

Volunteerism, Communication, Social Interaction

A Survey of Waldorf School Parents

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Background

Parents form an integral part of any Waldorf school community. And yet very little research has been undertaken to determine their attitudes toward what the schools ask of them as parents, especially as volunteers in and outside the classroom.

As a first step towards describing the Waldorf school experience from the point of view of parents, a survey at around a dozen North American Waldorf schools was conducted to take the pulse of parents on a wide range of social issues relating to their participation in the life of their schools. The primary objective of this survey was to explore community member involvement in their schools through volunteerism, and how they felt about it, school communication, inclusivity, parents' perceptions of social interactions, and transparency in schools.

A questionnaire of some 30 questions—some multiple-choice, some open-ended—was administered to a convenience sample of parents, many of whom had attended a workshop on parent relations led by Martin Novom. Multiple-choice questions provided background information about respondents and incidence of common school activities (newsletter, parent handbook, and so forth). Open-ended questions yielded more in-depth information and helped to answer some of the bigger Why? questions about the attitudes of parents to their Waldorf communities.

Description of participants

Survey participants included parents of children (typically one or two) currently enrolled in a Waldorf school, as well as faculty and staff members without children at a Waldorf school. Participants were fairly evenly distributed in terms of their years of association with a Waldorf school. The majority of participants reported being part of

just one Waldorf school community. The great majority of participants (eight out of ten) were parents, but staff members, faculty, trustees, grandparents, past parents, friends of the school, and parent council members were also included. Many participants reported wearing multiple hats in their schools. Most were employed either full or part time in some profession; fewer than one in ten indicated that they were not employed. The respondents were split about 60/40 between those receiving no financial aid and those receiving some form of tuition support (either financial aid or remission).

Summary and analysis of survey responses

Responses to the survey were grouped under four headings: volunteerism, communication, social inclusiveness, and transparency. In each

grouping, responses were tabulated and then subjected to analysis and interpretive commentary.

1. Volunteerism

We have all heard anecdotal comments about volunteering, usually something to the effect of how much people are volunteering. Survey responses support these anecdotal comments and reflect a

truly high degree of volunteerism. The majority of participants reported volunteering “constantly” or “very often.” Participants were most likely to report volunteering for class activities and class trips. Involvement on a board committee, parent council, or in the office was less common.

Fewer than half of participants reported feeling “very high” or “relatively high” pressure from the school to volunteer. “Pressure” from the school did not seem to be a motivator for a high level of participation in volunteer activities, suggesting that any pressure to volunteer could be coming from elsewhere (e.g. other parents).

Attitudes about volunteering provided some

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additional insight here. Most participants reported that they understood the culture of volunteerism in their school. From this we can infer that parents are motivated to volunteer out of an understanding of the school's needs. The case that the school makes implicitly or explicitly is compelling.

Finally, parents were asked to assess their level of joy in volunteering. More than two-thirds said they "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "volunteering is a joy." It is likely that the gratification people experience from volunteering is a motivator to continue doing so.

2. Communication

We asked several questions about the participants' understanding of Waldorf education, the extent to which their schools made an effort to orient and inform new parents, the availability of parent handbooks and their effectiveness, and the channels by which schools get information out to parents.

Parents generally felt they were well informed about Waldorf education. They reported that their understanding of Waldorf education was strong. Most said that their schools made a strong effort to orient and inform new parents about the school. Almost all of the participants reported having seen their school's parent handbook, and more than half felt it was a helpful tool. For day-to-day, week-to-week communications, nearly all participants reported receiving a regular bulletin or newsletter. Most felt that the newsletter or weekly handout was the most effective way they received information. The class teacher was seen as the most effective method by about a fourth of participants.

3. Issues of inclusiveness

Parent perceptions and feelings of inclusiveness (both among adults and students) represent important barometers of social health in a school community. To get a reading of this barometer in Waldorf schools, we asked several questions about inclusion. These questions addressed gestures of inclusiveness, the role of anthroposophy in the school, the availability and pursuit of study groups, and so forth.

Most participants indicated that their schools extended a very inclusive gesture toward parents.

Most respondents were aware that their schools offered study groups on Waldorf education and anthroposophy, but only a few regularly attended. About one-fourth of participants were unaware or unsure about these offerings at their schools. The role of anthroposophy in the school was not a problem for the vast majority of participants.

4. Social interactions and transparency

We were curious to know if participants perceived their schools to be proactive about creating healthy foundations for social interaction. To explore this we asked a wide range of questions to gauge the extent to which participants felt clear about how their schools function—e.g., the decision-making process, transparency about financial matters, follow-through regarding its rules, handling of disagreements between adults, and responsiveness to social issues between children.

When it comes to decision-making, financial transparency, and rule enforcement, participants reflected mixed feelings about the handling of these issues in their schools. We asked participants to what extent clarity about decision-making in their school was a problem for them. Respondents were divided, in almost equal measure, into three groups: those who reported this as a problem, those who were neutral or unsure about it, and those who felt this not to be a problem.

Participants also offered mixed responses in terms of their perception of their school's financial transparency. Participants were about split down the middle, with about half affirming a high degree of financial transparency in their schools, and the other half feeling uncertain or having little or no clarity about this. A similar pattern emerged around issues of rule enforcement: about half reported a high degree of agreement with the statement that their school enforced the rules it made; the rest were either unsure or disagreed with the claim that their school enforced its rules.

Socially, participants overwhelmingly affirmed the statement that children in their school were socially included in their classrooms. When asked about their school's response specifically to bullying and teasing, participants were of more mixed opinion. A little more than half affirmed their school's strong handling of these

situations; the rest were unsure or disagreed that their school effectively handled incidents of bullying and teasing.

We also asked participants to consider the extent to which they had a problem with the school's processes for handling disagreements between adults. Participants were about evenly divided into three groups: those who said handling disagreements was not a problem, those who were neutral, and those who indicated it was a problem, to varying degrees.

Discussion of survey responses

1. Volunteerism

The comments we have been hearing for years about how much volunteering is occurring in our schools are corroborated by this research. Some volunteerism may be motivated by pressure from schools, but it seems likely that having knowledge and understanding of needs in the school is more compelling. Having gratifying volunteer experiences also tends to support further volunteerism.

The frequency of volunteering in the class arena raises some interesting questions. This frequency could be driven simply by the high volume of opportunities to help out in this way. Further, class activities and trips may offer the benefit of volunteering on a case-by-case, short duration basis. Does this sort of volunteering draw on energy that might otherwise be available for bigger volunteer jobs? Do parents volunteering in this short-term way feel they have done their part? Do the small jobs serve and an unintended negative point of reference for the bigger ones? The answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this research and should form the basis of further study.

2. Communication

In general, communication in schools seems strong. Participants feel well informed about both the day-to-day news of the school and its philosophical underpinnings. Despite the fact that we continue to hear that people no longer read them, school newsletters and school weekly bulletins are, according to these participants, of value. Between the rhythmic communication methods (newsletter and handouts) and the efforts of class teachers, we seem to be touching most of the bases.

While this research offers some reassurance in the area of communication, the options for conveying information are rapidly changing and the impact of electronic communications on our ability to get our message through is as yet unclear. It is important that parents perceive that their school cares and is trying to do a good job in this area.

3. Inclusiveness

We can be grateful that efforts to be inclusive seem to be paying off. Adult education efforts such as study groups are being noticed. It is an open question whether sufficient groups of individuals are taking advantage of them. Fortunately, the role of anthroposophy in the schools is not seen as an obstacle to a feeling of inclusion.

4. Social Interaction and Transparency

This is the section of the survey that offers the least clarity in its results and perhaps merits the greatest need for further study. With the exception of participants' strongly-held perception that the children in the classroom are being socially included, social interactions and transparency are viewed with mixed feelings. This may be due to participants' lack of direct experience with these topics (for example, they are not involved with/have no interest in the school's finances). Or, it may be that for the few people affected by, for example, bullying and teasing issues, the impact is substantial.

Follow-on to this survey

By collating and publishing parent responses to this survey, our intention has been to:

- Celebrate what is working in our schools
- Indicate areas of confusion in the relationships between parents and schools
- Encourage dialogue in schools about volunteerism

At the same time, surveys of this kind often raise as many questions as they address. At very least, further polling of parents is needed to explore the following questions:

- What types of volunteer task are of interest to Waldorf parents these days?

- What is the impact of small volunteer efforts on the recruitment of parents for larger, longer-term tasks?
- How much is too much? Can we develop a benchmarked index of capacity for volunteerism to measure and track the impact of family constellation, household income, dual-earner households, economic factors, and so forth, on volunteerism? What is needed to deepen parent engagement and understanding of Waldorf education?
- How effective is e-communication in Waldorf school communities? When and how should this medium be used?
- How can we clarify issues and concerns among parents regarding questions of social interaction and transparency?

Greater understanding ultimately helps to support the partnership between parents and their school, and by extension Waldorf education as it is practiced in schools. Insights in this realm can help to strengthen individual school communities through the communication, adult education, inspiration, and greater integration of parents as a sustaining and nurturing force.

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The best way to find yourself is to
lose yourself in the service of others.

– Mahatma Gandhi