Waldorf Education in the United States
Historical Overview

Michael Holdrege

The ideas of Rudolf Steiner found their first footing in the United States on the 7th floor of the world-famous Carnegie Hall building in New York City. Beginning in 1910, several individuals with significant musical backgrounds—several of whom had met Rudolf Steiner in Europe through their singing career—began meeting as an anthroposophical study group in the Carnegie Hall studio of one of its members. This group can be credited for preparing the soil for planting the first seed of Waldorf education in North America—which then sprouted in New York City with the founding of the Rudolf Steiner School, in 1928.

The ideals of Waldorf education were anticipated on this continent by the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1854-1952), who, several decades before the advent of Waldorf education, was advocating for schools grounded in practical activities, human experience, and the pursuit of the arts. His reformist ideas were carried forth by a host "progressive schools," starting an educational movement that in one form or another is still going strong today. The Rudolf Steiner School grew slowly but steadily to become the first full K-12 Waldorf school on this continent.

The nurturing of this first Waldorf school received significant assistance from many European friends during those early decades. Individuals such as Lucy van der Pals-Neuscheller, Leo Neuscheller, Friedrich Hiebel, Hermann Poppelbaum, and Karl Ege taught classes at the New York City School, which, starting in the 1940s, was led for many years by Henry Barnes, who had trained in Stuttgart and then taught at the first established Waldorf school in England before returning to his native America.

In many ways, the first Waldorf school in North America can be viewed as a developing organism that needed care and fostering for some thirteen years before it was able to send out sprouts into its environment. The first new unfolding of Waldorf education then took hold at the Kimberton Waldorf School in the state of Pennsylvania (1941), followed in 1942 by High Mowing School in New Hampshire as the first Waldorf high school on the North American continent. Five years thereafter (1947), what is now called the Waldorf School of Garden City, not far from New York City, opened its doors. In the 1950s three more Waldorf Schools were founded, and five more followed in the 1960s. Besides a strong collection of schools in the Eastern U.S., two of these early schools found footing on the West Coast of the country: Highland Hall in Los Angeles and the Sacramento Waldorf School in Northern California. In 1968, these 12 schools joined together in a loose confederation that later took the name Association of Waldorf Schools in North America (AWSNA).

Of the many European helpers during those years, one figure in particular stands out: Dr. Hermann von Baravalle. Baravalle, who was chosen by Rudolf Steiner to teach in the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, became a frequent visitor to the Rudolf Steiner School in New York and was later connected with the founding of nearly every Waldorf school in the United States, from the 1940s to the 1960s. His presence was so significant that he was sometimes referred to as the "Johnny Appleseed" of Waldorf education in the United States. Baravalle held the strong conviction that in America, Rudolf Steiner's esotericism should be avoided when presenting Waldorf education to the public and also in teacher training. This perspective was not shared by all and represented the opposite end of the spectrum from the anthroposophy-centered and European-rooted approach of the Rudolf Steiner School in New York.

In the late 1960s, at the time when AWSNA was still in its embryonic forming, the country as a whole found itself in great turbulence. Key factors were the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the rebellion against the latter by a large portion of the country's student population. People at that time were learning the power of "peaceful" demonstrations. Students understood how to use that "voice" as a driving force for change, not only at the political level, but also in terms of educational reform.

During these very exciting years of "awakening," a number of young Americans began to discover anthroposophy and the work of Rudolf Steiner. Particularly significant in this process was a naturalized Englishman named Francis Edmunds. In the late 1960s and during the 1970s, Edmunds traveled each year across the United States, lecturing on Waldorf education and the work of Rudolf Steiner. In this context, he would also

inform his audiences of an idyllic place where anthroposophy could be experienced and studied: at Emerson College on a biodynamic farm in the south of England. As a result of Edmunds' peregrinations, hundreds of young Americans went to study anthroposophy at Emerson College; many stayed to train as Waldorf teachers or move on to London to study eurythmy or speech formation. Some even ventured further, crossing the English Channel to study various aspects of anthroposophy in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, or Scandinavia.

This large wave of young Americans who crossed the Atlantic to learn anthroposophy and its many applications had a huge influence on the development of Waldorf education in the United States during the ensuing years. Most of these individuals—sooner or later—returned to the U.S. and many of them became enthusiastic Waldorf teachers. This led to a rapid expansion of Waldorf schools across the country in the 1970s and 80s. Between 1928 and 1970, on average a new Waldorf school started every three years. Starting in the 1970s, by contrast, typically three schools opened each year. Today there are 124 recognized Waldorf schools, according to the international listing of Waldorf schools.

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In addition to these independent or private schools, over 40 public or so-called "charter" schools have sprung up under the umbrella of what is now called the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education (APWE). In the United States, a public Waldorf school typically takes the forms and methods of independent Waldorf schools and adapts them to the public-school environment and some state mandated requirements. The curriculum and content are usually adjusted and students are bound by mandated state tests, but the approach to teaching, such as the Main Lesson, the daily and weekly rhythms, the integration of artistic activity into every subject area, etc. are all applied. By contrast, students in the independent Waldorf schools are not required to take regular state examinations.

Waldorf schools cannot exist without trained teachers, of course, and the teacher training landscape that makes this possible has gone through considerable changes over the past half century. After the wave of returning Emerson College students began to slow, two institutions, in particular, moved into the foreground of Waldorf teacher training in the U.S.: Sunbridge College in Spring Valley, New York (originally in Detroit) and Rudolf Steiner College (RSC) in Sacramento, California. Founded in 1967 (Sunbridge) and 1976 (RSC), respectively, both institutions eventually experienced a major expansion as "the place to go" for those who wanted to explore anthroposophy and study Waldorf education. Starting in 1983, a third degree-granting Waldorf program was inaugurated within the Education Department of what was then called Antioch Graduate School of New England, based in Keene, New Hampshire.

During the 1980s and 90s, these three institutions were the largest centers for the development of Waldorf education in the U.S. However, as the new century approached, things grew more difficult for both Sunbridge and RSC. Economic challenges facing college-age students became a serious hindrance to pursuing post-graduate study at an anthroposophical institution. The cost of an undergraduate (bachelor's) degree had grown so high that most students arrived at the end of their university studies with significant student loans. (The total amount of outstanding student loans reached $1.41 trillion in 2019.) This meant that most needed to go to work immediately upon graduation and continue working for many years to pay off the money they had borrowed to attend university. For many, going back to school full-time to study anthroposophy and Waldorf education—an option more readily available to earlier generations—was no longer a realistic choice. These circumstances had a serious effect on enrollment at Sunbridge and Rudolf Steiner College. Both went eventually from master's-degree-granting, full-time programs to non-degree-granting, low-residency, part-time programs. Although Sunbridge Institute (which is officially no longer a college) still offers such courses, Rudolf Steiner College has closed its teacher training programs. As a result, the only degree-granting, year-round program remaining in the U.S. is the Waldorf Teacher Education Program at Antioch University New England, located in New Hampshire.

These days, instead of full-time programs, the most commonly-practiced format for Waldorf teacher training involves school-year weekends or month-long summer sessions located near or connected with Waldorf schools in various parts of the country.

Over the past century, public schools in the United States have increasingly taken on a more "top-down" form of organization run by school boards and school administrations. The central goal has become to apply "objective" data to a "soft" and seemingly undisciplined field—to identify the right "outcome targets" and then to "organize" the entire system on that basis. This has led to a classroom dynamic in public education that is commonly characterized as "teaching to the test." Such a cultural context also influences organizational tendencies in 21st century Waldorf schools. It is often difficult to find a healthy balance between managerial procedures and "bottom line" considerations coming from board members and administrators, on the one hand, and the viewpoints brought by teachers and other individuals who work day-to-day with the children from a developmental perspective, on the other. Schools may succeed in finding a balance between such differing viewpoints for periods of time, but there is increasingly the tendency to fall into "top-down" organizational forms when things are not going well.

In his vision of a threefold school organism, Rudolf Steiner clearly saw that meeting such challenges is healthy and grounding for teachers, but he also knew that such issues can never be resolved "once and for all." Such organizational questions must be met actively and with creative imagination again and again – as Waldorf schools in the United States have experienced repeatedly over the past 90 years.

Michael Holdrege *teaches life and earth sciences, economics, and German at the Chicago Waldorf School. He is also a faculty member at the Arcturus Rudolf Steiner Education Program in Chicago and at the Waldorf Teacher Training Program in Xi'an, China. Michael is author of* From Creative Ideas to Innovative Practices: Change-adept Organizations for a Changing World.