

Essential characteristics/guidelines of Waldorf Pedagogy

During its session of May 30, 2025, the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Pedagogy – Hague Circle (HC) – adopted the document *Essential Characteristics of Waldorf Pedagogy* as a binding orientation for the global Waldorf school movement. Even though the characteristics described here have general validity, individual schools can augment them so they are aligned with their own specific cultural circumstances. They aim to emphasize and strengthen individuality, openness for development, diversity of individual schools as well as unity in the Waldorf school movement. For preschool, the foundational principles adopted by the International Association for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) apply.

Preliminary Remarks

In Rudolf Steiner's conception, the life of the Waldorf school springs from true insight into the nature of human development¹, a source for the teachers to practice the art of education as the children in their care grow up, shaping and developing their teaching in accordance with time, school location, and people involved.

To be recognized as a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school, it is necessary to characterize essential elements of Waldorf pedagogy. Once the school has been recognized, it will be added to the worldwide list of Waldorf institutions, for which the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Pedagogy – Hague Circle – is responsible.

The characteristics described here are formulated freely and contain characterizations of what the International Forum understands by Waldorf education. This understanding is evolving, so these characteristics will also be added to or replaced over time; the fundamentals of the pedagogy remain the same.

¹ Rudolf Steiner's insight into the development of the human being, as outlined in his pedagogical lectures.

This document can serve as an orientation for individuals as well as schools (e.g. for self-evaluations) and forms an essential basis for the accreditation process of the Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school.²

Characteristics of a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school are, among others:

Belonging to a World-wide Movement

The Waldorf movement forms an international network, within which individual Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are autonomous, while being connected locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

The work of an individual school is strengthened by an awareness of the whole of the movement, and is nurtured by regular interchanges within the region and a particular country, as well as in international conferences.

This awareness can find expression in partnerships with schools in different countries as well as assistance for developing schools or schools in need. Taking part in professional development courses, both for teachers, parents and school representatives, will greatly strengthen this work.

Mutual interest and the overall effort to bring local educational practice in alignment with the Essential Characteristics will strengthen the institution as well as the Waldorf pedagogical movement as a whole, whereas isolation, provincialism, or even lack of willingness to work together will weaken the movement as a whole. One way to foster this attitude of mutual interest is to understand ourselves as an integral part of society as a whole, and proclaiming it as such.

² Schools in countries where there is a Waldorf Association recognized by the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education - Hague Circle (IC) are included in the World School List on their recommendation. If there is no such association, the IC decides on admission on the basis of a recommendation by at least two of its members. This recognition is a prerequisite for the right to bear the name “Waldorf” or “Rudolf Steiner” school, which is regulated in a separate procedure.

School Identity

Every school is unique. Its identity manifests in all the recognized characteristics, virtues, and potential, which are at its disposal. These are determined by its history, its location, and its geography as well as the circle of parents and teachers who put their stamp on the school organism.

Above and beyond that, the school bases its identity on its pursuit of the realization of the art of education as initiated by Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf pedagogy. The practical realization of the art of education, as sketched and described by Rudolf Steiner, will find different forms of expression in each individual school. This has consequences for the way teachers conceive of teaching and learning, the way they handle content and delivery of teaching material, how they give form to the way they relate to students, how they incorporate the pedagogical foundational principles and lastly to what extent their teaching methods are age-appropriate in the light of the anthroposophical insight into child development. The way children learn is a significant health factor at every stage. All schools share this ultimate aim: healthy learning.

It is therefore essential for each individual school to find creative and responsible solutions in all the areas outlined. Taken together, they form a large part of a school's identity, which culminates in what can be perceived as a sense of inner fulfillment, of meaning in that the people involved feel in line with their ideals. The extent to which the majority of the teachers have accomplished an attitude of openness in their striving for insight and self-education – with the help of anthroposophy – gives the school its identity; it builds the spiritual substance out of which future challenges can be mastered by the school community.

The individual character of each school is determined by the quality of professional joy, the striving for anthroposophical insight as a basis for pedagogy, as well as the cooperation of teachers, staff and parents – these things manifest in what generally is perceived as school spirit.

The curriculum and pedagogical creativity

There is no standardized curriculum for Waldorf schools which will work in every situation. But there are detailed indications given by Rudolf Steiner of suitable content for each age level, including methodological indications. Both content and method are aimed to optimally meet and support the development of body, soul, and spirit. Taken as a whole, these curriculum indications are one basic constituent of Waldorf education. They are the backbone of this pedagogy and, in their totality, represent the curriculum. Many of these suggestions are valid for all subjects and are characterized by the fact that they enable meaningful, effective learning progress through repetition, variation and reflection. Over the decades, many colleagues have tried to summarize Rudolf Steiner's suggestions and develop them further in line with the times and the respective cultural context.³

It is essential for a Waldorf school that teachers strive to sharpen their perception of each individual child and to understand the developmental characteristics of children and young people at different ages on the basis of anthroposophical anthropology. Based on this, they will work on the content of the lessons in such a way that the local context, the time, and the situation are appropriately taken into account.

Teachers in a Waldorf school will therefore endeavor to:

- study anthroposophical anthropology and child development;
- work on understanding and applying Rudolf Steiner's suggestions for their subject;
- be aware of the cultural, social, geographical, ecological, historical and religious context of their institution and the families involved;
- be aware of developments in current academic discourse in the field of pedagogy;
- take note of state requirements with regard to teaching content and learning objectives and take them into account or integrate them where appropriate or necessary.

On the basis of this study, teachers in an institution can individually and collegially develop a curriculum that realizes the intentions of Waldorf education in a specific way. The aim is to create a fruitful rapprochement between the possible and the ideal in order to work creatively and promote the development of the child through the curriculum. It will be necessary to revise this curriculum regularly and adapt it to developments.

³ See the curriculum books by C. von Heydebrandt, E. A. Stockmeyer, and, more recently, T. Richter and M. Rawson.

The relationship teacher – child - world

Child development and learning in school are realized in a trust-based relationship between the child and the teacher, and in the perception of the surrounding space and the world. Waldorf teachers bear a special responsibility for the vital shaping of this relationship. The type of relationship children need for healthy development depends on their age.

- In preschool, teachers cultivate a loving, protective attitude. Practical and artistic activities are of primary importance, building on the children's ability to imitate. Children learn and relate to the world through free play.
- In the first 6 to 8 years of elementary school, teachers strive to build an authentic relationship with the children, building on their innate need to follow a trusted authority, which enables them to relate to the world through a variety of learning activities. The emphasis at this age is on getting to know the world by means of rich learning experiences through stories, pictures and characterizations.
- In adolescence, this relationship changes, because now the focus is on encountering and engaging with the world from the perspective of the subjects themselves. Adolescents will need space and encouragement to form their own judgments, as well as to develop empathy and stimulate independent action. The decisive factor here is whether, in addition to their professional aptitude, sixth grade teachers have the ability to meet young people in such a way that they discover their own aspirations and develop the courage to start shaping their biographies accordingly.
- Education and teaching are successful if they awaken further questions and interest in other people and the world in children and young people. It is incumbent on schools to find ways to balance outside demands, (such as exams), with the demands of healthy mental and physical development.

The relationship with the pupils is deepened by child study. It is a further tool for getting in touch with the developing individuality of a child, allowing it to emerge through observation and description, holding back customary judgements or solutions.⁴

⁴ Anna Seidl: "Ich bin du"; Christof Wiechert: "Solving the Riddle of the Child – The Art of Child Study"; Sylvia Barth, Angelika Wiehl: "Wahrnehmungsvignetten".

The relationship between teachers and parents is a crucial part of daily educational practice. The cooperation between parents and teachers is cultivated in the sense of an educational partnership. Mutual interest, appreciation, regular encounters and cooperation create an atmosphere in which children can develop well. Adults also need this atmosphere in order to develop their educational potential. Parents and teachers in Waldorf schools therefore attach particular importance to cultivating relationships and finding creative solutions to overcome misunderstandings and mistrust.

Teachers as artists

Artistic teaching is one of the most important tools for this and may be understood in four ways.

1. The lesson itself is artistic in the sense of originality, imagery, creativity and also in the sense of healthy breathing; that is to say, teachers need to perceive when it is time to change activity, creating a lively alternation of tasks allowing tension and release. This artistic quality in the design of lessons is an essential element of Waldorf education.
2. Teachers will use traditional arts in an appropriate form in their lessons (painting, drawing, recitation, music, etc.).
3. Teachers themselves cultivate a relationship to an art form, including social art.
4. The teachers endeavor to create an appropriate artistic environment.

Teachers as researchers

The basis of science teaching, especially in the upper grades, is a phenomenological approach. Apart from the teaching of science as such, a broader scientific attitude comes into play for teachers, extending to their whole attitude. Three aspects stand out:

1. Science as a subject: teachers develop their subjects on the basis of the scientific knowledge of their time, including Goethean research.
2. Teachers - within the scope of their possibilities – cultivate a scientific approach, in the sense of practicing openness and objectivity; they ‘conduct research’ and reflect on their own teaching.
3. Their scientific attitude extends to all dimensions of the human being, which find expression in the spiritual scientific foundation of their teaching.

Standard forms in Waldorf Schools

In his conception of Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools, Rudolf Steiner specified only a few characteristic forms which give schools their identity. What has thus become institutionalized is grounded in deeper insights into human development on the one hand and on the other hand on the social task of the schools. These forms are:

For the children:

1. Stable class communities over many years. Classes arranged according to age, not according to standardized performance. No grade retention.
2. In addition, it is possible to form subject-specific, performance-differentiated learning groups.
3. The class teacher as a companion over many years (ideally until the pupils are 14 years old).
4. Main lesson in the morning, followed by subject lessons later in the day.
5. A pre-school level without academic learning objectives.
6. The school as a comprehensive school, from pre-school age to adulthood. The curriculum is designed that way.
7. Individual guidance of pupils within the class community.
8. Co-education.

For the teachers:

1. Each teacher is fully responsible for the school as a whole.
2. Teachers stay in touch by getting together as a group every week, thereby furthering their education and cultivating the social bonding element.
3. As a rule, the school is self-administered. Teachers and parents participate in self-administration.
4. Parents and teachers are jointly responsible for the school.
5. Each teacher is responsible for his or her teaching on the basis of anthroposophical anthropology. This pertains to a number of areas: maintenance of professional standards;

cultivation of the relationship with the pupils; social, professional and specialist skills as well as the Waldorf educational goals.

6. Teachers take two methodological principles into account:

- The human constitution is threefold: we act, feel and think. Lessons are therefore built up in such a way that content is structured according to three steps: living experience (activity); internalizing, letting it resonate (feeling); cognitive penetration, recognition, (thinking).
- The rhythmic fluctuation between day and night consciousness is at the foundation of teaching in blocks. Since we recognize the need to allow the different consciousness of the night to play in, Waldorf schools worldwide have instituted the so-called Main lesson. A subject or a set of topics is worked on for about two hours a day for several weeks at the beginning of the school day. In this way, during the night, the day's experiences are incorporated through neuronal restructuring and can be followed up the next day to deepen and retain the knowledge acquired.

7. Teachers seek and find ways of further quality development in their teaching.

Learning objectives, assessment, evaluation tools

The school must describe and document both development and performance of its pupils in an appropriate manner. This is done in the form of annual school reports. These contain an accurate picture of the pupils and a record their achievements in such a way that they relate to the pupils' abilities, i.e. they do not measure students against fixed standards, but characterize how the student has grown.

Waldorf education is designed for a school period of twelve years and aims to prepare students for the next step, be it further education or professional training. It must offer the qualifications required for this and, where needed, certify them in the form prescribed by the state.

The school community: working together

The basis for Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools is the school community and the human interaction between parents, teachers, pupils and staff. All working together is guided by human ideals and human dignity. Communally, all those involved can develop significant

non-hierarchical forms of cooperation. Transparency and accountability (instead of personal and institutional power) are sought in all school management processes and decisions. These are the basis for the engagement of the individual in the community and determine the school's image. Various activities and committees facilitate encounters between teachers and parents (parent evenings, consultation hours, discussions by and with students, etc.). When a school is perceived as making such an effort, it will gain a reputation for being an institution which is conscious of its social responsibility.

School management

Leading a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner school means having the task and mission of the Waldorf school ever more clearly in mind and working on it. This is only possible through the joint study of the anthroposophical foundations of this pedagogy. School leadership is therefore based on the unifying spirit of the Waldorf school.

The forms of leadership must correspond to the art of education and the needs of the pupils. In schools that have been in existence for several decades, it is worthwhile to review the structures, decision-making processes and management principles regularly. The following viewpoints are essential for the management of Waldorf schools and kindergartens:

- Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are generally self-governing (i.e. not state-administered) organizations. Teachers and parents manage the school and create appropriate committees. On this basis, the school's structure, organization, finances, administration, etc. can be carried out in a wide variety of ways. At present, this chiefly takes the form of delegation of tasks and responsibilities. These are discussed and agreed upon by consensus and carried out in accordance with the school's mission by those entrusted with them.
- The weekly meeting of teachers as a forum for regular training and research is indispensable. The pedagogical meeting is essential to achieving coherence and contemporary development in a pedagogy that focuses on pedagogical creativity and whose further development is not hierarchically determined. The focus of the faculty meeting is on the study of anthroposophical anthropology, child study and the exchange of pedagogical questions and experiences among individual teachers, as well as mutual help and advice. The results of this cooperation should always flow into the management and direction of the school as a whole.

Corporate health (budget and finances)

The size of an institution will determine the organizational structure in such a way that it can function properly, staying healthy and addressing the educational and social tasks of a school.

Since in most countries Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools are not state-funded, many schools are dependent on donations in addition to parental contributions. With regard to parental contributions and salaries, the school community strives for solidarity and solutions that are geared as far as possible to the needs and possibilities of the people involved.

Realistic budget planning is important for the social atmosphere and also contributes to the quality of educational work. A middle way must be found between excessive thriftiness and overestimating the possibilities of finding new sources of income.

The pursuit of profit and profit maximization are incompatible with the idea of the Waldorf school. As a rule, Waldorf schools and kindergartens are supported by non-profit associations. Where this is not possible, it must be ensured that the shareholders make 100% of the profits available to the school community.

Evaluation and self-evaluation

The pedagogical and administrative independence of Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner schools requires efficient forms of evaluation and self-evaluation to ensure the quality of teaching and the well-being of the child and to enable the school management to react quickly and effectively at any time if necessary.

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