

Case Study Research: The Waldorf Teacher

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“Good teaching comes from identity, not technique . . .”

Parker Palmer¹

While there is universal agreement that teacher quality is indeed linked to student success, there is great polarity as to the components of teacher quality or how to define it. The political response involves establishing a teacher reward and sanction system based on student outcomes. Some states offer sizeable monetary rewards to teachers for completing the National Certification, a process to allow for documentation of accomplished practice. Additional discussion and literature on public school reform centers around issues such as curriculum, parent involvement, teacher empowerment, class size, and the creation of school communities.

What is lacking in all these efforts is a focus on the identity of teachers. They are the ones who bring synthesis to all the elements needed for creation of a thriving learning environment. For instance, the best curriculum plan without a knowledgeable teacher to carry it forward in an intentional manner has limited chance of successful implementation. Additionally, teachers are the first link in parent interactions. This occurs through parent/teacher conferences, individual parent meetings, open houses, and other classroom projects. Moreover, parents rely on insightful feedback from teachers so they can make informed decisions about their children. Ultimately, a successful school community closely linked to the needs of the learners requires the shared vision of teachers. This means that teachers are empowered to make critical decisions about the school community especially those regarding personnel.

While the private Waldorf schools are not caught up in the bureaucracy of state or national credentialing there is a Waldorf training and certification to better prepare an individual for the journey of teaching in a Waldorf school. Within the training there is an emphasis on development as an individual. The challenge for teachers to grow and develop is reflected in four principles in which Rudolf Steiner urged the first Waldorf Teachers to adhere to:

The teacher must be a person of initiative in everything that is done, great or small.

The teacher should be one who is interested in the being of the whole world and of humanity.

The teacher must be one who never makes a compromise in heart or mind with what is untrue.

*The teacher must never get stale or grow sour.*²

My first exposure to Waldorf education over six years ago was rather happenstance. During my visit to a school I was intrigued by the quality of discussion taking place in the faculty lounge. As a former public school teacher and administrator I knew immediately that there was a difference between teachers in the public sector and those in the Waldorf schools. Unfortunately, there is little research available on the character of teachers or their thinking that makes them who they are.

Who are these teachers to whom we as parents entrust our children for a majority of the day throughout their elementary years? How did these individuals come to embrace Waldorf education? Is Waldorf teaching a “calling” in the sense of a strong inner prompting to special service? What are some of the characteristics of a Waldorf teacher’s journey into teaching?

While effective teaching is indeed a complex mingling of individuality and pedagogy I intend to acquire data that will lead to discussions toward understanding the life of the Waldorf teacher as an individual. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to provide insight into the Waldorf teacher in the areas of teaching choice, self-development, and perceived teacher attributes. Documentation will entail interviews, observations, and demographic data about the Waldorf teacher. Program summaries and comparative data between private Waldorf schools and the public Waldorf Charter Schools primarily in California will also be profiled. I welcome nation-wide dialog and requests for participation with persons interested in this topic especially Waldorf teachers currently in practice.

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¹ Palmer, Parker J. 1998. *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

² Steiner, Rudolf. Introduction by Craig Giddens. 1997. Discussions with Teachers. (Stuttgart, Aug-Sep 1919, GA 295 and 3 additional lectures) New York: Anthroposophic Press.