

Waldorf Around the World

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A meeting of the Hague Circle¹ took place recently at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, within the context of the biennial “Pedagogical Section Working Days.” These large meetings provide an opportunity to delve more deeply into topics of importance for the world-wide Waldorf school movement, which now officially includes more than 1,000 schools.² This time we took up these three topics:

- Criteria for Waldorf Schools;
- Surveys of Waldorf Graduates in Germany, Switzerland, and North America; and
- An Introduction to Portfolios and Projects in Assessing Student Learning.

As the second century in Waldorf education fast approaches, our schools are increasingly scrutinized and measured by scales that are not of our choosing. These scales do not measure, in many cases, what we hold to be important. Our best validations are our alumni and those who populate our schools. As we face questions of the assessment of our students, the identity of our schools, and the validity of our approaches to teaching and learning, our responses must not be defensive. They must be based upon our observations, our experiences with our children, and what our graduates tell us and show us about themselves and their lives.

Criteria for Waldorf Schools

As you can imagine, the topic of criteria brought about lively and passionate discussion. How would you define a Waldorf school? Why would you need a definition? If you take away the elements of your school one by one, such as eurythmy or the college of teachers, at which point does it cease to be identifiable as a Waldorf school? The growth of Waldorf education, particularly in countries that lack the resources to train

teachers well and support schools confidently, confronts us with these questions because there are many who would use the name “Waldorf” without much sense of what it means.

Participants with many years of experience, representing several different cultures, sat side by side to consider such questions; everyone saw, as well, the dangers of having a list of criteria. One speaker—after Heraclitus—argued that Waldorf education must be seen as a process rather than as a thing. He then—after Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—differentiated between education that works on a principle of “banking”—which is mainly concerned with transmitting knowledge—and that which is predicated on “posing” education—which has to do with a continual state of becoming. He suggested that the deciding factor in assessing the effectiveness of education comes down to what kind of people we are in Waldorf schools.

Other contributors led us in noting some of the qualities found in a Waldorf school community and in its teachers: interest, initiative, spirituality, and interpersonal relationships, to name a few. A long-time Waldorf school representative to schools around the world and a leader in the German Waldorf school movement, which now has more than 200 schools, also asked if there is an essential element for all Waldorf schools that, if missing, would make it impossible for a school to be a Waldorf school. Could a Waldorf school, for example, exist without a relationship to anthroposophy, or have a director instead of a circle of colleagues to guide the school? These questions seem particularly pressing when there is not a council of Waldorf schools whose representatives can deliberate and decide together how best to identify and then stand for the work that they do every day.

At the end of the conference, I found myself identifying three basic elements that would ensure

the integrity of what we are doing as Waldorf schools. The first is to find the principles of our education in *Study of Man* (more recently translated as *Foundations of Human Experience*). These include such principles as educating in light of body, soul, and spirit and educating in light of developmental realities and the needs of a child's changing consciousness. The second is the commitment to on-going self-education and self-development on the part of the teachers and staff of a school. The third is a commitment to collegiality in our work within a school, on the one hand, and, on the other, as schools within an association like the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA).

Participants agreed that a number of groups in different countries would draw up some suggestions, which will then be circulated to various school associations for consideration, amendment, and approval. These could then be used as appropriate in helping new schools in countries that do not have Waldorf school associations or similar supports.

Graduate Surveys

Many tens of thousands of Waldorf school graduates have made their way into the world over the last 80 years or so. Knowing what kind of adults they have become is of great interest to those of us who have taught them and also to those who want to know more about Waldorf schools. We can refer to our students and graduates as “people of initiative,” but how do we know this? These questions and others have led to surveys in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and North America. Educators from three countries, including David Mitchell and Douglas Gerwin from North America, reported their findings during the Working Days conference.³

The lack of anything more than anecdotal information on our graduates is due chiefly to two reasons, according to the main researcher of the German report. First, the Waldorf school movement is too small and there has been little interest in trying to delve into the salient but seemingly ineffable aspects that characterize our educational aims. Second, the Waldorf school community itself has not been interested in the judgment of statisticians, mostly because there has been doubt that they would inquire into the

truly important results of childhood education. These reservations are now beginning to be overcome because of interest in these four areas for research:

1. An assumption that Waldorf education is health-bringing;
2. Protection against prejudices (e.g., Waldorf education creates anthroposophists or creates impractical artistic persons);
3. National governments, including especially at this time the governments of Eastern European nations, want information on the results of Waldorf education;
4. Waldorf school practices can be useful in other school settings.

The Findings

While the reports themselves are too long for me to give more than an impression here, a number of notes may be of interest. The German study focused on three age groups: those who are now ages 66 to 70, ages 43 to 62, and ages 33 to 40. The results were based on responses from 32% of the total surveys sent, more than 1,100 of about 3,500. The survey asked questions regarding these five areas of interest:

1. Why was Waldorf education chosen by their parents and why or why not did they themselves choose it for their own children?
2. What have been their choices in terms of life style, work and values?
3. What are their religious and spiritual orientations?
4. What has been the quality of their health?
5. What is their view of their own education and their experiences during school?

The Swiss study also provided some interesting findings. The survey turned up three principle motivations for attendance at a Rudolf Steiner/ Waldorf school:

1. The pedagogical approach in the school;
2. Considerations of and appreciation for anthroposophy;
3. Dissatisfaction with state-sponsored education.

It is also significant that 80% of Swiss respondents felt that they had been “seen,” that is, recognized for the individuality that they felt and feel themselves to be. Another common—and perhaps alarming—perception of graduates was

that Waldorf education's lack of focus on quantifiable attainment and outer recognition is actually a strength because it reveals that learning is worth doing for its inherent benefits to the learner, regardless of competition or recognition.

The results were of great interest and Dirk Randall, head of the German study, wants to continue by finding a pool of public school graduates with a profile similar to Waldorf school graduates in order to properly compare the groups. This would help to address the aim of schooling from the Waldorf schools' point of view and avoid falling into the trap of being measured by criteria of public school education alone. He emphasized that the overarching value of such surveys and analyses is to move from the present and what we are toward the future and what we want to be.

Portfolios and Projects as Learning Tools

The Waldorf School of Pottsdam, near Berlin, has embraced an interesting and apparently productive and satisfying method of healthy student assessment as part of each student's education. From grades 7 to 12, students spend approximately ten weeks per year doing project work appropriate to their ages. At the same time, students compile a portfolio that documents what they have discovered, giving themselves, their teachers, and others an opportunity to become conscious of the process of learning. Perhaps of equal interest for us as teachers is the expectation that the students decide what goes into the portfolio. They select what best illustrates who they believe they are. From the beginning, then, students are obliged to engage in age-appropriate self-reflection. This development of self-knowledge is a tremendously important element in education and illustrates a principle which would be well worth further study.

This process may be seen to further Rudolf Steiner's tenet that all education is self-education. Students make more and more substantial presentations over the years, culminating in a senior presentation. The presentation is meant to showcase the process of the project which in turn is documented and made part of the portfolio. Each student asks, in an age-appropriate way, "Does this show the world who I am and the best that I can do?"

In senior presentations, students are obliged to consciously engage in three areas of assess-

ment: the cognitive (What have I learned?—important to the world); the artistic and practical (What does it tell the world about me and me about myself?); and the quality of life experience (What lessons did I learn along the way?). The audience includes not only family, students, and friends, but also experts in the subject, professionals, and community members, including people from other Waldorf schools.

Endnotes

1. "The Hague Circle was founded at Pentecost 1950 as working group and administrative college of the European Waldorf Schools. ...From 1951 onwards, representatives of the Dutch, English and German schools have met either in Stuttgart or The Hague ... in order to prepare conferences, and represent the interests of Waldorf Education internationally. Today, the Hague Circle, as an organ of the Educational Section [of the Anthroposophical Society], tries to foster the spiritual connection between the schools world-wide in their anthroposophical foundation." Source: http://www.anthromedia.com/articles/education_and_teaching/development_of_waldorf_education_in_the_20th_century/institutions_and_developments_to_date/.
2. Editor's note: Rudolf Steiner was the Director of the first Waldorf School and also spoke of Waldorf schools as "self-administered." The tension here between his example and his words leaves room for many possibilities in Waldorf school governance.
3. The North American *Survey of Waldorf Graduates, Phase II*, not covered here, is available at AWSNA Publications 518/634-2222, or publications@awsna.org. An article in Volume XII Number 2 (Spring 2007) of the *Research Bulletin*, entitled "Standing Out without Standing Alone: Profile of Waldorf School Graduates" by Douglas Gerwin and David Mitchell, summarizes these findings.