

Improving quality in Waldorf schools

Waldorf schools need to be directed toward Waldorf pedagogical goals.

In November 2014 an updated worldwide list of Waldorf schools was published. For the first time this list exceeds over 1000 schools, all of which are recognized by their national associations and are thus given the right to use the title "Waldorf school". The majority of these schools are to be found in Germany (232 schools) followed by 121 in the USA, 89 in the Netherlands and 45 in Sweden. In recent years schools have been started in many new countries and parts of the world. New schools are now officially recognized in China, Nepal, Peru and Guatemala.

Apart from these, there are a good number of schools which are inspired by Waldorf pedagogy but for different reasons do not fulfill those conditions which are required in order to be identified as a Waldorf school. This oftentimes depends on the fact that the school does not have a sufficient number of teachers who have completed a Waldorf teacher training. That which identifies a Waldorf school as such has come to be a decidedly controversial question as the Waldorf "brand" becomes more well known and respected. The label "Waldorf school" denotes that one is not merely an independent entity but is part of a much grander and recognized concept which will soon have garnered 100 years of respected experience.

Since the 1980s, Waldorf schools in Sweden have been organized under the Waldorf school Federation which has the juridical right to define what it means to be a Waldorf school. To this end, criteria and conditions for membership have been developed. However, there is no certification procedure nor an organizational structure or collaborative work in place to ensure quality control of the schools.

What were Rudolf Steiner's guidelines?

With the new school law established in 2010 Swedish Waldorf schools in large part are overseen by the Swedish school system even though certain exceptions are made for Waldorf schools. The same school laws and curriculum that apply to Swedish state schools are applied to Waldorf schools. When this new school law took effect it created much unrest among Waldorf teachers since this state curriculum conflicted with the traditional Waldorf curriculum, for example, in regard to concept development. In practice, school law and state curriculum in spite of other factors have become the most decisive pedagogical directives in this era where a school's existence is dependent upon passing the School inspection review. It is in fact that each school's improvement plan must direct itself toward those national curricular goals found in the Swedish school law and state curriculum. Consequently, Waldorf criteria and the Waldorf school's established curriculum have lost status.

The charter found in the majority of Waldorf schools indicates that the school will operate using "Rudolf Steiner's guidelines for Waldorf pedagogy" or something similar to this. It is apparent that a mission statement is of fundamental importance in directing the school association or trust, but what exactly is meant by "guidelines"? Where are they to be found?

Traditionally, the basis of Waldorf pedagogy is considered to be Steiner's foundational lectures given in three courses held in 1919 for the future teachers of the first Waldorf school, with "Study of Man- General Education course" as primary text and courses titled "Practical Advice to Teachers and Discussions with Teachers" as complement. One may hesitate to label these three courses (books) as guidelines, however, and it is doubtful whether Steiner himself would sanction such a definition. It would be far more

preferable to attempt to establish Waldorf guidelines by gaining a well-rounded understanding of what Steiner indicated in the three pedagogical courses as well as in hundreds of lectures and notes taken at the meetings with the college of teachers in the first Waldorf school. In addition to this, many traditions have been developed throughout the world's Waldorf schools and are today included as being part of the main core of Waldorf pedagogy.

Waldorf schools - a "save the world" project

How do Waldorf schools relate themselves to the controlling documents which the state in the spirit of democracy has decided that all schools must follow? With the exception of several points (for example in the subjects of art, chemistry and history) the Swedish curriculum and the current school law do not prove to be a point of particular controversy in the Waldorf schools. That the student has a right to security and a calm classroom environment; that the school will promote equality and respect for others; that one will acquire that education which is necessary in society and its connection to the educational process is for example not controversial.

The problem is instead that the Waldorf school's overall goals and purposes are more inclusive than the Swedish correlate. If we reduce the (Waldorf) school plan and only manage with an eye toward the school law and state curriculum, we deny our affinity with a worldwide school impulse which was founded out of a deep existential issue. For Rudolf Steiner the founding of the first Waldorf school was not a chance event but, instead, a deeply ethical and spiritually grounded counterforce against the instrumentalization of the human being, against forces which work to limit his or her freedom and promote a modern form of slavery. Steiner anticipated already in 1919 what would arise with the takeover by the Nazis and also surmised the ever increasing

influence of materialism. The Waldorf school is founded moreover on the anthroposophical view of the human being and one of the starting points is that the teacher occupies oneself at a deeper level in understanding the student's path of development.

If we seriously work out of Steiner's guidelines we must in other words place ourselves behind the principles that guide the anthroposophical view of the human being and also pledge ourselves to Rudolf Steiner's intentions with the Waldorf school. The first Waldorf school was not started to provide privileged children an excellent education within a protected oasis (as was the case with the old private schools) but the idea was the founding of a virtually revolutionary school reform for children of the working class and eventually for the general public. That Steiner intended to "save the world" through the Waldorf school is not an exaggeration.

Who owns Waldorf pedagogy?

The ambiguity which surrounds the guidelines of the Waldorf schools depends on Steiner's underlying position that each individual teacher bears the prime responsibility for shaping the pedagogical work. When Steiner spoke of artistic teaching he meant that each teacher creates his instructional process anew, every day. Through an understanding for what each child requires in the present moment the teacher is best able to approach the child's individuality and its needs. In other words, it is a truism that each teacher embodies Waldorf pedagogy.

Steiner was no friend to formal guidelines or checklists but rather challenged teachers to develop their own inner capacities to meet the child's true needs at each phase of development. To cultivate this inner work is therefore a crucial element of Waldorf

teacher training. As the number of trained teachers decreases in Sweden, however, confidence in the individual teacher's ability to maintain the school's commitment to Waldorf pedagogical methods becomes increasingly challenging. An understanding for Waldorf pedagogy's conformation is needed in our time to be more anchored in the organization of the school and as a formalized element of each school's efforts to attain quality improvement.

How can organizations direct themselves toward Waldorf pedagogical aims?

All Swedish schools are required to have a system of quality improvement to reach the national educational goals. The essential challenge, to develop and uphold our Waldorf pedagogical standards lies ahead of us.

At Lund's Waldorf school we have initiated an attempt to ensure quality in those Waldorf pedagogical goals which extend even beyond the current quality improvement plan in place. This project is identified by the name QWAL and consists of an instrument of which the methodology is reminiscent of BRUK, The Swedish Department of Education's support for self-evaluation and quality improvement. We plan to make this instrument available to those schools who wish to take part in this new development and who will commit to helping to further develop this tool.

This instrument includes tools for self-examination, monitoring and evaluation. It does not include external issuing of certification. It is composed of suggestions for Waldorf pedagogical goals in 7 areas (vision and common principles, curriculum, methodology and didactic guidelines, the role of teacher and the college of teachers, individual support services, board (trustee) and principal's responsibility as well as food and physical environment). We recommend that the results of a school's quality plan are publically reported, for example on the school's homepage.

Central to a school improvement program which rests upon a school's own estimation of its progress is the need for an ongoing process which will require concrete tasks and action plans with explicit schedules.

- Where are we? Current description and conditions
- Where do we want to go? Goals and current evaluation
- How will we get there? Planning and Scheduling
- What happened? Monitoring and Evaluation

By running a school improvement plan which will focus on Waldorf pedagogical goals, a school will be imbued with a focused, documented and transparent development, the goal of which will strengthen a school's standing as a Waldorf school as well as its intention of running the school in the light of Rudolf Steiner's various indications and guidelines for Waldorf education.

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