

Key Characteristics of Waldorf education

The International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education (IF) at its meetings in Vienna/Austria on 17 May 2015 and in Arles/France on 7 May 2016 revised and re-adopted the document “Key characteristics of Waldorf education” – first adopted in Harduf/Israel on 14 November 2014 – as binding guidance for the worldwide Waldorf school movement. These features have been formulated in such a way as to be generally valid and may be supplemented by specific cultural characteristics for use in a school’s own country. They wish to place the emphasis on and strengthen diversity, individuality and openness to development. They supplement the characteristics adopted by the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education (Hague Circle) in 2009.

Preliminary remarks.

In order for schools to be approved as Waldorf or Rudolf Steiner schools, it is necessary to characterise key elements of Waldorf education. Once approval has been granted, this is documented by the inclusion of the school concerned in the worldwide list of Waldorf schools for which the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education – (Hague Circle) is responsible.

The features described here are formulated in an open-ended way and contain a characterisation of what the International Forum understands by Waldorf education. Such an understanding is involved in a process of development which means that these features will also be supplemented or replaced by others over time; in doing so however, the foundations of this system of education are maintained.

This document can serve for one’s personal or institutional guidance (e.g. for self-assessment) and forms a key basis in the approval process for a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school.¹

Features of a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school include:

The context.

The Waldorf education movement forms an international network in which the individual Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are autonomous and are networked on a local, regional,

¹ Schools in countries which have their own Waldorf Association will be included in the list on the latter’s recommendation. If there is no such association, the IF will make a decision on inclusion on the basis of a qualified recommendation from at least two of its members. Such approval is the prerequisite for the right to use the name “Waldorf” or “Rudolf Steiner” school; this is regulated in a separate procedure.

national and international level – collegially, in friendship and politically. A common awareness and reciprocal exchange in the region, country or internationally strengthen each school's own work. Such an awareness of existing in a wider context can come to expression through partnerships with schools in other countries as much as through assistance for schools which are starting up or in difficulties. The attendance of teachers, parents or pupil representatives at regionally, nationally and internationally organised meetings, further training and conferences is also a part of it.

The awareness of one another as well as being in harmony with the key features creates an inner connection; whereas isolation, a niche existence and an unwillingness to collaborate hinder it. It also includes Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools seeing and identifying themselves as part of the social context in their surroundings and in public life.

The identity of the school.

Each school is unique. Its identity has its foundation in the way that it exists with all its specific features, benefits and developmental potentials. These are determined by its developmental history, its location and region, the founding parents and teachers who put their mark on the school organism. In addition, its identity is founded in implementing the art of education, Waldorf education, initiated by Rudolf Steiner.

The extent to which such an art of education, as it was outlined and described by Rudolf Steiner, can successfully be put into practice and be seen to be reflected in the classroom and the work of the teachers depends on the situation of each school. This relates to the pedagogy, how teachers deal with the pupils, the teaching methodology, how teachers handle the content and transfer of the teaching material equally with the question as to whether the basic strands in the teaching methodology of this art of education are applied; and, finally, whether its methodology is applied in an age-appropriate way as understood by the anthroposophical view of the human being. The important thing is that the individual schools should deal in a creative and responsible way with the areas set out here.

The latter form a major part of the school's identity which is completed by what may be perceived as an *inner meaning* in the individual teacher and the college of teachers. The extent to which the majority of the teachers have worked on an inner attitude of openness and striving for knowledge and self-education with the help of anthroposophy will determine the identity of the school. The pleasure in doing the job, the striving for an understanding of the human being as the basis for the education and the collaboration with the parents make up the individual atmosphere of each school and are the inner expression of what is generally perceived as the spirit of the school.

The framework curriculum.

The curriculum is not an arbitrary but a constituent element of Waldorf education. It marks essential teaching guidelines whose age-appropriate application strengthens the development of the children and young people through its inherent mirroring and composition across subjects in connected arcs spanning several years. It is continuously being

developed taking account of the geographical and cultural location, the political as well as general and global lines of development of the time.

Each school is located in a cultural, geographical and political space. This acts on the curriculum in a way comparable with the suggestions made by Rudolf Steiner as to the design of the classrooms and the school architecture in order to create the special atmosphere appropriate for each class.

Every region and country has its own access to world history which is the result of its unique history and also affects the curriculum.

Every school has to respond to the requirements of the public authorities responsible for education. The extent to which curricular requirements, for example, are included in the curriculum of the Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools depends on the political situation in each country. Also the use of Rudolf Steiner's specifications for lessons which relate, for example, more to western cultural values could be supplemented or replaced by cultural content of corresponding value as long as the educational effect is maintained. Foreign language teaching in multi-ethnic countries can be organised accordingly. Both Rudolf Steiner's specifications regarding general methodology and teaching methodology and the qualitative special characteristics of the various languages are definitive.

In countries in which several religions coexist, this is reflected by the school in the school customs and festivals. In coordination with the parents, religion lessons can be organised in accordance with their confession and as non-denominational religion lessons.

In many countries there are the requirements from the state which influence the curriculum and contradict the understanding of child development in Waldorf education. These range from the early start of schooling to various forms of premature academicised learning. Every school finds solutions, ways and compromises which preserve the spirit of Waldorf education while at the same time according with the statutory requirements. In such conflicting priorities it is important to establish a productive convergence between the possible and the ideal in order to work creatively and support the development of the child through the curriculum.

The relationship between teachers and pupils and the relationship with the world.

Child development and school learning are realised in the trust-based relationship of the child with the teachers, the surrounding space and in the child's perception of the world. Waldorf teachers bear a special responsibility for the life-filled organisation of this relationship.

In adolescence the relationship changes because now the focus from the perspective of the subjects is on an encounter with and involvement in the world in order to encourage the pupils to form their own judgements and to motivate empathy and independent action. Here it is crucial that the upper school teachers, alongside their suitability to teach the subject, should possess the ability to interact with the young people in such a way that the latter discover what it is that they want of themselves and develop the courage to direct their biography accordingly.

Lessons are successful if they awaken further-reaching questions in the young people and the latter do not develop and display disinterest but a real interest in their fellow human beings and the world. The school finds solutions and ways to maintain a balanced relationship

between the performance pressure in the preparation for exams and the requirements for a healthy mental and physical development.

The artistic.

It is one of the objectives of Waldorf education to combine education with life and not with the abstract accumulation of knowledge. The school has only met its educational task when in the later life of the pupil, after they have left school, humanity has been predisposed to strong thinking, feeling and volition. The way in which these abilities relate to one another determines whether the person will be able to follow their own path. Whether and how these abilities are integrated in the “I” of the human being affects the independence of the person.

Artistic teaching is an important instrument in this respect. Artistic teaching means a variety of things:

- 1) Teachers themselves cultivate an art form; they should practice an art form themselves.
- 2) They use artistic methods in their lessons (painting, drawing, recitation, music and so on).
- 3) The lessons themselves are artistic in the sense of originality, imagery and creativity and through the structure of the chronological progression as perceived by the pupils with a living alternation of concentration and letting go between tasks. This artistic element in structuring lessons forms the essence of Waldorf education.
- 4) The teachers endeavour to create an appropriate aesthetic environment in the school and the classroom because these have an unconscious effect on the mood of the pupils.

In structuring lessons artistically the path is the goal because it is a living thing like art itself. In doing so, teachers endeavour to develop their own methods and avoid ready-made methods as far as possible. Here it is of relevance whether the artistic is used as a goal or for educational reasons.

The forms. The structure of the school and lessons.

In conceiving Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools, Rudolf Steiner only gave a few identity-establishing *forms* which are based on the one hand in an understanding of the human being and on the other in the social task of the school. These are:

For the children:

- 1) Stable, performance-differentiated pupil groups. Classes arranged by age not by standardised streams.
- 2) Subject-specific streams are possible *alongside*.
- 3) The class teacher as companion over many years (ideally up to the age of 14 of the pupils).
- 4) Main lesson in the morning. *Afterwards* subject lessons.
- 5) A pre-school level without academic learning objectives.
- 6) The school as an integrated school from pre-school age to adulthood.
- 7) Individual support for pupils within the class community.
- 8) Coeducation.

For the teachers:

- 1) Each teacher is responsible to the full extent for the school as a whole.
- 2) An inner and outer connection is maintained through regular joint educational meetings, thereby continuing to learn.
- 3) As a rule, the school is carried by teachers and parents and is not determined from the outside.
- 4) Parents and teachers form a community which is responsible for the school.
- 5) The teachers seek and find forms of quality development.
- 6) Each teacher is responsible for their lessons on the basis of the anthroposophical understanding of the human being, to maintain professional standards, for their relationship with the pupils, their social, professional and subject competence as well as the goals of Waldorf education.

Entrepreneurial health.

The establishment of a Waldorf school takes place, as a rule, with the gradual development of one class after the other. Every school initiative develops and grows. The organic development of middle school leads to the creation of an upper school. If the upper school is set up prematurely, this can place the existence of the school at risk. Development and growth thus have to be kept in equilibrium in order to enable the educational task.

The size of the establishment influences the health of the school organism as well as the way in which the educational and social tasks of the school can be taken up.

A healthy school organism also has an effect on the finances. Since in most countries Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are not state funded, the costs of the school are covered by fees from the parents. In many countries they are therefore additionally dependent on donations. Many schools show a lot of commitment and creative solutions to preserve their financial health and continue the development of the school.

The school community. Coexistence.

The basis of Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools is formed by the school community and parents, teachers, pupils and staff getting along together as people. All their activities and work together are guided by humanity and human dignity. Everyone involved can together develop important non-hierarchical forms of collaboration. In this context transparency and clarity (instead of personal and institutional power) are aspired to in all processes of school governance as well as in the decision-making. They are the foundations for the commitment of the individual within the community and for the perception of the school in its environment. Various activities and bodies facilitate the meeting between teachers and parents (parents' evenings, consultations, counselling, pupil case discussions), where the teachers in particular have to cultivate these with the greatest possible care in the spirit of universal humanity.

If such aspirations can be perceived in a school, it raises its profile as an establishment which is aware of its social responsibility.

School governance.

Teachers and parents are jointly responsible for the Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school. They organise and structure it in accordance with their common intentions. In schools which have already been in existence for some decades, it is occasionally worthwhile radically to review the structures, decision-making processes and principles of governance.

Managing the school means always having a clear awareness of the task and mission of the Waldorf school and to continue working on it. This is only possible through the joint study of the anthroposophical foundations of this system of education. The governance of the school is therefore based in the unifying spirit of the Waldorf school which comes about when colleagues and parents work on the foundations.

Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are self-governed (i.e. not state-administered) organisations. Teachers and parents govern the school and set up appropriate organs.

On this basis, the school's organisation, finances, administration, etc. can be structured in a great variety of ways. Today it is, above all, the differentiated forms of delegation of tasks and responsibilities which, in consensus and in agreement with the mission of the school, are discussed and agreed together with the people directly involved.

This form of school governance is a key feature of the Waldorf school.

Concluding remarks.

In summary we can say: a school is a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school when a majority of the teachers lives by the spark of the spirit. It makes what is difficult easy, what is impossible possible and illuminates the dark.