



Responsibilities of Waldorf Education

A Response to Melanie Reiser

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Melanie Reiser's short statement, "The Responsibility of Waldorf Education," appears in volume XXVI-1 of the *Research Bulletin* along with a summary by the editor advancing the question "What is the responsibility of Waldorf education?" The summary of this article, along with the article itself, could be used to articulate what the goal of Waldorf education has been for 100 years. It has led countless university professors, employers, and business leaders in our culture, expressed in surveys, interviews, articles, and casual conversations,¹ to state the fact that, in some ineffable ways, Waldorf graduates tend to be the most desirable, tolerant,² kind, inclusive people to have around. As reported, these Waldorf graduates tend to see beyond ordinary superficialities into the goodness in everyone. They tend to care for their environment, bring life, color, and joy into every classroom, factory, or office in which they end up. A follow-up, and perhaps more acknowledging question would be, "How have Waldorf schools managed to develop in their graduates an unusual level of tolerance and anti-racist attitudes and how can these be deepened and broadened for even more transformative success – greater diversity in Waldorf faculties and student configurations?"

But I would like to address here a related issue that arises as a remark in Reiser's article. Speaking about the Public Waldorf charter movement, Melanie Reiser characterizes Public Waldorf as "welcoming-in a more racially and socially diverse student body" (one can assume that this is in comparison to independent Waldorf schools). Reiser continues, "But AWSNA initially distanced itself from supporting the development of these (public) schools." This statement, in its context, suggests that there was somehow a missed opportunity in this distancing. Finding the implication of this statement misleading, I believe it would be helpful to offer here the fuller story of the relationship between AWSNA and Public Waldorf schools.

Independent Waldorf schools pay a high price for their independence from government control. This is

evidenced in both the low salaries of its teachers as well as in the high cost of the tuition needed to support a school. Independent Waldorf schools have welcomed a diversity of students and yearned, for decades, for a more diverse student and family population; however, the cost of tuition has been a significant deterrent to this goal.

Melanie Reiser mentions the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf School as the beginning of the Public Waldorf School initiative, which was started not by AWSNA, but was led primarily by the Pedagogical Section Council of North America (PSC). It may be, however, that the real and lasting start of Public Waldorf schools was the passing of the law during the Clinton administration (1994) allowing charter schools within the public school system in America. This led to the start of several charter schools wishing to follow the Waldorf curriculum and approach. It also abruptly ended rigorous efforts that had been underway, especially in the Northeastern region, of investigating different models of tuition and

financial support for schools that would protect their independence from government regulation while allowing children of lower income families and of more diverse backgrounds to come to an independent Waldorf school. This last goal came from broad acknowledgement that the tuition-based model of independent education in America was not sustainable, as well as its being

a deterrent to a truly diverse student population in Waldorf schools. Some of the results of these conferences are still to be seen throughout the independent Waldorf movement in sliding scale tuition models, community-supported education models, tiered tuition models and the like.

Leaders in the American Waldorf movement in 1995 were not only enthusiastic about the possibility of Waldorf education in the public schools, but some were also insisting at delegates' meetings and in public statements that this was "the future of Waldorf education," and that "at last" we could have Waldorf education "for free." Proclamations were made about "crawling into the belly of the beast" to transform education from the inside out.

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1 David Mitchell & Douglas Gerwin, *Survey of Waldorf High School Graduates II* (NH: Research Institute for Waldorf Education, 2007).

2 Ilan Safit & Douglas Gerwin, *Into the World: How Waldorf Graduates Fare after High School* (NY: Waldorf Publications, 2020).

Concerns and questions came about “handing Waldorf education over to the government,” about the spiritual aspects of the curriculum being suppressed, but perhaps most importantly were questions about the directives given by Rudolf Steiner earlier than 1919, the year of the founding of the First Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany, identifying the release of education from the grip of governments as a primary task of the age of the consciousness soul. In these AWSNA Delegates’ meetings, no answers to these concerns were offered. Very often these questions were deemed “attacks,” sometimes met with tears or outrage.

As Leader for Outreach and Development for AWSNA from 2004 to 2013, I came to realize that as a questioner at delegates meetings, I had been labeled by avid supporters of charters as an “Anti-charter-ite.” On entering this position with AWSNA, I was told more than once that I was bound to fail at the job because I was “against charter schools.” My attempts to explain that I was more *for* releasing *all* education from the growing bonds of the federal government’s control of education, were rejected or, in at least one case, ridiculed. In 2006, I was invited with two other independent school colleagues to a conference for Public Waldorf charter schools in California. In the plenum, I stated honestly my admiration for the idealism I experienced repeatedly in the conference and lamented the many compromises necessary to accommodate government mandates.

Before I could continue, a young woman leapt to her feet and shouted, “How *dare* you call anything we do a compromise?! What we are doing is so noble, the word compromise has no place in our vocabulary!” I apologized and explained that the freedom of the teacher is paramount in Waldorf education, that a teacher’s freedom is curtailed when told what to do or when s/he must risk being docked or punished if not following top-down rules. I offered that if anyone would ever tell the government agency the reason *why* it was impossible to fulfill their demands, that these demands would be *hurtful to children* (for example, testing, pushing intellectual content to earlier and earlier ages), I would be right next to them in a heartbeat, working to explain these issues.

My colleague, Frances Kane, as Leader of Administration in AWSNA, agreed that it would be a helpful approach to create a “safe” arena for discussion between the two proponents of independent and public schools. Holders of the legal service mark (trademark) for

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Waldorf in Germany had transferred control of this mark to AWSNA for management on this continent. Primary responsibility for managing this mark was in Frances Kane’s purview. Permission to use the protected term “Waldorf” was granted automatically to all independent schools recognized by AWSNA. How to apply permission for the term beyond this for charter schools and businesses became problematic simply because no quality controls were available. As the legal authority for managing the mark was given, emphasis was placed on the fact that the term “Waldorf” has meaning, and that this meaning needed to be protected. This was taken (by some, at least) as a deep affront to charter school supporters. AWSNA was called a “fundamentalist” organization. Frances Kane fielded complaints about how such a tragic thing as giving the power of service mark control could have been granted to such an organization as AWSNA.

AWSNA continued to create a safe space for conversation and agreement. Gathering leadership from the new charter school movement, we set up one or two meetings a year from 2006 to 2013. Frances Kane, Michael Soule, and I, as the leaders in AWSNA at the time, inaugurated these meetings and spent thousands of dollars and uncountable hours planning and holding the meetings (all held in California to avoid inconveniencing the charter school group), feeding the group, hiring facilitators, chronicling the meetings, and drawing up the final agreement. These meetings led at long last to this agreement, finally signed in 2016 with new AWSNA leadership (including the author or the article cited, Melanie Reiser) though developed and promised in the spring of 2013, with, from the AWSNA group, Frances Kane, Patrice Maynard, Elan Leibner for the PSC and Eric Emmanuel, lawyer to AWNSA. This, eventually, identified the acceptable naming of the charter schools as “Public Waldorf” schools under the terms of the service mark. This acceptance and licensing strengthen the fact that there is a service mark and that the term has meaning and is worth protecting.

During the timespan of these meetings, the charter schools formed their own association, *The Association of Public WaldorfSM Education* (APWE). APWE has worked diligently to build accreditation standards for Public WaldorfSM schools and has increased its ability to hold the authority to do so precisely because there is a service mark. Their work underscores that the mark has meaning. This agreement had been the goal from

the beginning and this goal was held in marvelous focus for all those years by Frances Kane, for AWSNA, and for Waldorf education. A perceived affront in the eyes of charter school participants of having to “bend to the request of AWSNA,” who had “refused to accept them into the fold,” stalled the goal of the tool of the service mark, which is to protect the meaning of the terms “Waldorf education” and “Steiner education.” Meanwhile, bending to demands of the federal government and public-school districts appeared to remain a necessity not to be challenged.

Does the term “Waldorf education” have meaning? You bet it does! At one point a charter school representative asked, “Don’t you trust us? If a public-school drifts too far from really being a Waldorf school, we will close it.” And, with insight, Michael Soule, Leader at AWSNA, at that time pointed out, “No. you likely *won’t be able* to close a school. Parents will say, ‘We know what Waldorf education is, and we love our school. You are wrong. We *are* a Waldorf school.’”

Much rich content filled those years of meetings. The charter school leaders lamented that the government was very open when the charter laws were new but had become increasingly restrictive over the years. (What else do we think governments *do*? I wondered.) However, the predominant mood remained that no restrictions mattered because there was no tuition charged by public schools. That, by itself, was justification. There was steady insistence that the two kinds of schools were the same and no distinctions were necessary. At one meeting we had two flip charts. On the first we listed the similarities between the two kinds of schools and filled a page. We listed on the second flip chart all the differences and filled three pages. Of course, we were told that the differences (testing, having a principal and a top-down organizational structure, incorporating elements of curricula from the Common Core, to name a few) were “insignificant.”

Charter schools working to follow the Waldorf curriculum as closely as possible are an invaluable asset. Often, I wished I could simply state this. At one point we asked if the Public Waldorf schools could stop advertising their schools as “The same curriculum, only for free!” but instead state it clearly as stated here, “Charter schools working to follow the Waldorf curriculum.” Silence followed that particular request. I was privately reprimanded later by the facilitator, an anthroposophist, for making this request. It isn’t possible to count the number of times people said to

me, “Charter schools are not going away, you know.” This was a puzzle as this was never a goal or an assumption in my mind. There was only a wish to be clear and a need to answer the question of how to release all education from the control of the government.

At AWSNA, requests for help came frequently from California independent schools. Decreasing enrollment in independent Waldorf schools could be attributed by the charter school representatives to the “mess we all know independent Waldorf schools are.” Any attempts to identify the fact, that Public Waldorf schools owe their ability to exist from decades of sacrifice on the parts of Waldorf teachers to sustain the independent development of the Waldorf approach,

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were rejected as denial of the two types of schools being identical in heritage and development. Any attempts to point out that public education is never “for free,” but is funded through tax dollars, was named “inappropriate.” Any attempts to point out that charter schools were supported by AWSNA’s member schools

through resources provided through its existing strong reputation, by *Renewal* magazine (offered to charter schools at a discount), by AWSNA Publications, by teacher education institutes who train Waldorf teachers, by the protection of the service mark, all supplemented by the independent schools, were inadequate proof of attempts to help.

Meanwhile, in 2011, a California survey revealed that 40% of the students in Public Waldorf schools had started in independent Waldorf schools, indicating that the enrollment and recruitment of this 40% had been accomplished by independent schools. Concerns of AWSNA schools asking for help included: independent Waldorf teachers were being aggressively recruited away by charter schools; at hiring fairs for teachers employees at Public Waldorf schools were openly denigrating independent Waldorf schools; reports of manipulated lottery programs to acquire the wealthiest families from independent schools; and fundraising for Public Waldorf schools was directly interfering with that of independent Waldorf schools. One California independent school faced extinction twice at different times when a Public Waldorf school nearby opened new kindergartens or grades without warning to the independent school down the road. Ironically, this independent school had a very diverse student body.

Parents in Public Waldorf schools complained to AWSNA that their charter school was advertised as a Waldorf school but their practices were otherwise;

that one teacher or another in Public Waldorf schools ought to be fired and AWSNA should take care of this. In one particularly alarming case, it took fourteen email exchanges, four or five participants, and two-and-a-half weeks to determine that the school in question was not an AWSNA school but a Public Waldorf school. For this, at that time, there was nowhere to turn for help.

All stories have multiple sides. This is an offering of one side, another side, of Reiser's summary statement that "AWSNA distanced itself" from the charter school movement. It's still a question in my own considerations about which side did the distancing, or whether distancing is even an accurate description of what occurred. The remarkable intensity of these meetings makes such a descriptor at least misleading. "This side of the story" of those many efforts is not well-known to more than those who lived through them. And to relinquish judgement to a single story is false in its way, as described by the brilliant author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.³

That the agreement was achieved at all represented a significant miracle and stood as testimony to many gnarly knots, loosened and untied over a long period of time – many hearts and minds willing, beyond preformed judgements, to listen to and agree with each other. The government of the USA helped by ever demonstrating its relentless, increasing authority over education – a bi-partisan effort. That it took two to three years for the document of agreement to be signed by the Public Waldorf leaders might stand as testament to the differences in urgency about getting it completed. The entire, lengthy, time-consuming, expensive, difficult process was a worthy one, in my estimation. It brought clarity and definition, and, most importantly to me all through the process, protection of the term Waldorf, applied to education, as a meaningful term, not to be used indiscriminately or to apply to things or businesses.

The United States is the last country on the planet that has an imagination of a genuinely independent education. In other countries around the world, many have a hard time thinking about education that is not controlled and funded by a government. A great hope I hold is that with the agreement in place, increasing courage to explain to education departments that, even with fine teachers present in all schools, the current

educational system is not meant to support a healthy development of children, but meant instead to enrich corporations (pharmaceutical companies, the technology industry, textbook and curriculum companies, the food industry, to name a few), and to further political goals. The rising numbers of suicides among the young (for youngsters between the ages of 10 and 14, the number of suicides has doubled between the years of 2000, the year before the No Child Left Behind Act, and 2017⁴) is one clear symptom of the culture of despair and depression being created for the young (and also for teachers)⁵. The last year-and-a-half of the pandemic has furthered the decline in student morale and mental health and has increased the number of teen suicides.⁶

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More than once in AWSNA meetings with the charter school representatives, I attempted to explain that I wished with all my heart to thank them for their dedicated work. In any educational model, daily artistic work deepens understanding and builds resilience in human souls. However, so long as the catch phrase remains "the same thing only for free," and the resistance from public schoolers to comparisons with research behind

them into the results of both kinds of Waldorf schools, public and independent, I hesitate. Most importantly, so long as Public Waldorf teachers, do not stand against harmful practices, taking care to explain to authorities all the reasons why they stand against these practices, it seems wise to hesitate.

Once I was honored to be invited to participate in a faculty meeting at a Public Waldorf school in 2012, I listened to a 40-minute discussion held by the faculty; they were working to find ways to "fool the government" into believing that their Kindergarten program was applying the Common Core literacy curriculum. During a pause in this discussion, another guest said, "Patrice asked me last night if you ever say, 'No'." There was then a long silence. I asked, "What do you have to lose?" to which the administrator quickly replied, "\$180,000." I quipped without thinking, "Oh well, \$180,000 vs. a child's consciousness? Go for the money!" Lucky for me, everyone laughed. But my conviction and invitation still stands, that if we would

4 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db352-h.pdf>

5 <https://www.edutopia.org/article/high-school-kids-are-not-all-right-2016>

6 "Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12–25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, January 2019–May 2021", *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, June 18, 2021 / 70(24); 888–894, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>

3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The danger of a single story," TED Global, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

create informative moments with leaders in education to explain why Waldorf teachers would decline to do things that hurt children, change might just follow. This would be a chance to explain to government leaders that their control of the education system might be the very thing crippling American education today. This is a road not yet taken but that could and should be pursued.

From all this challenging work, I personally learned an enormous amount from public and independent Waldorf schools and cherish several hard-won friendships (the best kind!). Moods, attitudes, points of view, hearts, and minds changed. In these times of ours, this is a rare experience. The original question, articulated in the AWSNA delegates' circle — "What about independence in education and releasing all education from the grip of the government?" — remains unanswered and has poignant urgency considering the current situation in our culture, and for the young in this culture.

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