

WALDORF TEACHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA TODAY

By Ivy Greenstein

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“...dear Waldorf teachers... I want to shake your hands so warmly... you were the first to work at something that is so very necessary for our future as human beings... I thank you.”

~ Rudolf Steiner, in his address at the assembly at the end of the first school year, July 24, 1920

In September 2019, countless institutions, organizations, and initiatives across the globe will celebrate an extraordinary milestone: the 100th anniversary of the September 7, 1919, opening of the *Freie Waldorfschule* in Stuttgart, Germany—the world’s first Waldorf school.

Another Waldorf centennial, however, this one occurring two weeks prior, is likely to slip by unnoticed; yet, August 21 should merit equal attention among enthusiasts and proponents of Waldorf Education. For it was on this day in 1919 that Rudolf Steiner gave the first of a series of lectures to the individuals selected to lead the Stuttgart school—thus effectively initiating the world’s first Waldorf teacher education.

In his lectures—delivered over the course of two weeks—Steiner conveyed the four principles he considered essential to the cornerstone of this new educational movement:

- The teacher must be a person of initiative in everything s/he does, great and small
- The teacher must be one who takes an interest in the whole being and in humanity
- The teacher must be one who is true in the depths of his/her being
- The teacher must never grow stale or get sour

Since Steiner’s first “teacher training” sessions, the scope of Waldorf Education has grown enormously. Today, about 1000 independent Waldorf schools, far more Waldorf early childhood programs, and countless Waldorf-inspired initiatives exist in more than 60 countries stretching across six continents. Yet the basic hallmark of Waldorf teachers remains the same, and Waldorf teacher education still strives for the same timeless ideals Steiner laid out nearly 100 years ago.

Many of the individuals who comprised the original *Freie Waldorfschule* (or, Independent Waldorf School) faculty came to their new posts with no prior teaching experience (much less, of course, prior Waldorf teaching experience). They numbered among themselves theologians, philologists, mathematicians, naturalists, doctors, engineers, painters, craftsmen and musicians. In assembling this circle of twelve men and women, Steiner sought individuals who possessed a

deep interest in the world, the inner creativity to spark their students' imagination, and a commitment and striving to develop and cultivate their own humanity. Today, these qualities still stand at the heart of Waldorf teaching—and Waldorf teacher education.

Individuals choosing to become Waldorf teachers in 21st century America also represent a large cross-section of backgrounds. From prior career paths as diverse as veterinarian, fashion designer, lawyer, dancer, and software engineer, and enriched by educational degrees from BAs through PhDs, they represent age groups from millennials on up. In addition to their love of children, these individuals share a keen desire to find a vocation that draws upon all their abilities and gives them room to apply these abilities in service to improving our world.

The earliest Waldorf educators relied on Rudolf Steiner—and, later, on a concentric circle of Steiner-trained teachers—to learn the art of Waldorf teaching; in those first years, on-the-job training was the norm. In the decades accompanying the rise of Waldorf Education, formal teacher education centers sprang up, first in Europe, and then in the US and throughout the globe. Today, men and women wishing to enter the profession of Waldorf classroom teaching have a variety of teacher education programs available to them.

The majority of grades 1-8 Waldorf schools in the U.S. require—or, at minimum, strongly prefer—that their faculty be “trained”; that is, that they have graduated from one of the fourteen member Waldorf Teacher Education Institutes of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA). These centers—spanning the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific, reaching from Canada down into Mexico—offer a variety of teacher education programs for would-be (as well as currently practicing) Waldorf educators. Exploring these program options is often the first step taken on the journey toward becoming a Waldorf class teacher.

Part-time Waldorf teacher education is a broad term covering a wide range of formats and configurations. Programs falling under this rubric generally entail 2-4 years of study and range from weekends-only to summer sessions-only to low-residency programs involving on-campus attendance for several weeks throughout the course of the year—and everything in-between. In addition to the personal and professional flexibility that part-time programs offer, they also create valuable room between sessions for digestion and reflection.

Full-time Waldorf teacher education offers individuals the opportunity to immerse themselves fully in their studies without concurrently balancing full-time professional responsibilities. This format condenses the amount of time required to complete the teacher education program into a shorter period (generally one year). While once common, full-time teacher education is rare today, having largely given way to part-time programs.

Regardless of the design of their offerings, AWSNA Waldorf Teacher Education Institutes (as well as the more infrequent, small-scale professional development offered through some Waldorf schools themselves) share a common commitment: to provide a practical, artistic, and philosophical foundation for Waldorf teaching. This mandate is achieved through courses in several key areas of preparation:

- **Anthroposophical Studies** allow teacher education students to delve into the philosophical underpinnings of Waldorf Education. Through lectures, discussions, and the reading of Rudolf Steiner’s writings (ideally in their original—albeit, translated—version), students fully explore Steiner’s insights into child and human development. Also known as Foundation Studies or Orientation Year, anthroposophical studies can take the form of separate coursework required as a prerequisite to beginning a teacher preparation, or a series of classes embedded in the teacher education program itself.
- Classes in **Inner Development** provide opportunities for teacher trainees to explore the fundamental question Waldorf Education asks not only of the child, but of the teacher: *Who is s/he as a human being? What is s/he in the process of becoming?* Through discussions, reading, journaling, and meditative exercises, students are guided toward developing a contemplative inner practice that will enhance their teaching and help them acquire the capacities intrinsic to the lifelong, transformative path of becoming a Waldorf teacher.
- Study and practice in **The Arts**, including music, gardening, handwork, painting, drawing, clay modeling, wood carving, creative speech, and movement, help teacher education students unfold their own creative capacities while also learning how to guide their students in their work.
- Classes in **Child Development and Pedagogy** explore an anthroposophical understanding of child development and Steiner’s indications of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices that help prepare teachers to educate their students.
- Coursework in **School Administration and Government** provides a foundation in the dynamics of the philosophical underpinnings of leadership in Waldorf schools, and opportunities to develop and hone skills for successfully working with colleagues (an all-important factor in the self-administration structure of Waldorf schools). Additional coursework in **Group Work and Social Development** helps teachers strengthen their abilities to work with parents and to meet children with diverse needs.
- Because no amount of theoretical study can substitute for actual classroom experience, teacher education programs also include a **Field Work** element, requiring students spend time in Waldorf classrooms both working with the children as well as observing experienced Waldorf educators at work. Putting Waldorf teacher education lessons into actual use is an invaluable component in turning teacher preparation students into effective classroom teachers.

Steiner offered up Waldorf Education as a panacea to the fear and unrest very much alive in the turbulent aftermath of post-World War I Europe. His objective was to educate young people in such a way that future generations would not endure—or perpetuate—the societal ills endemic to his time. Today, we also live in an era of uncertainty. Worries over their children’s social, moral, and physical safety, concerns about their economic futures, all weigh on parents’ minds. In response, teachers are being asked to take on a greater number of roles and responsibilities than ever before. Thus, our approach to teacher education is challenged to meet the ever-

changing signs of our times. By continually cultivating an atmosphere of interest and awareness, by presenting opportunities to explore Steiner's principles and methods in an open-minded manner, by providing coursework that encourages an unfolding of the individual and a shared connection with humanity, Waldorf teacher education supports the healthy development of teachers, students, and the world.

Waldorf educators stand in front of children as a model of what it means to be human: they are the lens through which their students discover the world. Imbued with the sacred responsibility of helping children develop freely into who they are meant to be, Waldorf class teaching is hard, demanding, and enormously rewarding work. Waldorf teacher preparation is not the means to this end, but merely the beginning—the first step in a wonderful lifelong process of self-education, self-discovery, and service to the world.

“My teaching has grown deeper, richer, and clearer. More important, my self-development has grown in new directions, and I am a different person as a result of this work.”

“This has been one of the best experiences of my life. Thank you from me and all the children I hope to teach.”

~ Waldorf Elementary Teacher Education students, Sunbridge Institute