

QUALITY QUESTIONS IN WALDORF EDUCATION

The Waldorf curriculum was founded on a deep appreciation for, and understanding of, quality: gesture, tone and rhythm, line and colour, the dynamics of life, these are essences of the arts and of a truly human and humane education. When Steiner education is most successful the arts become practical. One danger of impractical aesthetics is that of replication. Replication is art without creativity, like the work of a photocopier: you can increase the size up to a point, but the image on the copy will always be what was fed into the machine, plus mechanical distortion, which, if the same image is copied repeatedly, eventually increases to a point where it begins to decay. Qualitative education demands continuous change and recreation. Accordingly, Rudolf Steiner gave indications, not prescriptions, so that the Waldorf curriculum would be endlessly recreated, but not replicated. An art of education, the art of a school, is not only what goes on in the conduct of lessons, but every aspect of the way the organisation operates. So, education is an art, more than another, which relies upon a science of application and an appropriate moral technology. Care for the essential qualities of a school, in order to develop and improve the learning environment, is one quality that sustains all the others and it is clear that this caring role is what Rudolf Steiner saw as the primary task of the teachers' meeting, or collegiate. In caring, application and moral responsibility are paramount. "Quality management", "quality improvement" are other words for "care" and "development", even if they sound more sharp-edged than is comfortable. Steiner Waldorf schools and early childhood settings exist in a world of regulation, regulations that are inspected by Ofsted (in England), or maintained by a battalion of agencies (Charity Commission, Companies House, the Health and Safety Executive...). Regulations are to do with standards that secure the bottom line, the legal rights of citizens (including small ones!). Standards of this sort are sometimes disguised as "qualities" but cannot in fact produce or even encourage quality. On the other hand, when organisations are judged to be falling short of the qualities their ethos implies, law soon rushes in pulling the organisation down and raising its own level, like water filling a leaky hulk. In other words, organisations that are not working to raise standards and are not seen to be doing so, are likely to find that legal regulation becomes more exacting, usually in ways that make life much more difficult, potentially at the expense of quality improvement. Higher qualities are undermined when survival is threatened. That is also why every organisation needs to have cross-checks and accountability firmly in place, such things are social co-responsibilities, not items for individual whim. The SWSF sustains regular contact and dialogue with regulators and inspectorates so far as that is possible. On the other hand, it also offers help, for example through the advisory service, for quality care and development in member organisations. Both are essential: the outer representation and the inner endeavour. We know only too well that without that balance the world soon begins to crash around our ears. In order for each organisation to maintain the individual balance that gives stability and strength to the whole, those responsible, staff, Trustees, members of the community, need to be engaged at their appropriate level of responsibility for meeting regulations and improving quality, cross-checking one another. The only proper measure of a school is the experience of young people and their learning, part of which belongs more in the future than the present. The complications of this task tend to encourage swarms of consultants often with obscurantist schemes, selling their services on the appearance of assurance this gives to the process. However because quality improvement demands creative risk, the appearance is usually false. Only when those who carry responsibility do so responsibly, keeping their core task and intentions in view along with the means by which they will evaluate the results, can the quality improvement risk be managed so that mistakes become opportunities for learning and progress. That is one quality no form of education should ever be without.

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