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Comparing Studies of German, Swiss, and North American Waldorf School Graduates

Waldorf education is a riddle of modern civilization. In a world in which accomplishment is thought to be quantifiable, where the only outcomes that matter are those that can be measured, this school movement has struggled to find its guidance in the immeasurable. This may be changing. A series of studies published in various countries appears to offer quantifiable insight into the strengths and weaknesses of Waldorf education.

The three surveys of Waldorf graduates examined in this report rely heavily on graduates' responses to a series of question clusters. All three studies, two done in Germany and Switzerland under the auspices of the Heinrich-Heine University in Dusseldorf and the Institute for Empirical Social Research at Alanus College and an American study by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education (RIWE is the publisher of this survey), focus on individuals who graduated from Waldorf schools between 1943 and 2004. The study of U.S. and Canadian students embraces the entire range; the German and Swiss studies cover those who finished school between the late 1950s and early 1990s.

International Comparisons

The three studies were designed to make possible a comparison of results. The same questionnaire was used in the German and Swiss studies (both were conducted by the same team of researchers) and the North American study was adapted to include a number of questions from the German and Swiss research of Dirk Randall and Heiner Barz.

The cluster of questions examined here asked respondents to indicate to what extent their time in a Waldorf school influenced their relationship concerning aspects of their lives and to indicate how important these aspects were to them. Although both studies rank responses on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the highest level of influence or importance, the intermediate steps in the two studies vary. In the German-Swiss study the choices run from 1 (negative influence) to 5 (very positive influence). The choices in the North American study, however, run from 1 (not at all influential) to 5 (extremely influential). The difference in interpretation between a negative influence and no influence makes it somewhat difficult to compare data. The German report groups data as either negative or positive, with responses of 1 and 2 combined to indicate negative influence and 4 and 5 combined to indicate positive influence.

For the sake of comparison, I have taken the liberty of grouping the North American responses in a similar way, overlooking the middle of the scale. I should note, too, that I am comparing the 35 categories that overlap between the two studies; each study includes different data sets that do not overlap. The primary

question and the 35 categories are these:

Please rate the following aspects of your life, first in terms of the influence your Waldorf education has had on that aspect of your life... and second in terms of how important to you each aspect is in your life....

Do we do enough to challenge students to immerse themselves in self-directed activity?

1. My ability to express my views and attitudes to others
2. My ability to know my own capacities and limitations
3. My interest in discussing points of view different from my own
4. My fairness and tolerance regarding other people's opinions
5. My ability to think critically and to evaluate
6. My creative capacities
7. My self-confidence (in the sense "I am capable of doing something")
8. My readiness to share responsibilities in my community
9. My ability to handle competition
10. My spiritual, religious orientation
11. My practical knowledge (e.g., how to repair a bicycle)
12. My grasp of theoretical sciences (e.g., physics, chemistry, mathematics)
13. My ability to step into the thoughts and feelings of others
14. My ability to work on something together with others
15. My ability to formulate my own judgment about something
16. My spontaneity
17. My ability to resolve conflicts with others
18. My ability to challenge assumptions
19. My ability to express myself verbally
20. My feeling of self-worth (in the sense "I am worth something")
21. My athletic abilities and achievements
22. My sense of responsibility for the environment
23. My choice of profession
24. My ability to endure and overcome burdens
25. My feeling of responsibility for my own health
26. My interest in working with other cultures and traditions
27. My interest in spiritual themes
28. My feeling of responsibility for other human beings
29. The development of a meaningful perspective on life
30. My love of learning
31. My ability to react in an open and flexible way to changing circumstances
32. My political orientation
33. My interest in working with anthroposophical themes (e.g., reincarnation, karma)
34. My ability to see certain developments of our times in a wider context
35. My ability to overcome personal crises successfully

Table 1 gives an overview of the available data. German responses are on the left, North American responses are on the right. The symbol "+" pertains to what graduates cited as the positive influence of school on the various categories and combines the percentages of 4 and 5 on the response scale. The "-" columns combine the percentages of responses indicated with 1 or 2. The columns headed "Imp" combine the percentages of responses given as 4 or 5 in the scale of relative importance. The difference between importance and positive influence is calculated in the columns headed "Diff."

For the most part, students in both groupings found the same things to be important, although the precise sequence varies. Twenty-four of the 35 are ranked within four places of one another. For instance, work on my own is most important to the greatest percentage of German graduates and it is fourth most important to North American graduates. "Self-confidence" is first on the North American side, fourth on the German side. "Form own judgments" is sixth on the German side, ninth

among North American graduates. In eleven categories, however, the difference is greater than four places.

The only category in which they are in full agreement concerns anthroposophy. It is the least important of the aspects for Waldorf graduates both in Germany and in North America. With two exceptions (step into others' minds and resolve conflicts), German respondents rated the aspects relating to social skills higher than did their North American counterparts. North American graduates, on the other hand, tended to rate those aspects pertaining to their own sense of self more highly. Those aspects furthest apart on the scale were "sense for the environment," "handle competition," "love of learning," "overcome crises," and "meaningful view of life." The first two were rated notably higher by the German graduates, the last three by the North American graduates. For instance, 86% of the German respondents viewed a sense for the environment as being important in their lives, whereas only 81% of the North American respondents did. It stands as the tenth most important category among the Germans; among North American respondents it is number nineteen. On the other hand, unless we can compare these data with graduates from other, non-Waldorf schools, we cannot know whether this difference is meaningful or not; after all, between 80 and 90 percent of both groups believe it is an important issue.

If we turn our attention to aspects that show the greatest disparity between the German and North American graduates, we see quite a different picture. Sixty-five percent of German respondents found spontaneity important, and only 49% of North American respondents did. A greater percentage of German graduates also found "see times in broader view" (11% difference), "choice of profession" (11%), "athletic abilities" (18%), and "overcome crises" (12%) more important than did their North American counterparts. A greater percentage of German graduates (70%) than North American graduates (56%) felt "practical knowledge" to be important. In five categories we find a difference that is more than twice the average (9%). These are athletic abilities, share responsibilities, grasp of science, handle competition, and meaningful view of life. Only 32% of the German respondents rated the latter

Ger +	Ger -	Ger Imp	Ger Diff	Categories	NAm +	NAm -	NAm Imp	NAm Diff
75	5	91	16	1. express views to others	69	6	90	21
76	8	92	15	2. work on my own	61	7	91	30
54	18	84	30	3. know own capacities	48	15	76	28
79	3	90	11	4. tolerate others' views	63	8	90	27
72	6	88	17	5. think critically	63	10	92	29
88	2	86	-1	6. creative capacities	87	1	86	-1
64	13	89	25	7. self-confidence	69	7	94	25
77	3	85	8	8. share responsibilities	49	16	62	13
31	26	70	38	9. handle competition	21	41	43	22
31	11	37	6	10. spiritual/religious life	27	44	44	17
50	13	70	20	11. practical knowledge	29	34	56	27
34	28	69	36	12. grasp of science	26	38	44	18
71	3	85	13	13. step into others' minds	57	8	83	26
74	4	85	11	14. work with others	62	8	82	20
68	6	88	20	15. form own judgments	55	7	89	34
48	7	65	17	16. spontaneity	29	32	49	20
54	8	80	26	17. resolve conflicts	40	20	82	42
62	6	85	23	18. challenge assumptions	49	10	80	31
75	7	87	12	19. express verbally	84	8	93	9
62	12	85	23	20. feeling of self-worth	62	8	91	29
24	28	53	28	21. athletic abilities	24	44	35	11
77	2	86	9	22. sense for environment	59	10	81	22
38	13	65	27	23. choice of profession	36	36	76	40
53	15	85	32	24. endure burdens	38	22	82	44
44	5	73	29	25. sense for own health	29	35	80	51
67	4	77	10	26. other cultures	53	17	70	17
38	12	38	0	27. spiritual themes	37	28	42	5
79	2	88	8	28. responsibility for others	61	7	82	21
59	5	32	-26	29. meaningful view of life	64	8	82	18
53	13	83	30	30. love of learning	74	4	91	17
60	6	82	22	31. flexible to change	46	15	86	40
20	11	40	20	32. political orientation	23	48	48	25
31	17	26	-4	33. interest in anthroposophy	22	48	21	-1
59	4	66	7	34. see times in broader views	52	16	77	25
48	8	77	29	35. overcome crises	36	22	89	53

Table 1: Overview of responses from German and North American graduates

as important compared with 82% of the North American respondents. Science and sports are also markedly more important for the German graduates than for those who have graduated from Waldorf schools in North America. 69% of the German graduates indicated that a grasp of the theoretical sciences was important to them and 53% cited their athletic ability as important. Only 44% of the North American graduates found a grasp of science to be important and, surprisingly, on a continent that glorifies sports, only 35% cited athletics as important in their lives. Competition plays a larger role among German graduates: 70% compared to 43% found the ability to handle competitive situations to be important in their lives. On the other hand, a greater percentage of Germans also found it to be important to share communal responsibilities: 85% compared to 62%.

How do respondents in the two groups rate the influence of their Waldorf educations on these same aspects? The highest percentage of respondents in both groups found that their creative capacities had been strongly influenced by their

time in a Waldorf school (88% German, 87% North America). This is also the category that had the highest positive response. Six of the categories are found in the next ten responses for both groups (tolerate others' view, express verbally, work on my own, express views to others, work with others, think critically). Both German and North American graduates cited these categories as areas in which Waldorf education had a positive influence. The other four entries differ from group to group. High percentages of German graduates found the school to have influenced them in aspects that have a clear social focus (responsibility for others, sense for environment, share responsibilities, step into others' minds), whereas the North American graduates saw the schools' influence as stronger in aspects of personal development (love of learning, self-confidence, meaningful view of life, feelings of self-worth). It is worth noting that these studies may demonstrate a difference between German and North American consciousness, mentality, or mindset, distinct from time in a Waldorf school.

The aspects cited as least influenced by Waldorf education were, for the most part, identical and include “grasp of science,” “athletic abilities,” and “handle competition,” as well as the three aspects pertaining to spiritual life.

On the whole, German graduates found that their time in Waldorf schools had a greater positive influence on their lives than did the North American graduates, 57% to 49%. This difference is apparent in Chart 1. With the exception of five categories (self confidence, express verbally, love of learning, political orientation, meaningful view of life), the percentage of German graduates who cited a positive influence from their time in a Waldorf school is higher than that of the North American graduates. These five categories, how

large percentages of North American respondents cited, at best, a negligible influence of Waldorf education on such aspects as spiritual/religious life, grasp of science, handle competition, practical knowledge, and sense for own health deserves attention.

Table 2 groups responses according to the difference between personal importance and school influence. Figures for German graduates are on the left, those for North American respondents are on the right. The highest difference cited by the German graduates pertains to being able to handle competitive situations. Seventy percent held this ability to be important and only 31% experienced school as having a positive influence on the development of this ability (a difference of

38%). On the North American side, we find “overcome crises” in the first position. 89% felt this ability to be important and only 36% indicated that school had a positive influence on the development of this capacity. The average difference is 17% in German data and 24% in North American data.

This indicates that a greater number of North American graduates may experience a dis-

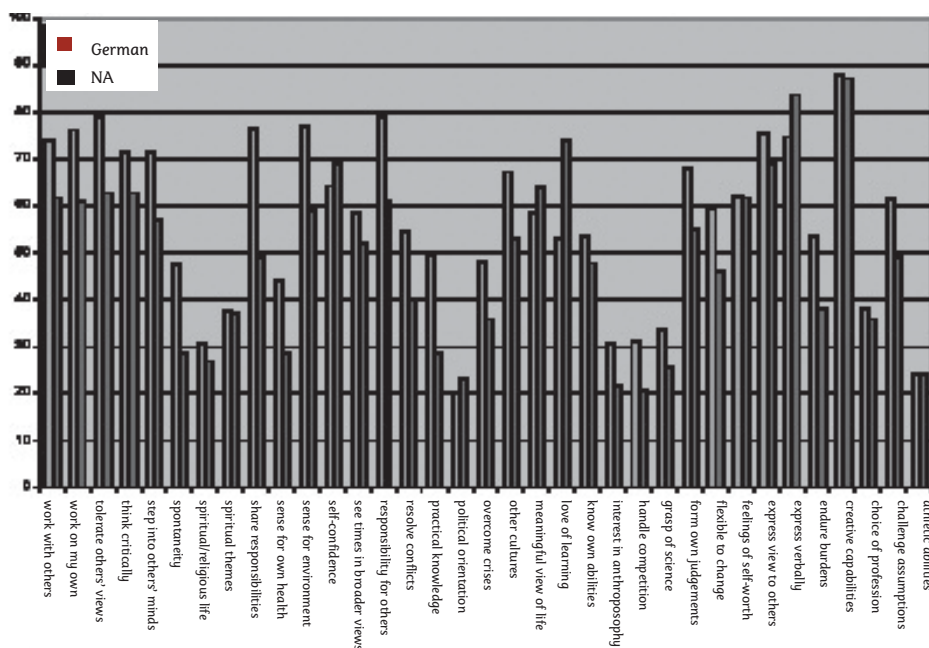


Chart 1: Positive influence of Waldorf education—comparison of German and North American graduates

ever, correspond to the disparity between social responsibility and personal development.

A look at the areas in which Waldorf education had a less than positive influence on respondents' lives is shown in Chart 2. In almost every category, the percentage of North American graduates that cited a less than positive influence is higher. The exceptions are “self-confidence,” “feelings of self-worth,” “know own abilities,” and “love of learning.” German graduates indicated that their time in school had a negative influence on these aspects of their lives. That such relatively

parity between what is important to them and what they experience in school.

The difference between the North American and German studies is generally greater in aspects that have to do with knowledge and learning. In data from German graduates, for instance, the difference concerning the ability to grasp theoretical science is 36%, and in North American responses it is 18%. Only 44% of North American graduates, however, felt this to be important. Similarly, “the ability to work on my own” shows a 15% difference in the German

Categories	Ger +	Ger Imp	Ger Diff	Categories	NAm +	NAm Imp	NAm Diff
handle competition	31	70	39	overcome crises	36	89	53
grasp of science	34	69	35	sense for own health	29	80	51
endure burdens	53	85	32	endure burdens	38	82	44
love of learning	53	83	30	resolve conflicts	40	82	42
know own abilities	54	84	30	choice of profession	36	76	40
overcome crises	48	77	29	flexible to change	46	86	40
sense for own health	44	73	29	form own judgments	55	89	34
athletic abilities	24	53	29	challenge assumptions	49	80	31
choice of profession	38	65	27	work on my own	61	91	30
resolve conflicts	54	80	24	think critically	63	92	29
self-confidence	64	89	25	feelings of self-worth	62	91	29
challenge assumptions	62	85	23	know own abilities	48	76	28
feelings of self-worth	62	85	23	practical knowledge	29	56	27
flexible to change	60	82	22	tolerate others' views	63	90	27
form own judgments	68	88	20	step into others' minds	57	83	26
practical knowledge	50	70	20	political orientation	23	48	25
political orientation	20	40	20	see times in broader views	52	77	25
spontaneity	48	65	17	handle competition	21	43	22
think critically	72	88	16	sense for environment	59	81	22
express views to others	75	91	16	responsibility for others	61	82	21
work on my own	76	92	16	express views to others	69	90	21
step into others' minds	71	85	14	spontaneity	29	49	20
express verbally	75	87	12	work with others	62	82	20
work with others	74	85	11	grasp of science	26	44	18
tolerate others' views	79	90	11	meaningful view of life	64	82	18
other cultures	67	77	10	spiritual/religious life	27	44	17
sense for environment	77	86	9	other cultures	53	70	17
share responsibilities	77	85	8	share responsibilities	49	62	13
responsibility for others	79	88	9	love of learning	79	91	12
see times in broader views	59	66	7	athletic abilities	24	35	11
spiritual/religious life	31	37	6	express verbally	84	93	9
spiritual themes	38	38	0	spiritual themes	37	42	5
creative capacities	88	86	-2	interest in anthroposophy	22	21	-1
interest in anthroposophy	31	26	-5	creative capacities	87	86	-1
meaningful view of life	59	32	-27	self-confidence	69	94	25

Table 2: Difference between Influence and Importance

study and a 30% difference in the North American results. The third highest difference in both studies pertains to the ability to endure burdens (German 32%, North America 44%). While both groups felt this to be important, neither experienced a positive influence on the development of this capacity from their time in school.

There is little question that these differences are important for an understanding of the role that educational experience plays in supporting the attainment of core capacities. German graduates cited a disconnection between schools' influence on their ability to handle competitive situations and their sense of its importance, but, at the

same time, felt that their experience in school did not support the development of self-confidence, a sense of self-worth, their love of learning, or their insight into their own abilities. Similarly, North American graduates indicated a disparity between the importance they give to the ability to overcome crises and schools' influence on the development of this capacity. They also left school feeling, relative to their German counterparts, that they had not learned the importance of sharing responsibilities, being responsible for the environment or their own health, or having the ability to resolve conflicts.

Perhaps the disparity between subjective experiences of importance and experiences of institutional influence points toward a weakness of the schools to fully engage the learning individual. Perhaps the issue is not primarily a problem of program or method but one of culture. Do we do enough to challenge students to immerse themselves in self-directed activity? These are activities that strengthen the capacity of individuals to respond out of themselves, whether in a competitive situation, in a moment of crisis, or in a situation in which one just has to stick things out. Perhaps what the data indicate is not that Waldorf schools need to adopt mainstream approaches, but that we have to re-examine our fundamental principles and ask ourselves whether or not we live up to them.

The Fine Line between Bias and Prejudice

Each of the studies has its bias. The German and Swiss studies look at the responses of Waldorf graduates through the eyes of conventional educational research and view them in light of general societal expectations for educational institutions, while the North American study views the graduates' responses through the eyes of supportive Waldorf educators.

When does bias become prejudice? Randall—a lead researcher for the German study who has been on the periphery of the Waldorf school movement for a number of years as a parent and, professionally, as a project analyst for a foundation which has supported Waldorf schools in various countries and, in recent years, a number of comparative studies—has a self-described critical relationship to what happens in Waldorf schools. Much of his contribution in the almost 400-page report revolves around questions that in his assessment cast a critical light on Waldorf school practices.

Randall presents results with a certain eloquent disinterest until he finds something that, from his point of view, seems questionable. Then one can almost see him leaping onto his horse and riding off to give battle. There are several examples in his 60-page article. Take, for instance, the discovery that there is a noticeable difference between the percentage of male graduates who are able to identify strongly with their time in school and the percentage of female graduates.

Randall writes: “These results support the conjecture that girls are better able to adapt to the situation in Waldorf schools than boys are.” He goes on to suppose that this conjectured conclusion is based on the fact that girls respond better to the “musical-artistic tendencies of these schools” and that it is perhaps also due to the greater percentage of female teachers—also present in public education. At this point, Randall lets loose a salvo of questions:

What does this mean, however, for male Waldorf students and their development? Is there a dearth of male role models in the Waldorf schools? The development of one's sense of identity as a man is not an easy undertaking in a “feminized” environment. How do Waldorf schools deal with aggression, with emerging sexuality, with alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs? Are such things discussed openly and constructively or are they dealt with as bagatelles, swept aside, talked to death or moralized? Does the 8-year class teacher still make sense? Do the changing social structures demand a new look at gender socialization among the students in the feminized environment of the Waldorf schools?

What began as conjecture seems to have become stated as truth. Without a comparison to the experience of students from other, non-Waldorf schools—in which it is likely, too, that girls generally suffer less than boys—Waldorf schools cannot legitimately be singled out on this issue.

Later Randall tackles the question of student achievement and the lack of performance assessment in the schools, again based on input from graduates. He sees the lower percentage of positive responses from male participants as the basis once again to presume a lack of performance-based assessment in the schools. Also in regard to sports: “Here we find again the tendency that performance-based learning plays a subordinate role in Waldorf schools.” And he becomes almost passionate when addressing the expressed lack of certainty among graduates on how to deal with competitive situations:

Here too we find clearly expressed that Waldorf schools do not place enough value on student achievement and performance, on the pressure to perform and

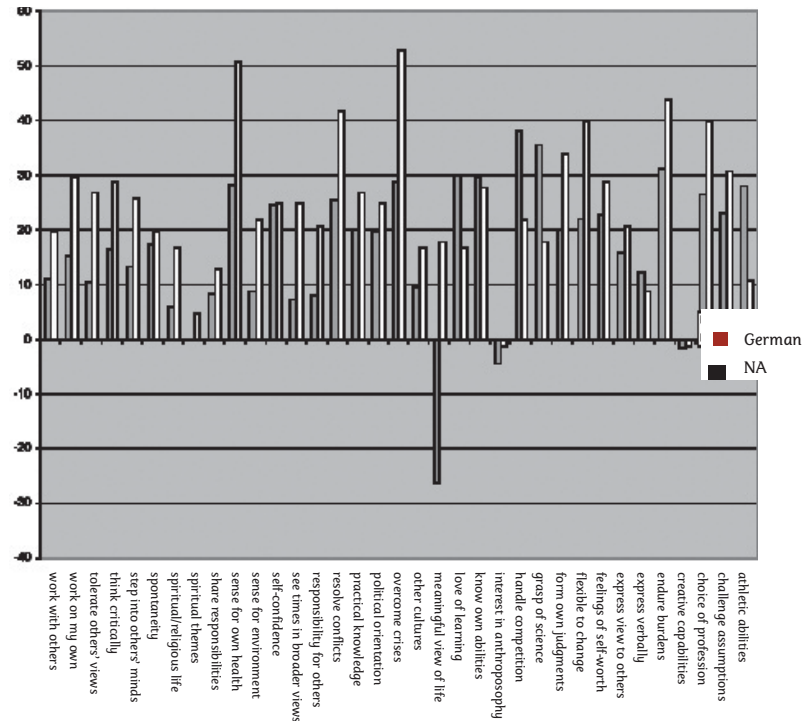


Chart 2: Comparison between Importance and Influence

on learning strategies to deal with competitive situations, which was clearly shown in the study by Randall (1999). Why do the Waldorf schools, or the teachers there make such a big deal about it? Then it is well-known that performance and competition can also be a source of joy, they can motivate and satisfy one, yes, they can even support social processes. The Waldorf schools are thus not appropriate places to adequately prepare students for the performance-based, competitive aspects of our society, in part because they have grown apart from it or chosen to distance themselves.

One wonders whether Randall bothered to read the analysis by his colleague Michael Brater of the vocational biographies of the same group of graduates. Although acknowledging the respondents' generally positive assessment of their time in Waldorf schools, Randall's report emphasizes areas in which the schools do not measure up to ubiquitous societal educational standards. They may be fulfilling their intrinsic

goals, something the majority of the respondents affirmed, but they do show specific weaknesses in areas that play a primary role in mainstream education. These are the ones Randall addresses most energetically.

The North American study, which was similarly structured, shows a different bias. If one takes the published results of this study at face value, Waldorf schools not only produce good college students and fine citizens, but graduates are also healthy, socially intelligent, tolerant, artistic individuals who spend time with their friends, help others in need, don't watch television, and earn good livings. They appear to be perfect examples of well-rounded individuals able to assimilate well into a presumably decadent culture.

Whereas Randall was explicit about the goals of the German study (to discover, on the one hand, whether or not the claims made by Waldorf educators about the results of Waldorf education are supported by graduates, and, on the other hand, "to make a contribution to the further development of Waldorf schools by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses"), David Mitchell

and Douglas Gerwin, authors of the North American study, do not explicitly articulate goals for their research. It appears that they set out to study what Waldorf graduates do with their lives and how, in retrospect, they view their Waldorf educations. The structure of the report belies this ostensibly open-ended, heuristic approach. The presentation seems designed to dispel certain assumptions about Waldorf education, specifically concerning its ability to prepare students to succeed in college.

What Randall skims over—the general affirmation of a productive schooling—is the meat and potatoes of this report. Mitchell and Gerwin seem to be satisfied with the fact that, yes, Waldorf schools are good and that even “students attending the newer or pioneering Waldorf high schools are at no disadvantage, in terms of college placement or career choices, when compared to those graduating from older Waldorf schools.” This level of analysis may serve well for enrollment and fundraising brochures, but it does not provide much of interest for the teacher or for anyone interested in the further development of Waldorf education. The authors of the report have acknowledged this. The question concerning the data on Waldorf graduates, one that applies as well to the German report, is whether it is specific enough to support assessment of current practices with a view toward better meeting the needs of Waldorf school pupils.

Compromise?

Perhaps the most troubling statistic to come out of the studies is one of those which has been broadcast most loudly: that only a small percentage of Waldorf school graduates go on to work in anthroposophical endeavors. This choice—made by precious few, it seems—may have nothing to do with indoctrination; it may have to do with schools helping students find real perspectives for living a life of practical idealism. Do the data suggest that we don’t do enough to give our students concrete ways to apply the forces of individuality that we help them to awaken in school?

During a teacher’s meeting at the end of the first year of the first Waldorf school, Rudolf Steiner spoke about the tension between his edu-

cational principles and practices and expectations of the educational establishment: “All that is important is that we do not enter into any compromises.... Outwardly, we may be conciliatory, but inwardly, when it comes to questions of principle, one must hold a strong position. To do this it is necessary to have the strength to see the things radically and not have any inclination to compromise.”¹

Endnote

1. Steiner, Rudolf. *Conferences with Teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Volume One*, July 24, 1920, Forest Row, England: Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, 1986, p. 95.

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[Note: This article is a condensed version of a chapter published from *Survey of Waldorf Graduates, Phase III*, by Douglas Gerwin and David Mitchell]

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