lacks a common center, and decision-making becomes a matter either of personal interest, with the accompanying tendency toward power struggles, or of institutional expediency based on compromise.

The form of self-governance that we are challenged to develop and sustain hinges on this activity. It manifests itself in pedagogical study, the sharing of teaching questions and insights, and, most especially, in ongoing striving to deepen our ability to recognize the spiritual gifts and questions that we encounter in children. It is a dialogical undertaking, a space in which the teachers enter into a quality of listening and learning with one another similar to that which they hope to achieve in the classroom with the children. It is a space of highly focused activity, of a questioning learning, the space in which Waldorf education is developed out of the encounter with the spiritual reality of specific children, where Waldorf education comes alive and meets the intuitive forces of the future. It is the only space in which the future of education can be conceived.

The art of pedagogical study is as important to the health of a Waldorf school as is the art of teaching. This applies not only to what is often narrowly termed "the pedagogical realm." The financial health of our schools is wedded directly to the quality of learning that takes place in classrooms, encounters that are enhanced and enlivened through this activity of pedagogical dialogue. The classroom is at once a concert hall and a laboratory, the teacher a participant-observer. Each day, each year should bring insights that allow us to better meet the developmental needs of the children who find their way to us, not merely cater to the supposed wishes of the parents or position ourselves more successfully in the greater educational landscape. Financial health is linked to the evolving vitality of the educational encounter, the verve of learning. This vitality, this verve is the spiritual expression of pedagogical collaboration.

When we consider the struggles many schools have today with questions of governance, it seems to make sense not to try to find ways to fix the problem—for instance, by importing successful programs or training methods, or hiring consultants to present solutions—but to step back and ask ourselves: Are there time and space in the school's rhythm that allow this quality of dialogue to unfold? Do we give it the space it deserves? Are the skills necessary for a productive dialogue practiced and cultivated? No self-governance structure can succeed in a school in which this dialogue is lacking. Conversely, where it lives, governance takes on a fully new quality. It becomes a question of finding forms that allow us to realize the educational impulses that arise out of this intentional, reflected commitment to our children.

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Balance and Interdependence

Finding structures that work for any given school is no easy matter. There are no general solutions. Each school presents a unique opportunity to develop self-governing structures that serve pedagogical creativity. Yet, although there are no general solutions, there are basic principles at work in every social organism. An understanding of these is helpful.

Due to the nature of their work, schools are social institutions that work explicitly with the future. Although it is clear that as a teacher we often have to deal with the past, learning takes place when a bit of the future lights up in the present. Unlike factories or stores which deal with the refinement and distribution of materials formed in the past, a school is constantly working with what is in the process of becoming, the manifestation of the evolving individual. It is helpful to keep this in mind: A school is a working community dedicated to the act of becoming.

When one reads the brochures and websites of many Waldorf schools, one finds language that speaks of education as though it were a product, something that one can deliver, with "Waldorf" being one specific form of educational product. Education, especially Waldorf education, is by its nature not a product; it is a hope, a possibility.

It is due to this that we can speak of schools in terms of Steiner's thoughts on the threefold nature of the body social as belonging to the spiritual-cultural sphere. If schools were marketing an educational product they would have to function within the service sector, which is a form of what Steiner speaks of as the economic sphere. A number of educators have recognized this in recent years and have formed for-profit educational services with an explicitly outcome-based approach and clear learning objectives. These services are run as businesses and, in some cases, have been quite successful. This is clearly not our focus as Waldorf educators. Yet in every school we can find a tension between those aspects of the school's life that are intertwined with the realities of the economic sphere and those that are most closely engaged in the challenge of finding pedagogical insight.

This should be no surprise. Economic thinking, as it has developed in our time, requires outcome-based approaches in order to assess effectiveness. Such approaches must be replicable. When this form of thinking dominates in a school, we find the tendency toward standardization of both the learning goals and the teaching methods. There is a tendency toward strict forms, repeatable achievements. The outer image presented by the school takes up ever more time and energy. Emphasis is placed on institutional stability, making sure that the school has everything that a school should have; programs mushroom, and the parts start to become more important than the whole.

The tension between institutional stability and pedagogical creativity is an intrinsic reality of every Waldorf school. The challenge of finding

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appropriate forms of governance can be met only if we recognize that both are essential to the long-term existence of a school and if we understand the nature of their relationship in light of the *raison d' être*, the essential goal of the school as an institution. The striving for institutional stability must serve the cultural-spiritual impulse; the latter cannot be channeled into forms that seem to serve the former. This is what lies behind Steiner's injunction that the vision guiding the development of a school must arise out of the collaborative dialogue of those most intimately connected to the children themselves, the teachers. Insight into what is needed in education can come only through reflected encounter with learning children.

If these two necessary fields of activity in a school are not balanced by a third, we can readily picture the recurring clashes and compromises that must occur in the life of a school. Conflict is inevitable, especially as those who take responsibility for various aspects of a school's life do so with great energy and dedication. The third field of activity is one in which these two polarities find a dynamic balance. Those who are familiar with Steiner's work on questions of social development will recognize that this balancing activity lies between the realms of necessity (economics) and creativity (individual development) and rests on the agreements, on the articulated rights and responsibilities, and on the clearly delineated processes that guide interactions within the community. It is the middle sphere, the "rights" sphere, the sphere in which governance, in its narrow sense, comes to institutional expression.

Over the course of the last few years, I have come to call these three realms of activity *sustainability*, *accountability*, and *creativity*. Any governance structure adopted by a school must devote time, space, and resources to the practice of all three activities and articulate clearly the nature of the relationships among them.

Although a number of schools have worked intensely on developing organizational structures

that reflect Steiner's work on the threefold nature of social interaction, there is little or no recognition of the fact that each of these three realms of activity needs a different structure in order to be effective.

The archetypal form of a productive pedagogical dialogue is given in what is often termed the teachers' meditation, the words Rudolf Steiner spoke to the teachers of the first Waldorf school at the beginning of their training seminar. In this imaginative picture, he speaks of the relationship between the task of teaching at this point in the evolution of humanity and the work of the spiritual beings that form the third hierarchy: angels, archangels, and archai. In relation to the concepts of strength, courage, and light, he shows how these beings inform our work with the qualities of imagination, inspiration, and intuition. As we work through the images we discover that what is described is a path from the inner soul work of the individual to the illumination of a community of teachers. Each brings his or her experiences into the circle of teachers. Through a consciously cultivated connection with an angel, these experiences are raised out of the realm of the personal into a realm in which the imaginative reality of what lies behind them can begin to speak. In a circle of colleagues, these experiences flow together with what each brings from his or her encounters with children. The archangels bear from one to the other what each has to give, what each has to receive. In this flow of intentional dialogue, the archai bring the light of intuitive understanding.

Whoever has experienced this striving toward insight through dialogue knows that its outcomes cannot be programmed. Insight can speak through the words of each and every member of the circle. When true insight speaks, through whoever is then able to voice it, it unites the circle, and we leave such a meeting feeling enlivened and strengthened for the work ahead.

The structure of creativity is an open one, with space for a variety of exchanges, questions, explorations, and challenges. Intent is focused through specific questions, such as those regard-

ing physiological development in 7th graders, learning to read, or movement and learning. Perhaps the group studies together. How does Steiner approach the question? What are our observations? Then, step by step, always focused on the goal: to better understand the question in order to let this understanding flow into teaching.

This is a quality of work that has nothing directly to do with decision-making processes, yet plays a decisive role in the development of the school. When done effectively, it creates the spiritual and pedagogical background against which decisions can become apparent.

Whereas collaborative creativity requires such an open, dynamic structure, the activities of sustainability and accountability require more closed, regimented structures. Even these differ, however, from each other.

An institution becomes sustainable when all the available resources are stewarded in an ongoing, renewable manner. Over the course of the last several years, there has been a growing awareness that the long-term institutional health of a school rests on a delicate web of relationships. Some of these exist within the institution (personnel questions and human resources in the corporate sense, for example), others in the encounter with the surrounding community (parent relationships and community visibility, for example), and yet others with the society at large (other Waldorf schools, accrediting bodies, and the economy, for example). Taken together these represent the ecological reality of the school as an evolving social organism. Sustainable resource management or stewardship is only possible out of an understanding of the complexities of these relationships. It takes expertise in a number of different fields, such as finance, law, communication, planning, design, and marketing. Any given question must be examined or explored from each point of view. Instead of an open, dynamic dialogue in which spiritual or pedagogical insight can arise, we need here a structure that ensures that the various aspects of any planned initiative can be examined through the eyes of various areas of expertise.

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The third structural gesture is that of account-ability. Questions of accountability appear to take up the most time in faculty meetings and decision-making processes. A lack of clear processes and transparent responsibilities in this realm serves to drain a school of its vitality. Immeasurable amounts of time and effort go into finding solu-tions for problems that arise in this realm. In the process, many of the most sacred aspects of col-laborative work are sacrificed—honesty, frank-ness, consequence, and clarity. What actually is accountability? In the best of worlds, it is what each individual strives for in his or her work. Doing what we say we will do, fulfilling the responsibilities that are attached to our position, acting in a manner that reflects the stated goals of the community, the active striving to right whatever wrongs may have occurred in the course of our work—all are facets of this striving. In creating an accountability structure within a school, we acknowledge consciously the need to help one another live up to these strivings. An accountability structure also ensures that what we have decided to do as a community gets done, that there is the needed follow-through on proj-ects, that planning takes place, and that emer-gent questions are addressed in the proper man-ner. This is functionally the most selfless of the three realms of activity, yet, at the same time, it is the most demanding.

The accountability structure stands and medi-ates between the two poles of sustainability and creativity. It has a balancing function, bringing the activity of each of these realms into a produc-tive relationship with that of the other. Because of this mediating charge, it is a structure that must be mandated from both sides, from those respon-sible for the long-term institutional existence of the school and from those who are involved in daily encounters with children or young people. (I have been asked a number of times if these two bodies are the Board and the College. Yes, and no. In the organizational structure most common in American Waldorf schools, the Board is legally responsible for the existence of the school as a corporate body. The idea of the College suffers from a lack of clarity about its role, its function, and its spiritual basis. In an ideal situation, one could imagine Board and College taking on these two polar functions. In contemporary practice,

there is much confusion concerning which body is responsible for what. In the confusion, Colleges at times function as spiritually correct over-Boards, and Boards find themselves stepping in to ensure the continuance of Waldorf education.)

The Administrative Fallacy

The last 15 years have seen a mushrooming of administrative positions in schools. Although this is to be expected as institutions pass through their pioneering years and reach a certain level of maturity, it poses a problem. Administration, if not carefully managed, tends either to become bureaucratic or to develop an undue sense of its own importance. Administrative functions are service functions. Good administrative co-workers do not want to be anything else but of service. They are professional service personnel. They jus-tifiably expect guidance, clear work expectations, and oversight, and they take pride in doing their work well. Anyone in an administrative position who does not find fulfillment within these bound-aries is in the wrong position. Any school that hires administrative personnel without giving them proper guidance does a grave injustice not only to these persons but to the viability of the school.

The lack of management in the administrative realm is the result of an unfortunate approach to "threefolding" that has been propagated through-out the school movement. Placing administrative responsibility for a school in the hands of admin-istrators is somewhat similar to placing financial responsibility for a banking institution in the hands of its bookkeepers. Administration in a Waldorf school serves the realization of pedagogi-cal vision in a sustainable manner. It can be effec-tive in the fulfillment of this task only if it is man-aged within the framework of the accountability structure that a school adopts. The approach to administrative structures most prevalent in American Waldorf schools raises administrative functions into the realm of management without ensuring that the personnel are adequately trained in the two realms such a management function entails: sustainable organizational devel-opment and pedagogical dialogue. In an attempt to rectify this lack, administrators are given responsibility but not authority, the latter being split between a pedagogical body and a legal-

financial body, a practice that leads inevitably to conflict due to the polarity that exists between these two areas of activity. This embedded conflict potential has been exacerbated to some extent by consultants who work either pedagogically or organizationally, creating what can only be seen as an artificial fragmentation of an organic whole.

The Double Gesture of a Dynamic Structure

Examined closely, it becomes apparent that two tri-archies are at play in the approach to governance sketched out above. One, which has a more vertical gesture, is functional and is composed of the three qualities: leadership, management, and administration. The other, which ensures that the three intrinsic realms of activity—sustainability, accountability, and creativity—can develop under conditions that are appropriate to each, has a more horizontal gesture. The interweaving of the two creates a dynamic whole. Leadership must be present in all three realms of activity, yet leadership within the realm of pedagogical creativity requires different qualities than does leadership within the realm of sustainability or accountability. The same holds true to a lesser extent for management and administration, with the administrative functions in all three realms varying least.

The recognition of this double gesture raises a number of questions concerning governance in Waldorf schools:

1. Does the school have a practiced commitment to ongoing pedagogical dialogue designed to enhance teachers' understanding of child development and learning?
2. In any given governance model, are the three core realms of activity structured in such a way that the different qualities of necessary social interaction are supported?
3. Is there a clear mandate system to ensure that necessary functions are addressed?
4. Does transparency exist around decision-making processes and the various forms and stages of input and feedback?
5. Is there an explicitly shared will to work on the skills and capacities needed to develop and sustain forms of collegial governance?

The intentional striving to develop collegial forms of governance is perhaps the noblest undertaking of our time. The realization that the skills to meet this challenge arise only through the conscious attempt to craft, practice, and revise such forms opens the door to much needed creativity and the research required to sustain it.

Endnote

1. Steiner, Rudolf. *Allgemeine Menschenkunde.* Rudolf Steiner Verlag, Dornach, 1998, p. 14 (author's translation).

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