

What it's like being a Waldorf teacher

Results of an empirical survey

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ABSTRACT. In 2011 Dirk Randoll carried out a major study on job satisfaction among Waldorf teachers. He looked at their working conditions, various aspects of work-load as well their general attitude to their profession. This article presents a comprehensive summary of his findings. Work-load and modes of coping with it were considered in relation both to conditions in the school system in general and to certain ones peculiar to Waldorf schools (e.g., management by the college of teachers, pedagogical ethos). In selected areas of concern answers given by state teachers were included by way of comparison. The questionnaire was filled in by a representative sample of 1,807 Waldorf teachers from 105 Waldorf schools in Germany. In addition to the areas already mentioned, the following aspects were addressed: training, salary levels, professional behaviour, and challenges for the future. The findings demonstrate a fairly high level of job satisfaction, although the pressure of work-load was felt to be high. A number of critical points also emerged, such as questions about the efficiency of participatory management and the prognosis for future development.

Keywords: Waldorf teachers, job satisfaction, empirical study, representative sample, professionalisation, future development.

Introduction

Until very recently little was known about Waldorf teachers' working conditions and how happy they were in their work, nor about the professional pressures they faced and their coping strategies. This led the education faculty at Alanus University to the idea of conducting an exploratory study of German Waldorf schools. It was funded by the Software AG-Stiftung, the Hannoversche Kassen, and the Pädagogische Forschungsstelle (Stuttgart). The study, which was carried out in 2011/12, consists of a qualitative and a quantitative section (Randoll, 2013).

The study was based on a representative sample of 1,807 teachers from 105 Waldorf schools, and in what follows selected findings from their responses to the questionnaire will be presented. This questionnaire, specially designed for the purpose, contained 345 questions covering the following topics:

Motivation, aims, teaching

School atmosphere

Communication and co-operation with colleagues

Evaluation and quality assurance

Issues around working (along) with parents, parent-teacher communication

Professional satisfaction

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Professional behaviour and experience (AVEM model)
 Individual organisation of work
 Experience of work pressure
 Coping strategies
 State of health
 Salary scales, organisational structure, pension
 Professional status and self-esteem
 Challenges facing the Waldorf school in the future

In order to enable comparison with teachers from state schools questions from the *Pädagogische Entwicklungsbilanzen*, a project of the German Institute of International Educational Research (das Deutsche Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung – DIPF-PEB-Projekt) (Döbrich, 2007; Gerecht, Steinert, Klieme & Döbrich, 2007) and the short version of the AVEM (Arbeitsbezogenes Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster) questionnaire by Schaarschmidt and Fischer (2003) were also included.

Sample composition

At the participating schools there are more female (60×2%) than male teachers. This is broadly similar to the gender proportions found in state comprehensive schools (54% women, 41×6% men) as surveyed in the previously mentioned study done by the DIPF (Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung, Frankfurt am Main). Also, the average age of those in the Waldorf sample (49×2, $s = 8×33$) does not differ significantly from that of teachers in state schools (cf. Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012b). The age structure among Waldorf teachers, however, bears witness to the fact that in the next ten to fifteen years there will be a retirement wave, the clear implication of which is that at least every second teacher will have to be replaced by a younger one. Since the Waldorf schools in Germany are already experiencing problems recruiting young teachers, this is an immense challenge.

In relation to religious affiliation the following picture emerges: 42×6% of Waldorf teachers are not members of any denomination, 54×8% belong to one or other denominational grouping (protestant 19×5%, Christian community 18×7%, Roman catholic 12×5%). The proportion of denominationally unaffiliated Waldorf teachers is clearly higher than in the overall population of Germany.⁴

On the question of the relationship to anthroposophy, the figures came out as follows:

| | Total | up to 40 | 41-50 | 51-60 | over 60 |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| Practising/involved | 33,9 | 28,6 | 34,4 | 34,0 | 49,5 |
| Positively disposed | 40,2 | 39,3 | 42,0 | 42,0 | 28,9 |
| Critically sympathetic | 21,5 | 26,0 | 21,2 | 21,1 | 17,5 |
| Indifferent/neutral | 1,5 | 2,7 | 0,9 | 1,6 | 2,1 |
| Critical/sceptical | 1,1 | 1,9 | 0,8 | 0,9 | 1,0 |
| Negative/rejecting | 0,1 | 0,4 | 0,2 | 0 | 0 |

Table 1: Waldorf teachers' relationship to anthroposophy (%)

This clearly shows that older Waldorf teachers have a more positive attitude to anthroposophy than do younger ones. At the same time, all those in the sample assign a higher significance to anthroposophy

4. 18·7% of Waldorf teachers declare themselves as members of the Christian Community (of these 24·8% are over 60, whereas 11·1% are under 40).

in its professional context than in their private life. Here again, there are clear age distinctions. Moreover, eurythmy teachers are most closely affiliated to anthroposophy, followed by the class teachers and the art, craft and music teachers. Most distanced in their relationship to anthroposophy are the sport, high school and foreign language teachers.

Professional input

With N=533, class teachers are the group that make the strongest showing here, followed by high-school (N=312) and foreign language teachers (N=281), then art and craft teachers (N=156), eurythmists (N=113), music (N=94) and finally sport teachers (N=84). Under “other” (N=188) we have teachers of gardening, ethics/religion, etc.

57×8% of Waldorf teachers state that they work full-time (men 79×3%, women 45×8%), 40×1% part-time (men 20×1%, women 53×4%). As can be seen from Table 2, class teachers have the highest number of lessons per week, followed by art/craft, music, high-school and foreign-language teachers. Comparatively, eurythmists have the lowest level of actual teaching commitments.

| Work-load in hours/ week | Total | Class teachers | Art/craft music | Music | High-school | Foreign language | Sport | Eurythmy ⁵ |
|--------------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------|-------|-------------|------------------|-------|-----------------------|
| 1–5 | 0,8 | 0,4 | 0,6 | 1,1 | 1,0 | 1,8 | – | – |
| 6–13 | 11,8 | 2,6 | 14,1 | 13,8 | 13,5 | 14,2 | 11,9 | 23,9 |
| 14–19 | 25,7 | 24,4 | 21,8 | 22,3 | 23,1 | 27,0 | 26,2 | 39,8 |
| 20–26 | 56,1 | 67,5 | 59,6 | 57,4 | 56,1 | 55,2 | 54,8 | 33,6 |
| >27 | 3,4 | 3,9 | 3,8 | 4,3 | 5,4 | 1,4 | 7,1 | 0,9 |

Table 2: Number of lessons per week, by subject (%)

Qualifications

Only 19×4% of the teachers asked attended a Waldorf school themselves (the younger ones more than the older ones). 79% have Abitur (“A-levels”), 6×8% Mittlere Reife (“O-levels”), 7×1% Fachhochschulreife (“LNC”), 3×4% Fachgebundene Hochschulreife (“HNC”). Here also there are clear differences according to age-group.⁶ The percentage of high-school and foreign language teachers with certificate (A-levels) is higher than that of eurythmists, and that of art, craft and sport teachers.

As can be seen from Figure 1, 46×4% (N=838) of the sampled Waldorf teachers have a university degree with teaching qualification, while 18×9% have a degree in a particular subject without any teaching qualification (e.g., in biology, physics, or German). 14×8% have done some general pedagogical/therapeutic training, for instance, as a kindergarten teacher, curative teacher, subject teacher, social worker, art therapist or physiotherapist. A further 10×5% have trained in a trade (e.g., joiner/carpenter, locksmith, goldsmith, electrician, gardener or bookbinder), and 6×5% have an art training (e.g., design, painting, sculpture). Among the so-called vocational trainings represented (5×3%) are bank saleswoman, bookseller, industrial salesperson, medical technician or doctor’s assistant. Finally, 9×4% explicitly state that they have trained at a Waldorf training institute of some kind, financed by the Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, and 6×2% that

5. In most Waldorf schools eurythmy teachers have an agreed weekly dispensation of 18 lessons.

6. The Abitur figure for those under 40 is 84·7%, for those over 60 it is 70·1%.

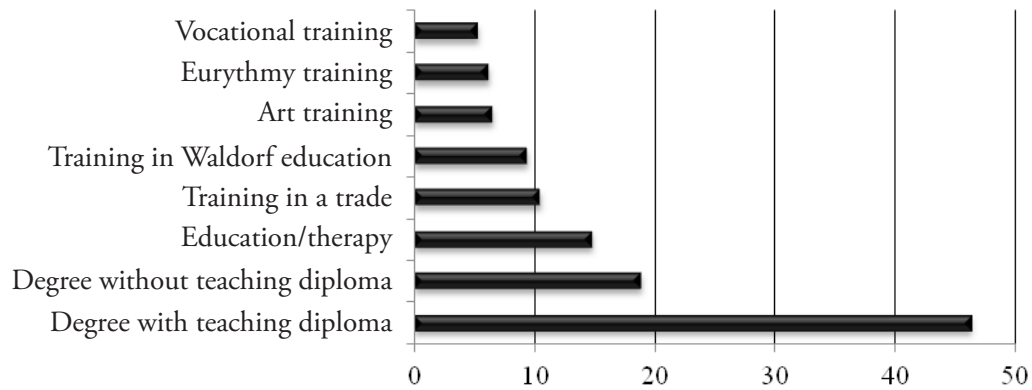


Figure 1: Professional qualification(s) (in percentages, the question was framed so that more than one could be stated if necessary)

In Table 3 the answers relating to professional training have been presented according to subjects taught.

| | Degree with teaching diploma | Degree without teaching diploma | Education/therapy | Trade | Waldorf training | Art | Eurythmy training | Vocational training |
|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Total | 46,4 | 18,9 | 14,8 | 10,5 | 9,4 | 6,5 | 6,2 | 5,3 |
| Sport | 78,6 | 6,7 | 12,0 | 10,7 | 5,9 | 1,3 | 6,0 | 5,3 |
| Foreign languages | 68,7 | 16,3 | 3,9 | 1,6 | 4,9 | 1,6 | 3,6 | 3,5 |
| High-school teacher | 56,1 | 28,9 | 4,1 | 4,6 | 7,1 | 1,9 | 1,0 | 4,1 |
| Music | 55,3 | 15,4 | 9,6 | 4,3 | 7,4 | 23,4 | 2,2 | 2,1 |
| Class teacher | 40,1 | 22,5 | 20,3 | 9,2 | 18,6 | 6,1 | 3,9 | 5,4 |
| Art/craft | 32,1 | 7,4 | 19,2 | 42,3 | 12,2 | 20,5 | 3,3 | 3,8 |
| Eurythmy | 11,5 | 29,9 | 24,0 | 5,1 | 10,6 | 3,2 | 98,2 | 6,4 |

Table 3: Type of professional training in relation to subject(s) taught (%)

This shows that the majority of sport, foreign language and high school teachers have a degree from a state university, while class teachers, as well art, craft and music teachers, are more likely to have studied at a Waldorf training institute.

The question as to how teachers prepared themselves for their post at a Waldorf school was answered as follows (multiple answers were possible):

- 44×5% attended a supplementary Waldorf training, either full or part-time, after completing their degree.
- 22×1% acquired their Waldorf qualification in the course of some professional training.

- 19×1% studied at one or several training colleges financed by the Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen. Because of the multiple answers on this point it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the actual numbers of teachers who attended Waldorf training institutes.

Overall 80×4% of those sampled have some kind of Waldorf qualification (whether complete or supplementary).

To the question as to whether they felt that their training had prepared them well for their professional task, 58% said “yes”, 38×4% “no”. The ones who felt best prepared were those who had done a degree at a state university, followed by a diploma of education and then an in-service Waldorf seminar (66×4%).

The financial position of Waldorf teachers

More than three quarters of the teachers sampled (78×5%) said they were completely dependent on their salary, whereas 18×9% said they weren't. 19×1% supplement their income with another job in addition to their work as a Waldorf teacher (in the case of full-time: 14×3%; in the case of part-time: 26×3%). This applies much more to art, craft and music teachers (34%), as well as eurythmists (28×8%). The types of extra work most often mentioned (multiple answers were possible) are: teaching (e.g. as lecturer or tutor), artistic or musical engagements (e.g., choir leader, pianist or artist), caregiving and therapy (e.g., curative eurythmy), or consultancy. Only 35×4% felt satisfied with their income. Thus it is no wonder that 77% are of the opinion that not enough money is allocated for personnel costs at their school. They also feel that the low salary, not to speak of report writing, meetings and administrative work, is particularly burdensome. In spite of all this, more than two thirds (68×8%) say they prefer to be paid according to the principle of equal shares (every teacher receives the same basic salary, supplemented according to family situation, extra responsibilities, etc.). On the other hand, only 12×2% favour a salary structure modelled along civil service lines (in this group are mainly high school teachers with 21×2%, and foreign language teachers with 22×8%).⁷

Job satisfaction

In spite of their relatively low salary and the excessive demands made on their time by administrative duties and all the extra-curricular activities involved in running the school, the great majority of Waldorf teachers – 91×7% - seem to be happy in their profession. This is especially striking in comparison to the level of job satisfaction found among state comprehensive school teachers (71×2%). Possible reasons for this are:

1. Waldorf schools in Germany choose their students themselves, in other words, there is a selection procedure. Moreover, the Waldorf school's normal clientele is the academic middle class, from which these students are recruited. Accordingly, the teachers are not confronted with social, emotional and behavioural problems to the same extent as their colleagues in state schools.
2. Waldorf teachers rate their relationship to students as much more positive than that of the comparable group of teachers at comprehensive schools. Nevertheless, they also seem to have a tendency to idealise this relationship and to over-estimate their role as teacher (as shown by comparing personal and external images of this).
3. Waldorf schools in Germany have generally arisen out of parent initiatives. Also parents choose this type school with certain expectations in mind as regards their children's education. Thus it is understandable when 84% of Waldorf teachers say that co-operation with parents works very well.
4. The participatory style of management practised at Waldorf schools enables the individual teacher to feel that he or she has a real say in how the school is structured and organised. This enhances the teacher's sense of personal initiative, which is an essential condition for the development of professional resilience.
5. Freedom and independence emerged as very important to the teachers involved in this study. Freedom

⁷ The question here was: “If you could freely decide, what salary structure would you envisage as optimal for your school and for yourself...”

not simply in relation to organisational questions, but also in the matter of planning and designing one's own lessons. This is why any hint of external influence or outside control perceived as a "threat" to the practice of Waldorf education – for instance, the introduction of centralised examinations – is likely to be rejected as strongly as it is feared.

6. Almost all Waldorf teachers have a shared preoccupation with the foundations of Waldorf education (e.g., Rudolf Steiner's "Foundations of Human Experience", the Waldorf curriculum or the focus on nurturing individuality). Independent of age, gender or degree of affiliation to anthroposophy, these form a background context within which the running of the school is shaped and organised. This is also the most often named motive for choosing the profession of Waldorf teacher.

Critical Points

The picture of general job satisfaction among Waldorf teachers is not entirely untarnished, since there are a number of areas where there are distinct reservations. The main ones are:

- The participatory management practised in Waldorf schools.
- The unequal distribution of tasks and responsibilities among college members
- The lack of appreciation and recognition – from both colleagues and students – felt by eurythmy teachers, and even by some art, craft and music teachers. For the Waldorf school, as a supposed champion of artistic education, this is a finding that should give serious pause for thought and discussion.

In regard to participatory management, the following aspects were singled out as especially problematical:

- decision-making processes are not efficient enough
- information exchange is inadequate
- there are groups who do not (any longer) attend the teachers meetings
- communication is not always open and transparent
- there are individuals who strongly influence the climate of opinion – i.e., "hidden headmasters".

Added to this is the fact that participatory management is felt to be too time- and cost-intensive. Given the tight budgets of Waldorf schools, this throws up many questions. This is why most of the Waldorf teachers asked favour the so-called mandate model as clearly a better alternative to participatory management involving everyone.

Further findings tending towards critical are:

1. The preponderance of older colleagues in the teaching body and the concomitant tendency towards a split into "traditionalists" and "reformers". The high fluctuation rate among new, and mostly young, appointees should be the focus of serious critical reflection.
2. The insufficient quality of teacher training at Waldorf seminars and colleges. Over decades there has been a failure there to take stock of developments in modern educational research and to integrate this new knowledge into their own curricula. Indeed, the opposite gesture has been most apparent, namely that of dissociation from educational theory in order to pursue their own path. The consequence of this is that in Waldorf education further development is scarcely discernible. But a practitioner of the art of education needs a repertoire of teaching skills and abilities just as much as a store of comprehensive, subject-specific and inter-disciplinary knowledge.

Patterns of performance among Waldorf teachers

The AVEM model

The abbreviation AVEM stands for “Arbeitsbezogene Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster”. This procedure, developed by Schaarschmidt (2003), enables us to make statements about the personal resources of teachers and their responses to pressure. By using a shortened version of the AVEM questionnaire, consisting of 44 questions, it proved possible to assign 91×8% of the teachers in our sample to one of the four AVEM categories. This was done in terms of 11 characteristics, each of which entailed four questions.⁸ For an exact description of the categories reference may be made to Peters’ dissertation (2013) or Randall’s research report (2013). For our purposes here it is enough to distinguish between the “healthy categories” and the so-called “risk categories”. There are two different ways in which a teacher’s behaviour can be judged as being healthy. One of these is the type of teacher who is very engaged and willing to invest all his or her energy to the point of exhaustion, but who also recovers very quickly and feels well supported by the social surroundings (category G: (gesund) healthy). The other healthy type is one who is aware of his or her own limits, and takes care not to overstep them (category S: (Schonung) self-preservation). This group tend to be less engaged and are better able to be detached in relation to their professional activities. For teachers in both these “healthy” categories there are no indications of health risks specifically associated with the practice of their profession.

For the two so-called risk categories things look rather different: one type can be described as the classic “workaholic” – the greater the demands made upon him, the more he will increase his efforts to fulfil them (category A: (Anstrengung) strain). The other type is already in a state of resignation, and gears all his activities towards somehow getting through the day. This second type is most strongly in danger of burn-out (category B: in danger of burn-out).

Just how big the gap is between “healthy” and “at risk” in the teachers sampled is shown in the following figure.

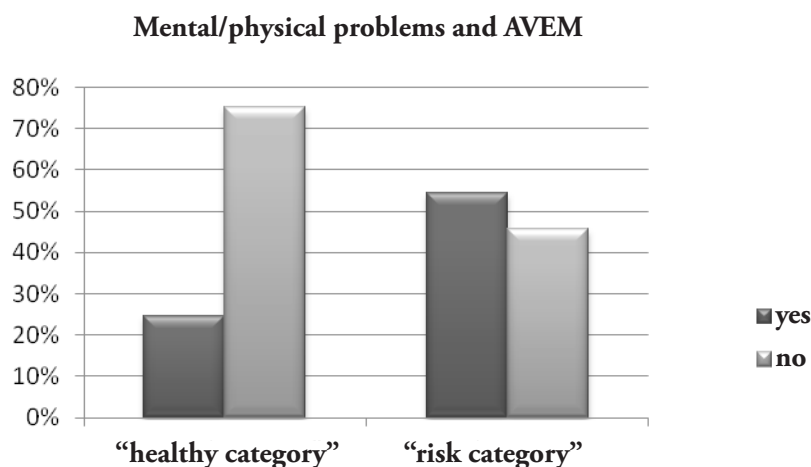


Figure 2: Health problems among Waldorf teachers in relation to the AVEM categories

Figure 2 shows that within the “healthy category” only about a quarter indicate health problems that could be associated with their profession, whereas within the “risk category” this figure is over 50%. This is one of the most significant findings of this part of the study, namely that there is a proven connection between teachers’ inner attitudes and their state of health.

At 49×7% the proportion of Waldorf teachers in the “risk category” is 9% lower than the corresponding figure for state school teachers⁹, but it is still considerably higher than that of other professional groupings

8. The characteristics were: meaningfulness of work, professional ambition, willingness to go to the limit, perfectionism, facility for detachment, tendency to resignation, drive towards problem-solving, inner calm, experience of success, social support, life-satisfaction.

9. Here all types of state schools were taken into consideration.

(e.g., doctors, policemen). This means that for close to 50% of Waldorf teachers their professional life is a source of strain upon their mental health.

The comparison with state school teachers yielded significant differences for only two of the eleven AVEM-characteristics: the figures for Waldorf teachers were lower under the heading of “perfectionism”, and higher under that of “facility for detachment”. These two deviations are responsible for the striking fact that the proportion of Waldorf teachers in the “risk category” was 9% lower. In investigating these two characteristics in relation to other factors in the study, only one significant connection was found for each of them: the lower level of “perfectionism” is demonstrably related to greater (consciously felt) autonomy, and the higher level in the “facility for detachment” shows a clear relationship to the stated feeling of being involved in the school as a whole. By way of interpretation it could be said that someone permitted autonomy of action will not be so tightly bound to previously established (or prescribed) aims, but will be able to meet the demands of a given situation more flexibly. On the other hand, having an emotional connection to the school as a whole will work against the danger of feeling that one has to battle singlehandedly through every school day. And this would ultimately enhance one’s detachment from one’s own work. One further point to be made is that the facility for detachment has shown itself to be a key qualification for coping with external pressure in general.

From the investigation of specific factors relating to the categories that stand out, a number of other insights were gained into personal resources and causes of stress. These AVEM findings largely concur with the results from the direct questions about work-load. Chief among the positive personal resources to be mentioned is initiative, which is particularly pronounced among Waldorf teachers on account of the high degree of autonomy they enjoy both in the classroom and in administration. It is clearly apparent, however, that participatory management has its shadow side: in those schools where administrative and decision-making processes become laborious and inefficient through the fact that all colleagues decide everything together there is an increased incidence of stress patterns. With participatory management it is not “whether” but “how” that is the decisive factor.

Another factor clearly affecting the distribution of our sample among the various categories is the tendency of Waldorf teachers to place very high demands upon themselves and on their pedagogical work ($r = 0 \times 59$)¹⁰. This has a very clear negative effect upon stress indicators. By contrast, the sense of being appreciated by students ($r = 0 \times 48$) and of self-fulfilment in one’s work ($r = 0 \times 52$) can be recorded as positive.

Future challenges for the Waldorf school

78×9% (N = 1×427) tabled a comment on the following open question: “*In your opinion, what are the three greatest challenges facing Waldorf schools in the future?*” Altogether 3,732 comments were evaluated. The method used in doing so was to sort them into thematic categories as given in the following table.

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Further development, renewal of the body of anthroposophical thinking, rethink the spiritual “anchorings”. | N=876; 23,5% |
| The recruiting of new teachers and students; improvement of the financing of schools and teachers | N=818; 21,9% |
| Maintaining hold on the anthroposophical foundations | N=734; 19,7% |
| Keeping abreast of new developments in childhood and youth; maintaining a workable relationship with parents; how to deal with media and media consumption | N=508; 13,6% |

10. ETA correlation.

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Setting protective bounds against state intervention, the erosion of autonomy, external pressure to perform, clarifying what distinguishes Waldorf from other free alternative schools | N=394; 10,6% |
| Collegial co-operation, experience of stress | N=149; 4,0% |
| “Participatory management” – a theme for debate | N=140; 3,8% |
| Importance of publicity | N=113; 3,0% |

Table 4: Challenges: main points according to frequency of mention (N, %)

Discussion of the comments

The themes under the headings “*Further development/change*” and “*renewal of the body of anthroposophical thinking, rethink the spiritual ‘anchorings’*.” seem to be a major preoccupation for Waldorf teachers and are considered very important for the future of Waldorf schools. Many have a keen awareness that Waldorf education is in need of transformation, but without wishing to jettison its “roots”, its “foundations”, in the process. “*Steiner’s thinking must be carried further*”, “*not set in tablets of stone*”, which is the gist of quite a number of comments, could set in motion a widespread debate on the renewal of Waldorf education.

Against the impulse towards further development stand those comments focused upon preserving, defending and being loyal to tradition. The values, contents and aims of Waldorf education as intended by Rudolf Steiner should be nurtured a perpetuated in practice. Steiner’s “Foundations of Human Experience” remains the undisputed basis of Waldorf education.

Lack of teachers, the state of teacher training, teachers’ salaries and the fall in student numbers are major problems.

There is clearly also great effort being made to come to an understanding of the world of today’s children and young people. Here the two strands of “*further development/change*” and “*preserve/hold on to traditions*” come together. Closely related to the topic of *the changing nature of childhood* is that of how to deal with modern media and media consumption.

A further aspect that stood out is the need to have clear lines of demarcation between Waldorf schools and both state and other private schools. For many reasons the different types of school stand in stiff competition to each other for students, parents and teachers. It is all about location, educational programme and, not least, about money.

The sixth theme listed in Table 3 poses questions in areas such as teamwork, willingness to talk about things, conflict resolution, collegial wellbeing and handling the relationships among teachers, students and parents. “*Experience of stress*” is a closely related topic. The relevant responses of those sampled expressed a clear need for training in social competence, in conflict management, and in personality development. The theme of *participatory management* is also part of this picture, since the tasks it entails are often experienced by teachers as stressful.

Building up a good public image seems to be something that is also very important to Waldorf teachers. This involves having a well-aimed information policy, open engagement with anti-Waldorf prejudices, good presentation of one’s own qualities, and stronger involvement in the public debate on education.

Summary

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the founding of the first Waldorf school (in 1919) a booklet entitled *Zur Pädagogik Rudolf Steiners (1929)* was published. Here the teachers vividly describe their experience of the first ten years. What were the elements of Waldorf education then considered essential by these pedagogical pioneers? They were: social justice, freedom, the true nature of the human being, art, self-knowledge, personal autonomy/emulation of an authority figure, living perception, unity of man and nature, enthusiasm for learning. *“Rudolf Steiner did not want us just to take in what he said about the nature of the human being and his relationship to the world, learn it off by heart and then use it as a sort of instruction manual for what to do in the classroom. We were supposed to be – as he wished – free human beings, and act out of our own creative powers”* (von Heydebrand, p. 153). *“There is nothing in the world that is unworthy of my interest; I just have to find the right way to approach the apparently insignificant”* (Wilke, p. 210). Enthusiasm for learning is indispensable to life. To awaken this enthusiasm, to support and nurture it so that it does not ebb away is surely one of the most important tasks an “educational artist” (as envisaged by Rudolf Steiner) can perform.

Today also Waldorf teachers face the challenge of rethinking, re-evaluating and re-interpreting the writings of Rudolf Steiner. For them this represents a grappling with anthroposophy and the foundations of Waldorf education which is likely to continue for some time to come (see also Gebhardt, Miriam, 2011).

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