

# Core Principles of Waldorf Education: An Introduction and First Discourse



In January 2013 the Pedagogical Section Council of North America (PSC) crafted a document entitled “Core Principles of Waldorf Education”; since then it has been periodically revised. As the document circulated within the Waldorf movement, the PSC received several requests for further elaboration on these principles, as well as supporting references.

With this issue of the *Research Bulletin*, we begin a series of short articles in which members of the Council offer study materials and commentary that elaborate on these Core Principles.

## A Little Background

The impetus for drafting this document was a prolonged period of debate over the use of the name “Waldorf” in non-independent (public charter) schools. Members of the PSC, like others in the Waldorf movement, were not all in agreement about the questions raised by this debate. However, since the Pedagogical Section includes teachers who work in both independent and in charter schools, and since the question of “What is a Waldorf school?” has become a legal question, the Council decided to focus on the pedagogical rather than on the legal aspects of this question. We have attempted to identify the essential aspects of Waldorf education so that every school and every teacher can study them and then assess their work relative to these principles. The document was never meant to be an enforceable criterion, but rather an anchor for discussion and study on the meaning of the term “Waldorf education.”

We now present these principles and the first in our series of contributions, starting with Elan Leibner and Holly Koteen-Soulé, who offer elaborations of the first two Core Principles.

## Core Principles of Waldorf Education by the PSC of North America (amended August 2014)

Waldorf education can be characterized as having seven core principles. Each one of them can be the subject of a life-long study. Nevertheless, they can be summarized in the following manner:

**Image of the Human Being:** The human being in its essence is a being of Spirit, soul, and body. Childhood and adolescence, from birth to age 21, are the periods during which the Spirit/soul gradually takes hold of the physical instrument that is our body. The Self is the irreducible spiritual individuality within each one of us which continues its human journey through successive incarnations.

**Phases of Child Development:** This process of embodiment has an archetypal sequence of approximately seven-year phases, and each child’s development is an individual expression of the archetype. Each phase has unique and characteristic physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

**Developmental Curriculum:** The curriculum is created to meet and support the phase of development of the individual and the class. From birth to age 7, the guiding principle is that of imitation; from 7 to 14 the guiding principle is that of following the teacher’s guidance; during the high school years, the guiding principle is idealism and the development of independent judgment.

**Freedom in Teaching:** Rudolf Steiner gave indications for the development of a

new pedagogical art, with the expectation that “the teacher must invent this art at every moment.” Out of the understanding of child development and Waldorf pedagogy, the Waldorf teacher is expected to meet the needs of the children in the class out of his/her insights and the circumstances of the school. Interferences with the freedom of the teacher by the school, parents, standardized testing regimen, or the government, while they may be necessary in a specific circumstance (for safety or legal reasons, for example), are nonetheless compromises.<sup>1</sup>

**Methodology of Teaching:** There are a few key methodological guidelines for the grade school and high school teachers. Early childhood teachers work with these principles appropriate to the way in which the child before the age of 7 learns, out of imitation rather than direct instruction.

**Artistic metamorphosis:** The teacher should understand, internalize, and then present the topic in an artistic form.<sup>2</sup>

**From experience to concept:** The direction of the learning process should proceed from the students’ soul activities of willing, through feeling to thinking. In the high school the context of the experience is provided at the outset.<sup>3</sup>

**Holistic process:** proceeding from the whole to the parts and back again, and addressing the whole human being.

**Use of rhythm and repetition.**<sup>4</sup>

**Relationships:** Enduring human relationships between students and their teachers are essential and irreplaceable. The task of all teachers is to work with the developing individuality of each student and with each class as a whole. Truly human pedagogical relationships gain in depth and stability when they are cultivated over many years. They cannot be replaced by instructions utilizing computers or other electronic means. Healthy working relationships with parents and

colleagues are also essential to the wellbeing of the class community and the school.

**Spiritual Orientation:** In order to cultivate the imaginations, inspirations, and intuitions needed for their work, Rudolf Steiner gave the teachers an abundance of guidance for developing an inner, meditative life. This guidance includes individual professional meditations and an imagination of the circle of teachers forming an organ of spiritual perception. Faculty and individual study, artistic activity, and research form additional facets of ongoing professional development.

## Endnotes

- 1 A note about school governance: While not directly a pedagogical matter, school governance can be an essential aspect of freedom in teaching. Just as a developmental curriculum should support the phases of child development, school governance should support the teachers’ pedagogical freedom (while maintaining the school’s responsibilities towards society).
- 2 The term “artistic” does not necessarily mean the traditional arts (singing, drawing, sculpting, and so forth), but rather that, like those arts, the perceptually manifest reveals something invisible through utilizing perceptible media. Thus a math problem or science project can be just as artistic as storytelling or painting.
- 3 This mirrors the development of human cognition, which is at first active in the limbs and only later in the head.
- 4 There are four basic rhythms with which the Waldorf teacher works. The most basic of those is the day-night (or two-day) rhythm. Material that is presented on a given day is allowed to “go to sleep” before it is reviewed and brought to conceptual clarity on the following day. A second rhythm is that of the week. It is “the interest rhythm,” and teachers strive to complete an engagement with a topic within a week of working on it. A paper that is returned to the student after more than a week will no longer be interesting to the student. The only interesting thing will be the teacher’s comments, but the topic itself is already past the “interest window.” A third rhythm is that of four weeks. Blocks, or units of instruction, are usually best covered in four-week periods. This life-rhythm can be understood in contemplation of feminine reproductive cycles, for example, and can be

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said to bring a topic to a temporary level of maturity. The last of the pedagogical rhythms is that of a year. This is the time it can take for a new concept to be mastered to the degree that it can be used as a

capacity. Thus a mathematical concept introduced early in third grade should be mastered sufficiently to be assumed as a capacity for work at the beginning of fourth grade.