Seven Myths of Social Participation of Waldorf Graduates

Wanda Ribeiro and Juan Pablo de Jesus Pereira

Introduction

Waldorf education continues to be relatively unknown. When first making contact with this pedagogy, people in general tend to find in it certain oddities that may elicit admiration or incredulity, as well as some doubts. Parents who decide to send their children to a Waldorf school know that they are taking a courageous step to be "different." The decision is not easy, because Waldorf education presents many differences in comparison with other teaching methods. Among the most obvious ones:

- No textbooks are used. Students create their own.
- There are no tests and no exams, at least in the lower grades. As a result, there is no failing of a grade.
- Reading and writing begin only in first grade and may take a long time to learn.
- All students remain grouped together for most of their classes from the first to the last (twelfth) grade (with occasional exceptions due to students entering or leaving the school).
- A single class teacher accompanies the class from grade 1 for up to eight years, teaching most or all the main subjects: mathematics, history, geography, the native language, and sciences.
- These subjects are taught in main lessons, daily classes lasting up to two hours each day for three or four weeks.
- Ideally, students learn the sciences such as physics, biology, chemistry, and geology using the so-called "Goethean phenomenological principle." This means that first of all they intensely experience and describe the related phenomena, and only later come to learn and elaborate the intellectual concepts about what they have experienced.
- Arts have the same importance and receive the same attention as all other subjects. They are not offered as extra classes or elective subjects; they include form drawing, sketching, painting, sculpture, pottery, weaving, music, drama, and handicrafts. Furthermore, in the elementary school years (grades 1–8), every subject is taught in an artistic way.
- Waldorf education is based on an anthroposophical understanding of the human being developed by Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly with regard to processes of child and adolescent development. The content of each school subject and the way the subject is taught follow specific guidelines about the characteristics of each age level.

In Brazil and many other countries, doubts arise when people first hear about Waldorf education because these differences and other aspects lie far away from what parents are used to finding in conventional schools. Some of these concerns have to do with the imagined difficulties graduates may meet when pursuing a higher education in good universities, their perceived tendency to stick to professions connected to the human sciences and the arts, their ability to later succeed in the job market, and so forth.

Wanda Ribeiro and Juan Pablo de Jesus Pereira, the authors of this study, were confronted with similar questions and doubts. Their daughter, Renata, presently attends class 10 at the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School of São Paulo (RSWS) in Brazil ("Escola Waldorf Rudolf Steiner de São Paulo"). When they first learned about Waldorf education some years ago, Juan Pablo's reaction was a feeling that he had somehow found a place for his child where human beings could be well prepared to later act in the "real world." Wanda, on the other hand, had many doubts. She thought that Waldorf education was interesting enough, but unfortunately "far away from reality." In 2001, when Renata was nine years old, after trying some conventional schools, they decided on

Waldorf education. Before very long, Wanda had no more doubts about the excellence of this method.

Nevertheless, when they began to meet other parents in that Waldorf school, the authors were surprised to find other parents struggling with the same doubts that Wanda had once had, and which the majority of people outside the school usually have. So they felt the need to objectively clarify such doubts and verify whether they corresponded to some reality, or whether they were simply "myths." (In this paper "myths" refers to the phenomena described in the *American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd Edition*: "A fiction, or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology.")

Parents who decide to send their child to a Waldorf school know that they are taking a courageous step to be "different."

Relying on Wanda's experience as a social scientist, the authors decided to begin by gathering some statistical data. Furthermore, this was an opportunity for Wanda to examine several other aspects that had attracted her interest when she first learned about Waldorf education. Juan Pablo decided to collaborate in the study in order to collect "serious" arguments when talking about Waldorf education. They began their research in August 2003 with interviews of Waldorf graduates, who are perhaps in the best position to bring truth and light to all these speculations and "myths." The results brought answers to many questions and a lot of information on Waldorf education itself.

This paper presents some of the statistical results collected in the interviews. Of course, numbers alone can hardly express the essentials of what was learned in this study or what Waldorf education really is, but they can surely shed some objective light on commonly held doubts. This research is not a pedagogical work; there are no discussions about education theories and approaches. It is a sociological work which investigates the results of the application of Waldorf education. This is what will be here called "social participation."

Methodology of the study

The field of investigation was the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School of Sao Paulo (RSWS) for the following reasons: first, it is necessary to locate a piece of research in a specific time and place; second, the school has a large enough cohort of graduates to provide a reliable base for a statistical sample; third, this was the pioneer Waldorf school in Brazil; fourth, it has graduates covering a wide range of ages, providing a wide view of the aspects the researchers wanted to explore. In all, 135 graduates of the school were interviewed between 2003 and 2006.

For this first research the authors considered just those who had finished high school at the RSWS, comprising a total of 108 who graduated between 1975 to 2002. This period was chosen because 1975 was the year of the first high school graduation, and 2002 because this allowed students to have at least one year's distance from their high school experience. 108 students represents a statistical sample with 95% confidence and an error margin of 10%. During the period 1975–2002, the school graduated 1345 students, according to its own records. Some subjects interviewed were recommended by people outside the school, some by other former students, while others were randomly selected from the school's Alumni Association (GEA, or "Grupo de Ex-alunos Waldorf"), particularly during its 2003 and 2004 annual meetings.

The authors designed a questionnaire of "open questions." This means that the interviewees could say anything they wished. There were no pre-determined answers. We present here only quantitative results of this first portion of the research. Qualitative elements will be presented elsewhere, and will constitute an outcome of the main goal: showing the distinguishing characteristics of a Waldorf school from a qualitative point of view. In all, 35 questions were designed with the goal of clarifying many aspects, some of them not included in this paper, such as the students' relationship with their class teachers, their opinions about watching TV, about people with whom they work, and so on.

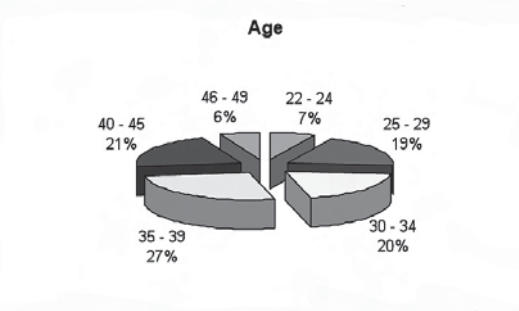
In 82% of the cases, interviews were conducted in person, recorded then and transcribed afterwards. During the interviews the authors wanted to apply a basic principle of Waldorf education, i.e. to make a personal connection with each subject.

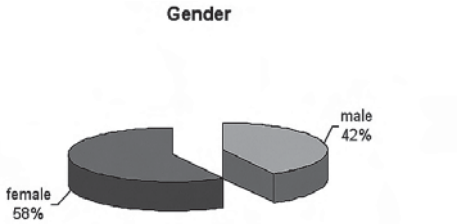
Only 11% of the interviews were conducted by telephone and 7% by e-mail. The authors planned an investigation about Waldorf education, and not about the RSWS. This means that the same questions could be applied to any Waldorf school. Furthermore, this research does not compare Waldorf education with other pedagogical systems.

The questions helped to make an assessment of what the authors call "seven myths about Waldorf education," detailing and expanding the doubts referred to in section 1. These myths are as follows:

1. Waldorf graduates are not able to pass the admissions examinations to Brazilian colleges and universities;[1]
2. They are not admitted to first-rank colleges and universities;
3. Once accepted by a good college or university, they are not able to finish their course;
4. Most Waldorf graduates become artists;
5. Waldorf education does not prepare students for the job market;
6. It does not prepare students to be professionally competitive;
7. Waldorf is a religious education.

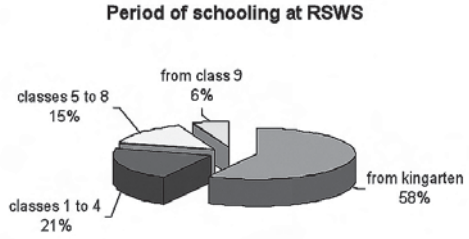
These myths summarize just some of the commonly held prejudices about Waldorf education in Brazil.[2] They constitute what seemed to the authors to be the most frequently expressed and typical doubts about the education.





Outline of the sample

At first some quantitative aspects about the graduates who were interviewed are shown. The graphs below show the distributions according to age and sex. It is interesting to note that our sample had about the same distribution of gender as the total number of graduates of the RSWS. The next graph shows the classes in which the interviewed people had begun their education at their school.



This graph shows that 58% completed their entire education at the school, 36% came into the school in the elementary or middle school, and 6% joined at the high school level; all of the latter came from "conventional" schools. It is interesting to call attention to the fact that for many years RSWS was the only Waldorf school in the city of São Paulo (in fact, in Brazil) with a high school. It is also interesting to note that graduates who entered the school in the upper classes said that their own opinion was fundamental to this decision. They said they had been looking for a "different" education.

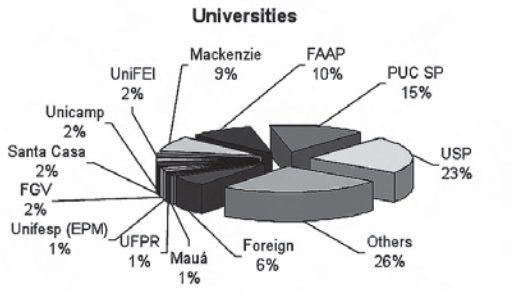
Assessment of the seven myths

Myth number one: Waldorf graduates are not able to pass admission examinations to Brazilian colleges and universities.

Not all graduates tried to follow a university course. The next graph shows the percentage of those who did. 100% of the students who took admission examinations to colleges and universities passed them. This shows something very significant in terms of academic achievement. There are many private high schools that specialize in preparing their students to take admission exams to universities; this is done, for example, by separating the classes into various vocational streams (because of differences in subjects and difficulties tested in those exams), such as the physical sciences, maths/computer science and engineering, biological and medical sciences, law, and so forth, and directing the teaching to the programs of admission exams. No Waldorf school in Brazil has a curriculum with this goal: all of them provide a general education. Nevertheless, the performances of graduates on the admission exams to colleges and universities were exceptional.

One has also to understand that many Waldorf graduates take 1-semester or 1-year preparatory courses for those exams after graduation, but the end-effect shows that Waldorf education does not hinder going to a university—on the contrary, as indicated by the fact that only 3% did not pursue a university degree

This study showed another very significant piece of information: 91% of those interviewed who did take admission exams were admitted into a university on their first attempt, 8% on the second attempt and only 1% after the third attempt. It should also be noted that very rarely does a student in class 12 take a preparatory course in parallel to attending school, because the curriculum of class 12 is very demanding. As a matter of fact, 21% of the interviewed graduates passed admission examinations to universities without going to preparatory courses, which is also a very high percentage in comparison to other established high schools.



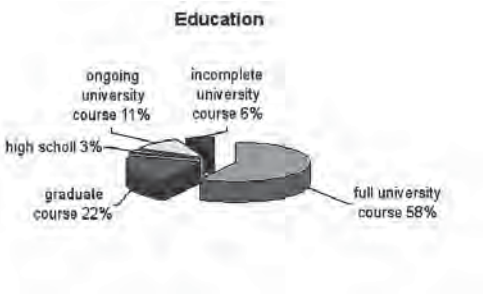
Myth number two: Graduates are not admitted to first-rank colleges and universities.

This myth is a consequence of the previous one. After telling someone that graduates did very well in admission exams, the authors were typically confronted with the statement that the students were probably not able to enter good universities. Therefore, the authors decided to investigate the institutions that were attended. The next graph shows in detail universities and colleges that are rated as top-ranked by the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

The University of São Paulo (USP), by far the leading university for science in the country, ranked among the best 150 in the world. The Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC/SP), Escola Paulista de Medicina (EPM), and Santa Casa rank among the main faculties of medicine in the country. "Others" stands for universities and colleges not so well ranked. So, it is possible to see that 68% of all graduates went to highly rated institutions.

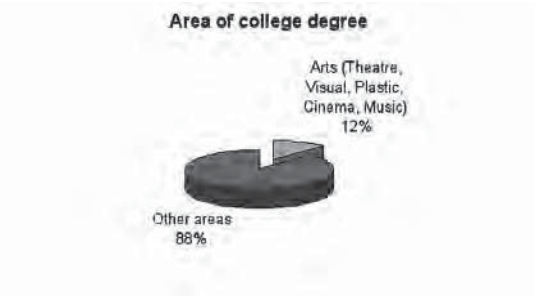
Myth number three: Graduates are not able to finish their university courses.

Another common statement is: "Even if Waldorf graduates pass the admission exams to universities, they are not able to finish successfully." The first graph shows the percentage of Waldorf students who finished their higher education and received college or university degrees. The next graph complements the preceding one, showing in more detail the educational grade attained by Waldorf graduates. This graph shows that 80% of Waldorf graduates successfully finished university. (One should also take into consideration a further 11% were still attending university at the time of the assessment.)

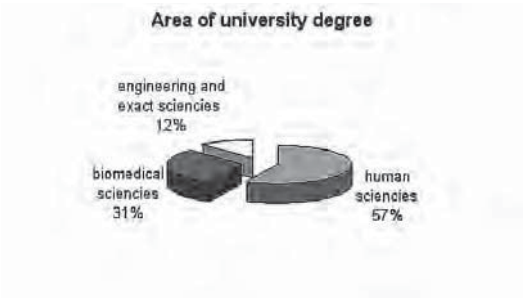


Myth number four: Most Waldorf graduates become artists.

Because Waldorf education devotes the same importance to artistic subjects as it gives to traditional academic subjects, besides using artistic means for teaching every subject in elementary and middle school, people think that the education produces only artists. The first graph shows the choices of Waldorf graduates in various college disciplines, subdividing the artistic ones (theater, plastic arts, visual arts, cinema, and music).

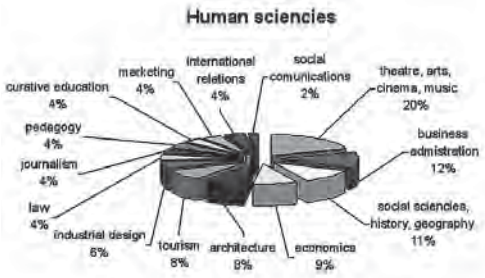


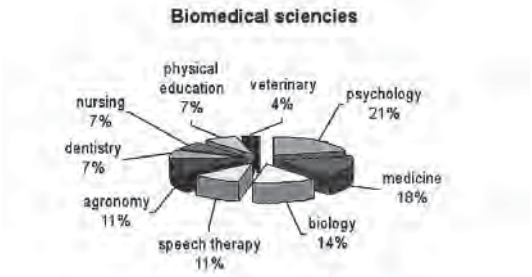
The next graph shows the distribution of college degrees subdivided among biomedical, engineering/pure sciences and human sciences areas.

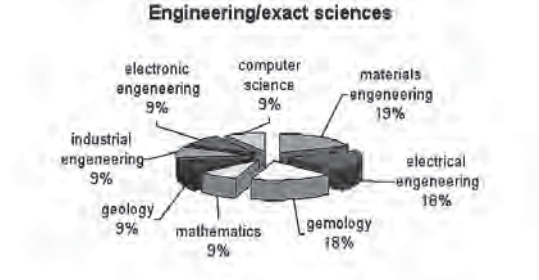


These are areas used in Brazil for large admission exams to universities, such as Fuvest (USP along with some other independent faculties) and Vunesp, the two admission exams in Brazil with the largest number of candidates.

It is interesting to compare this distribution of candidates with the overall distribution of candidates who took the two admission examinations cited above: 50% for human sciences, 30% biomedical, and 20% engineering/pure sciences. This contradicts the common myth that Waldorf graduates tend towards the human sciences. The following graphs show details of these three areas in corresponding sub-areas.

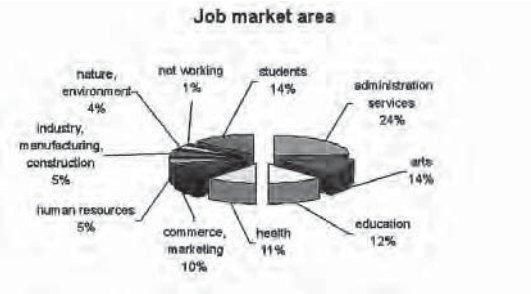






Myth number five: Waldorf education does not prepare its students for the job market.

There is a belief that Waldorf education educates people to work only in artistic areas. The next graph shows data about the jobs currently being held by the interviewed graduates.



Myth number six: Waldorf education does not prepare students for a professional competitive world.

Because Waldorf education strongly emphasizes social relations among students, as well as being a humanistic form of education, there is a myth that its graduates leave school unprepared for, or have difficulties in dealing with, competition in their jobs. To gain an insight into this question, graduates were asked if this had happened to them in their professional activities. The answers are plotted in the next graph.

The subtitles in this graph require some further explanation. Of the respondents, 38% thought competitiveness in the job market and a humanistic background were completely different things; for them, to be prepared or not for competition was essentially a personal question, so Waldorf education did no harm; 36% thought Waldorf education helped because it prepared them to think and act in flexible ways and that these were positive when they were seeking a job; 11% said it is a personal question, but Waldorf education gave them elements that helped in some competitive situations or gave them some ethical support; 9% thought they were harmed by Waldorf education because they did not feel prepared for any kind of competitiveness; 5% believed Waldorf education provided for a hard beginning as far as competition was concerned, but after some time they found their way, and 1% did not know how to answer the question.

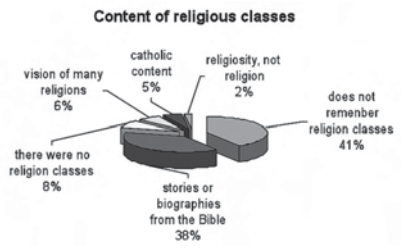
Myth number seven: Waldorf education is a religious education.

Waldorf education is strongly based upon the spiritual worldview introduced by Rudolf Steiner, which he called Anthroposophy. Some people regard it erroneously as a religion and claim that it contains religious doctrine. More important than disproving the claim that Anthroposophy is a religion is recognition of the fact that Anthroposophy is explicitly no part of the school curriculum, and, as a rule, is not mentioned by teachers.

Every religious school that follows a specific doctrine or confession has religious classes. By contrast, Waldorf schools recommend that students, mainly in their younger years, receive religious education from their parents, church, synagogue, and so forth. In former years, the RSWS had religious representatives of various confessions come to give religion classes, but this practice ended for lack of interest on the part of the religious representatives.

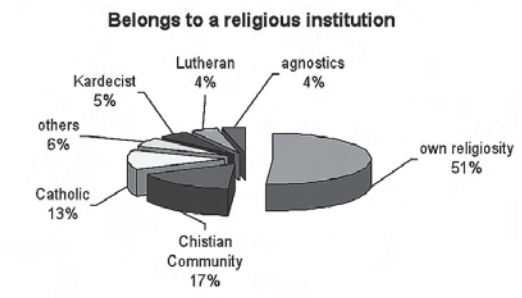
Applying Steiner's recommendation that young children should receive a religious education, some Waldorf schools offer so-called "free religion classes," in general given by the teachers themselves. On the other hand, Bible stories and stories from many religious traditions (Hindu, Greek and Roman mythology, and Norse myths, and so forth) are part of the history and literature curricula.

The authors of the study investigated the myth of Waldorf education as a religious schooling by asking what was the subject of the graduates' religion classes.



Some subtitles need further explanation. Among those who responded, 38% remembered that classes covered stories or biographies from the Bible but without any religious doctrine; 8% said they had no religious classes because they entered the school during high school and there were no religion classes for that level; 6% reported that they had received a view of several religions; 5% answered their religion classes had Catholic content because their parents were Catholic; 2% said religion classes did not bring any religious doctrine and that Waldorf education is not a religious institution even though a religious tone is evident in several aspects, for example, in the verse that the students say at the beginning of every class day.

The next graph shows the distribution of graduates according to religious confessions. For the Christian Community[3] for Kardecism.[4] "Others" includes Baptists, Jews, Presbyterians, Buddhists, Cabalists, and adepts of Candomblé.[5]



Summary

Myth number one: Waldorf graduates are not able to pass admission examinations to Brazilian universities. 100% of the graduates who took college entrance exams were approved for admission.

Myth number two: Graduates are not admitted to first-rank colleges or universities. 68% got into highly ranked universities.

Myth number three: Graduates are not able to finish their university courses. 92% graduated from their university courses.

Myth number four: Most Waldorf graduates become artists. Only 12% of the graduates surveyed had chosen artistic careers.

Myth number five: Waldorf education does not prepare for the job market. 99% are participating in the job market.

Myth number six: Waldorf education does not prepare for a professional competitive world. 84% did not experience any detriment to their capacity to compete in the job market.

Myth number seven: It is a religious education. 100% did not notice any kind of religious doctrine or teachings.

Conclusions

This study shows that the seven myths examined in the study do not correspond to reality. Waldorf education has its own unique character. One of its distinctive features is the essential participation of parents, teachers, and students in the education. This participation is very important because Waldorf education does not follow the usual educational standards, with the result that students and parents develop a feeling of being "different." Many people don't like to be called "different," so it is important that they become aware of the positive results provided by this education.

The number of differences between Waldorf education and other educational methods is myriad. Nevertheless, the interviewed graduates found that the differences they saw during their education fell mainly into two categories: the respect for the individual developmental rhythms and pace of maturing of each student; and the central role of the arts in the unfolding of this process of developing personal abilities and sensitivity. Herewith are some quotes from the interviewed graduates concerning these two aspects:

On the respect for the individual rhythm of development and maturity in each student

"Waldorf's aim is to consider the necessities of each human being according to his age."

"There I could be myself. It is a question of trust."

"Human development for the whole of life, not just preparing for college"

"Respect for each student's learning process and individual assessment of each one's progress"

"The range of different kinds of experiences led to a deeper and wider development of the self."
"Respect for individuality"
"Creative autonomy"

On the importance of the arts in the educational process

"It gives a global view of life."
"It gives flexibility to act in the world."
"It teaches many capacities."
"It gives self-confidence and leads to self-knowledge and respect for people."
"It makes the world bigger, shows other universes, and expands your action."
"Art is a serious thing and we need to regard it as such."

Endnotes

1. These examinations, given by each college, university, or group thereof, are considered of extreme importance in Brazil because passing the examination and getting a sufficiently good mark in order to be offered one of the limited number of available places is the only way a student can be admitted to a college or university.
2. The website of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America shows some "frequently asked questions" (FAQs). (See www.awsna.org/awsna-faq.html). Some of our "myths" are there. There is also a video available, made by Freunde der Waldorfschulen (Friends of Waldorf Education) for the 44th International UNESCO Conference on Education, which took place in Geneva.
3. The Christian Community is a "movement of religious renewal." Its founders saw in Rudolf Steiner's worldview "the decisive spiritual help for the age of natural science and, with this, a means of preserving Christianity in the Twentieth Century" (Hemleben, 1989: 142).
4. Kardecists are those adept of Alan Kardec's worldview, which is based upon mediumship and is quite popular in Brazil.
5. Candomblé is an African religion which is a syncretism of Christianity with a form of voodoo.

Wanda Ribeiro *graduated from the University of São Paulo (USP) with degrees in Social Science and Social Education. A Waldorf parent since 2001, she undertook Waldorf teacher training at the Rudolf Steiner School of São Paulo.*

Juan Pablo de Jesus Pereira *graduated from the University of São Paulo (USP) with a degree in civil engineering. He has also been a Waldorf parent since 2001 and has taken Waldorf Teacher Training.*