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Essential Characteristics of Waldorf/Steiner Early Childhood Education – May 2014

IASWECE: International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education

The future development of each individual child and of humanity as a whole depends on health-giving experiences in the first seven years of life. An atmosphere of loving warmth and guidance that promotes joy, wonder, and reverence supports such healthy development. The most essential aspect of the work with the little child is the inner attitude of the educator, who provides the example for the child's imitation. Therefore the work of the Waldorf educator demands an ongoing process of research and self-education including anthroposophical study, meditative practice, artistic and practical activity.

In Waldorf nursery-kindergartens, home care programs, childcare centers, parent-child programs and other settings, foundations are laid for later learning and healthy development, including life-long physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth. This education, based on an understanding of the development of human individuality, offers protection and respect for the dignity of childhood. It includes an understanding of the unfolding development of the child from pre-birth to seven, including the unique significance of the development of walking, speaking and thinking in the first three years of life.

Activities in Waldorf early childhood education take into consideration the age-specific developmental needs of young children, from a focus on will-oriented physical activity in the first three years, then on imaginative play in the middle years of early childhood, and later a more cognitive approach to learning after the child enters school.

Educational Principles

Waldorf based programs may differ according to geography, culture, group size, age-range, and the individual teaching approach. Granting these differences, Waldorf programs share certain fundamental characteristics:

- Loving interest in and acceptance of each child
- Opportunities for self-initiated play with simple play materials as the essential activity for young children.
- This is the young child's work and makes it possible for them to digest and understand their experiences.
- Awareness that young children learn through imitation, through the experience of diverse sensory impressions, and through movement. Their natural inclination is to actively explore their physical and social environment. The surroundings offer limits, structure and protection, as well as the possibility to take risks and meet challenges.
- A focus on real rather than virtual experiences to support the child in forming a healthy relationship to the world.
- Artistic activities such as storytelling, music, drawing and painting, rhythmic games, and modeling that foster the healthy development of imagination and creativity.
- Meaningful practical work such as cooking, baking, gardening, handwork and do-

mestic activity that provide opportunities to develop unfolding human capacities. Here the emphasis is on the processes of life rather than on learning outcomes.

- Predictable rhythms through the day, week and year that provide security and a sense of the interrelationships and wholeness of life. Seasonal and other festivals are celebrated according to the cultural and geographical surroundings.

We recognize that healthy child development unfolds most fully in the context of a community with healthy social relationships among parents, teachers and children. Waldorf educators strive to create such conscious, collaborative communities around the children in their care and see their activity as part of a worldwide cultural impulse.

The International Forum of Waldorf/ Steiner Schools (Hague Circle) within the Pedagogical Section

At its meeting in Harduf/Israel on 14 November 2014, the International Forum of Waldorf/Steiner Schools established and passed guidelines defining the essential characteristics of Waldorf Education. The characteristics are expressed in general terms and can be amended by criteria that are specific to the various countries. They can be translated into the relevant languages any time. They are meant as guidelines for a better understanding of Waldorf Education within the global school movement and are in addition to the characteristics defined in 2009.

Characteristics of a Waldorf/Steiner School

Preface

When Waldorf schools or Rudolf Steiner schools are to be recognised as such, they require a description of characteristics and essential elements in order to ascertain if they are indeed Waldorf/Steiner schools.

If such recognition occurs for a particular school, this will be evident through its inclusion in the World List of Waldorf Schools.

The features described below have been broadly formulated, and do not constitute a checklist, but are rather a characterisation of how the International Forum defines Waldorf/Steiner schools. As this understanding is in the process of development, these features will be replaced by others over time. The basics of the educational philosophy, however, remain the same.

This text can serve the purpose of both a self-evaluation process as well as an accreditation procedure for the recognition of a Waldorf/Steiner school.

Characteristics of a Waldorf/Steiner School include:

Interconnectedness

Such a school is in contact with existing Waldorf/Steiner schools. Members of the school

communities know each other and maintain mutual relations. The school community endeavours to engage in networking. A shared awareness of one another within a region or in the same country strengthens a school's own work. This idea of knowing one another can be expressed on an international level as well, for example through partnerships with other schools in other countries or through the support of young Waldorf initiatives or schools in need. The participation of colleagues at further training courses and conferences organised on a regional, national and international level is also part of this.

This knowledge of one another creates an inner sense of interconnectedness. Being isolated and working alone is not characteristic of a Waldorf/Steiner School. Apart from this, such a school strives for integration into the social context of the place where it is located and endeavours to participate in public life and to avoid a niche existence.

The identity of the school

Each school is unmistakably individual. Merely through the simple fact of its existence, it has its own identity with all its peculiarities, advantages and development opportunities. These arise out of the school's historical development, its location and environment, as well as its founding parents and

teachers. This is like a human body. In addition, the school has a second identity which consists of the realisation of the art of education initiated by Rudolf Steiner. To what extent does the school succeed in putting into practice the art of education as outlined and described by Steiner? By this we mean whether the application of the art of education is discernible in the classrooms and in the work of colleagues. More specifically, it refers to the pedagogy (i.e. how colleagues relate to the children and students), it refers to teaching, how colleagues deal with the content and transfer of the subject matter, how the fundamental themes of the art of education are applied and finally it refers to whether the methodology of the art of education is applied in a way appropriate to the child's stage of development in accordance with the understanding of the human being. Is it possible at such a school to discern a creative approach taking place with regards to these three areas?

This will account for a large part of the school's identity. This will be completed through what can be perceived as an *inner meaning* in each individual colleague and within the community of teachers. Does one find an inner attitude in the majority of colleagues an inner attitude which corresponds to the striving for knowledge and self-education with the help of anthroposophy? Is the striving for knowledge of the human being as a basis of pedagogy noticeable and perceptible alongside the joy of the profession?

These things make up the individual mood of each school and are the soul-wise expression of what is generally perceived as the spirit of the school.

The curriculum

Since the curriculum strengthens the development of children and students through

mirroring this development, which anybody who applies the curriculum can experience, it is not an arbitrary part of the art of education, but rather an absolutely constituent element. Nevertheless, the curriculum is subject to change, mainly due to three reasons: space, time and development.

Each school is located in a cultural, geographical and political space which has its effect on the curriculum, in the same way that the colour-specifications for the classrooms, which were developed by Steiner, were based on the specific space of each different school.

Each school also exists in a stream of time. Each region or country has its history, which characterises world history from its own vantage point. This too will have its effect on the curriculum.

Each school relates in some way to the demands of the state authorities responsible for education, attempting to have a greater or lesser influence on the curriculum guidelines.

Examples: What do the Class 7 history lessons look like in non-European countries?

What does the different narrative material look like? Can the course of development still succeed if, for example, Norse mythology is replaced by the myth of a specific country or culture without losing the pedagogical impact of the original myths? What changes must be made to the teaching of foreign languages in multi-ethnic countries where four languages are already being spoken? It is an area full of movement and dynamism, and yet, through the effect they have, the original indications of Steiner are still the criteria for understanding.

In many countries the educational authorities have a strong impact on the curriculum, which as a rule is not conducive to child development, but rather, for reasons of state, conforms to set stipulations. (For example, through diverse manifold forms of premature academic learning at an age that is, according to our criteria of development, inappropriate.)

How a school conducts itself in these three areas of tension will express a fair amount about the school. Does it succeed in bringing about fruitful consensus between possibility and ideal and in working in a creatively productive way? Is the picture of the child's development maintained, mirrored and fostered through the curriculum?

These questions will have to be looked at.

The Relationship between Teacher and Pupil, and their Relationship to the World

Child development and all that is learnt at school are realised in a relationship borne of the child's trust in the teachers, in their general environment and in an awareness of the world. Waldorf teachers bear a special responsibility for the vibrant forms of this relationship.

In adolescence this relationship changes, for now the students are to stimulate their own forming of opinions, empathy and independent activity in their encounters and in their attempts to come to terms with the world from the perspective of the subjects. Do high school teachers, besides their professional qualifications, bring the ability to meet the young people in such a way that they discover their self-expression and develop the courage to orientate their biographies accordingly?

Does the teaching awaken further questions in the students? Are the students bored in

school or do they show interest in their fellow human beings and the world? Does Waldorf education nevertheless take place despite the pressure to prepare for final examinations in order to obtain good grades?

Art and the Teaching of Art

One of the objectives of a Waldorf school is the attempt to break the pre-eminence of intellectualism (not of the "intellect"), at least in teaching, in order that education is once again concerned with life and not just with cognition. One will do justice to the task of education only when an inclination towards basic humanity lives in the graduating student through strong thinking, feeling and will. How these abilities engage in relation to one another will make a difference as to whether or not the human being can walk his own path.

Whether and how these abilities are integrated within the "I" of the human being will have an effect on his or her independence.

One of the most important instruments for this is the artistic lessons. There are four aspects to be understood:

- 1) The teacher nurtures his/her own relationship to art in some form; he is to endeavour to cultivate something artistic in his own being.
- 2) He uses artistic materials in her lessons (painting, drawing, recitation, music and the like).
- 3) His lesson itself, however, is artistic in the sense of originality, imagery and through structuring the flow of time in rhythm with the breathing of the children. This is actually the essential aspect.
- 4) Finally, the teachers strive for an appropriate aesthetic environment of the school, for this has its effects on the unconscious moods of the students.

The path is the goal. That means the artistic lesson as a finished result will not exist, for then art is 'frozen'. Far more, there is a visible striving for that. This striving comes to expression among other things through the extent to which the teacher is free of prefabricated methods.

This is observed and acknowledged during the process of recognition.

At the same time it must be assessed whether the artistic activities are used as an end in themselves, or for pedagogical reasons. This distinction is of increasing significance, for artistic activities are also to be found outside Waldorf/Steiner schools.

The Forms: Shaping the School and the Lessons

In the conception of the Waldorf/Steiner schools, Steiner gave us little in the way of forms that would provide a founding identity. They are all founded in the knowledge of the human being and by the social mission of the schools.

They are the following:

- 1) Student groups comprise groups of like age and different levels of proficiency. Classes are arranged according to age, not ability.
- 2) *Alongside* this subject-specific proficiency groups are possible.
- 3) The class teacher accompanies the class for many years.
- 4) The Main lesson takes place in the morning. *Thereafter* the subject lessons.
- 5) There is a pre-school stage without academic objective.
- 6) The school is an all-inclusive school, from pre-school age to young adulthood.
- 7) There is an individual accompanying of students within the class community.
- 8) The school is co-educational.

The following 'forms' apply to the teachers:

- 1) Each colleague is fully and jointly responsible for the school as a whole living organism.
- 2) One maintains an inner and outer connection through regular joint faculty meetings, and engages thereby in further training.
- 3) The management of the school is not handed over to any outside control.
- 4) Parents and teachers form a community that takes responsibility for the school.
- 5) The teachers search for and find forms to develop quality.
- 6) Each teacher is responsible for his lessons on the basis of the study of the human being, the relationship to the students and his social and specialist competencies.

The Justification for its Existence: Entrepreneurial Health

Each school initiative needs development and growth. It is quite evident that an initiative which remains (too) small will one day have to ask the question, whether it is still doing justice to its educational and social tasks. If a primary (lower) school grows in an organic way, the question of high school will surface. Many schools understandably tend to start a high school too early. That often brings with it an existential crisis, which in turn puts the school as a whole into question.

Is the school in a position to establish a reasonably good balance between development and growth, so that the educational task remains intact?

To what extent is the school crisis-prone, crisis-ridden or permanently in crisis?

Crises do not have to be a feature of a school!

The same applies to the finances of the school. On the one hand, they reflect the

'health' of an institution, on the other hand, they are very sensitive to fluctuations, which can come as much from outside as from inside. Does the school have a reasonably healthy financial basis? Or does it need assistance in this area?

Living Together: Social Aspects

The basis for Waldorf/Steiner schools is human interaction. Parents encounter human beings, not officials, in the school. All co-operation and working together are identified by humanity and human dignity.

It is here that significant forms of the working together of teachers, parents and other interested parties can develop. Personal or institutional power should not be a determining factor. In all processes of the school – externally and internally – there is a striving for transparency and a comprehensive picture. This is also the way in which decisions are reached. This quality engenders much goodwill. The question arises as to whether this goodwill can be discerned in the periphery of the school. Encounters between teachers and parents (parent's evenings, consultations, discussions, child studies) need the greatest possible care on the part of the teachers; always considered from the standpoint of 'universal humanity'.

If such striving can be discerned at a school it also gains a profile as an institution which is aware of its social responsibility.

School Leadership

Against the background of the threefold social order which came into being at the same time as the Waldorf school, Rudolf Steiner called upon the colleagues to take the leadership of the school into their own hands. What does this mean? To lead the school means to have the task and mission of the Waldorf school ever clearer in one's con-

sciousness and to constantly work at it. This is only possible through studying together the anthroposophical fundamentals of this pedagogy. So school leadership, founded in the unifying spirit of the Waldorf school, emerges in that colleagues and parents work with the fundamentals – penetrating them with an ever better knowledge.

On this foundation the management of the school, the shaping of the organisation of the school, the finances, administration, etc. can be carried out in the most varied of ways. The old principle of "self-governance" (in the sense of everyone doing everything) no longer functions in many schools. In many places it is being replaced by the most varied forms of delegation of work and responsibility – always seeking consensus with the mission of the school and the people involved.

How the school organises itself in questions of leadership, whether it seeks cohesion of the entity in all things, or whether leadership no longer belongs to the operation of the school – this will form part of the assessment.

Concluding Remarks

If we can summarise what has been outlined here, we can say a Waldorf/Steiner school is one where a majority of the teachers live by an igniting spirit. This spirit makes light and easy what is heavy and hard, it makes the impossible possible and illumines the darkness.

Waldorf-Inspired Schools

Preface

Under the term "Waldorf-Inspired schools" various forms of schooling can be understood.

- It can be about an existing school in mainstream education, which makes use of elements of the Waldorf/Steiner school and wants to apply these.
- It can be about new schools that are on the way to receiving accreditation as a Waldorf school in the (near) future, but still need time to attain this.
- It can be schools which would like as much as possible to realise Waldorf/Steiner education, but are in a legal or religious or cultural context in which this is only possible to a limited extent.
- It can be schools that apply Waldorf/Steiner education within a state teaching system, insofar as this is possible within the existing system.

Then there are also school forms of other kinds which also aspire to Waldorf/Steiner education.

- Those are the very small, quite 'free' schools, such as are found within the context of farming communities.
- To that belong a quickly growing number of home schools. Here we have to distinguish between home schools that are preparing to be regular schools and those which as a matter of principle always want to remain home schools, because all other school forms are rejected.

With these schools various Waldorf elements can be found:

Narrative material is given.

Music is played.

Teaching is in Main Lesson blocks and Main Lesson books are produced.

Lessons are given by the class teachers.

The curriculum is applied.

A hygienic timetable is put into practice.

Eurythmy lessons take place.

(Additional) foreign languages are taught.

There is painting, and form drawings are systematically practised.

The teachers come together for weekly faculty meetings.

The teacher ethos described above is striven for.

The teachers take part in further training for Waldorf teachers.

There is a deepening of the anthropology the school is founded on (Anthroposophy).

In assessing whether a school can be called Waldorf-inspired, it will depend on how many of these elements exist and of what quality.

The Relationship to the Accredited Waldorf Schools

It is important that these schools striving for Waldorf pedagogy are seen and acknowledged. One could envisage a second list of schools in which the Waldorf-inspired schools are listed.

Concluding Remarks

We should avoid these various types of schools becoming invisible in their striving for the art of education.

If Steiner's principle still applies, namely that Anthroposophy should never be permitted to

be separated from its initiator, then an important task lies here: to perceive these forms of schooling as striving for Waldorf education and through this perception to acknowledging their right to exist. Then we have to deal with a second stream of school forms alongside the typical Waldorf/Steiner schools that are acknowledged as such.

In this way a fruitful educational Mesopotamia can become possible.

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