



## CHAPTER 19

### PARADOXES, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND FALSE STATEMENTS ABOUT WALDORF EDUCATION

*A basic principle of the Association for the Threefolding of the Social Organism is to work toward an independent school system, making it free of the State so that the State does not even supervise the schools.*

– Rudolf Steiner *The Tasks of Schools and the Threefold Social Organism*, Stuttgart, Germany, June 1919<sup>94</sup>

*If you do not have the courage to strive for the liberation of schools from the state, the whole Waldorf School Movement is of no avail.*

– Rudolf Steiner *The First University Course*, Dornach, Switzerland, October 1920<sup>95</sup>

*Our education concerns itself with the methods of teaching and is essentially a new way and art of education, so every teacher can bring it into his work, in whatever kind of school he happens to be. ... Our task is ... to give indications of a way of teaching arising out of our anthroposophical knowledge of man.*

– Rudolf Steiner *The Roots of Education*, Bern, Switzerland, April 1924<sup>96</sup>

*From the outset we were never interested in principles of educational method which might later on be somehow incorporated in a legalized educational system. What did interest us was reality, absolute true reality.*

– Rudolf Steiner *Human Values in Education*, Arheim, Holland, July 1924<sup>97</sup>

We will now show that a number of statements or opinions being circulated about what Rudolf Steiner said, intended, or did regarding the first Waldorf school have no basis in reality or have no correlation to circumstances now. These untruths introduce confusion, divert the attention from fundamental social tasks, and undermine the possibility of developing a strategy for advancing independent Waldorf education worldwide.

But first, let us address the question of what Rudolf Steiner meant by Waldorf *teaching methods* when he said, “Our education concerns itself with the methods of teaching and is essentially a new way and art of education, so every teacher can bring it into his work, in whatever kind of school he happens to be. ... Our task is ... to give indications of a way of teaching arising out of our anthroposophical knowledge of man.” This may create a paradox in some people’s minds because it appears to contradict the thoughts in the other quotations, which emphasize the necessity to separate education from the State.

In the lecture cycle in Bern, Switzerland, from which the quotation was taken regarding methods of teaching, and in a similar cycle, *Essentials of Education*,<sup>98</sup> given a few days prior in Stuttgart, Germany, Steiner is quite clear that Waldorf schools do not teach Anthroposophy, but rather Anthroposophy is the source and basis of the *teaching methods*. As he describes it, Waldorf methods flow out of Anthroposophy and the anthroposophical understanding of the human being. In the vast amount of material on Waldorf methods, it becomes clear that the art of teaching goes beyond mere outer techniques to include: cultivating a knowledge of body, soul, and spirit in relation to the human being; understanding the spiritual forces that a child brings to earth from pre-earthly life; understanding the necessity of the moral development of the teacher; developing a religious mood of soul out of which a person teaches; meditating on the children who are being taught; and viewing teaching as a priestly profession. These are all part of the Waldorf teaching methods as Steiner intended them to be.

With this in mind, let us now consider the apparent inconsistency and contradiction of the statement made by Steiner in Bern, Switzerland, in relation to the adjoining statements and others quoted throughout this book. Why, and in what context, did he say that Waldorf methods can be applied in any type of school one might be teaching in, if one of the social tasks of Waldorf education is to help liberate education from state control and create an independent school movement? First of all, it is important to note that it was only in Switzerland on certain occasions that Steiner spoke in this way. He was of the opinion that the sense for democracy at that time was different in Switzerland than in the rest of Europe. Accordingly, it was not possible for the Swiss to even consider the possibility of independent schools competing with State schools. Steiner therefore maintained that the only way to develop an independent Waldorf school movement in Switzerland was to introduce and establish independent Waldorf schools *as model schools* that could demonstrate a new “way of teaching arising out of our anthroposophical knowledge of man” for the benefit of all schools. Steiner’s main goal was not to create State-run Waldorf schools but to create a conceptual basis and justification for establishing independent schools in Switzerland.<sup>99</sup>

There is no correlation between the situation that existed in Switzerland during Steiner’s time and the situation of private education in the United States now. Approximately eleven percent of school-age children attend private schools in the United States. There is no need to position Waldorf schools as model schools in order to justify their existence. Even so, such statements by Steiner are now being used to rationalize efforts to incorporate Waldorf methods within the state system through public charter and magnet schools.

Let us now consider a number of recently circulated false ideas and erroneous facts that undermine any understanding of the relation of the first Waldorf school to the threefolding of society and educational freedom.

*The first Waldorf school was publicly (government) funded.*<sup>100</sup>

For anyone who has studied the material available about the early years of the Waldorf School under Steiner's direction and its relation to the movement for educational freedom and the three-folding of social life, the idea that the school was subsidized by the State is not within the realm of possibility. Irrefutable facts presented here demonstrate the falseness of such an idea, including the quoted words of F. Hartlieb, school inspector from the state of Württemberg, when he stated in 1926 that the school was "not supported financially either by the State or by the town of Stuttgart, but is dependent entirely upon its own resources."<sup>101</sup>

*Rudolf Steiner intended the first Waldorf school to be a "public," meaning state or government school.*<sup>102</sup>

Again, an objective study of Steiner's and Molt's intentions and their deeds in relation to the first Waldorf school shows that this thought is not true. The source of this erroneous idea is a mistranslation from the German of certain passages in "The Pedagogical Basis of the Waldorf School," an essay that appeared in the periodical *The Threefold Social Order*. The key mistranslated sentence reads: "It is now planned that the Waldorf School will be a public school." The word "public" is a translation of the word *Volksschule*. The correct translation of *Volksschule* in this essay is *primary* or *elementary school*, meaning a school for children up to the age of 14, not a public school. This same essay also appears in the book *The Renewal of the Social Organism*, published by the Anthroposophic Press, and the word *Volksschule* is correctly translated there as "primary" school, not "public school."<sup>103</sup> From the context of the essay it is quite clear *Volksschule* can only mean a primary or elementary school, for the whole essay is a description of pedagogical methods used with students up to the age of 14 years, and the essay itself is part of a series of essays on the threefold social organism, which explain why education and cultural life must be completely disassociated from the State and industry.<sup>104</sup>

*Rudolf Steiner's vision for education, including Waldorf schools, was that they would exist within the State educational system, which would provide for the education but leave the educating to the teachers.*<sup>105</sup>

It is unambiguous in Rudolf Steiner's writings and lectures on the threefold social organism that the State should no longer supervise, inspect, provide the facilities for, or fund education. The State's relation to education would be limited to such things as upholding safety regulations, contracts, the right of a child to an education, and the application of civil rights.

A passage in Steiner's book *Toward Social Renewal* may be the source of this mistaken idea. It reads: "Human culture has matured toward freedom within the framework of the State, but it cannot exercise this freedom without complete autonomy of action." But this statement is preceded and followed by thoughts which make it clear Steiner was not suggesting that complete autonomy for education can ever be found within the framework of the State: "For a new era in human relations to emerge, it was necessary that the circles which controlled education and culture be relieved of this function and that it be transferred to the political state. However, to persist in this arrangement is a grave social error ... the nature which spiritual life has assumed requires that it constitute a fully autonomous member of the social organism."<sup>106</sup>

In a discussion after a lecture to young *public school* teachers in Germany, Rudolf Steiner made the following remark: "Someone also mentioned that it does not matter whether the person charged with developing thinking, feeling, and willing in a child does so within or outside the structure of the State. In spite of the fact that this question came up twice, I really cannot understand it. The important thing is that we not rob teachers of their strength of personality by cramming them into the confines of government regulations. You need only consider what it would mean if what entered the child's head did not come out of the free work of the teacher, but instead arose through regulations, curricula, and goals determined by the state."<sup>107</sup>

Steiner never suggested that it was possible to create a free space for education under the auspices and with the support of the State. Rather he declared that education needs to be removed from the State altogether.

*Rudolf Steiner made a deal with the State in which he agreed that the students would and should be tested in grades 3, 6, and 8.*<sup>108</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the three compromises that Rudolf Steiner made with government authorities was that the students would achieve learning goals equivalent to the local public school by the end of the third, sixth, and eighth grades. The fact that Steiner was willing to accept these compromises is often used to overcome present day concerns that Waldorf-inspired public schools need to submit to more and more state testing and curriculum standards. To what degree this compromise actually meant that the children were subjected to state tests, and to what degree Steiner approved of state testing, is revealed in the following passages. These are taken from notes of the conferences he had with teachers in the first school. The first series of excerpts is from a teachers' conference in April 1922, the third year of the Waldorf School.

"In the most important subjects we must bring the children to the point where they can pass exams."<sup>109</sup> Out of context this statement is ambiguous as to whether the students would actually take any kind of exam.

For further clarification, we continue. "We could give them supplementary reports saying that the pupil has reached [grade] 6 or [grade] 3 standard in such and such a subject in the following way. We shall not use marks. We will put it in a few reasonable words. This applies to [grades] 3, 6, 8, and 12. We have committed ourselves to do this. This special report must be given for [grade] 8." Steiner is suggesting that a special report written in the manner of a typical Waldorf report—a written summary of the abilities of the student by his or her teacher—is sufficient and even preferable to any type of letter or numerical grade. There is no indication

that students had to be tested in any special way by the school, let alone by the state, to demonstrate their academic ability to fulfill the obligations of the compromise.

Continuing on: “If the children are not leaving, it is not necessary. We write them for those who need them. In the higher classes they only need them as leaving reports.” Steiner’s interpretation of his agreement with the State was that only those students who were going to leave the Waldorf School, which initially had only eight grades, needed a special report describing their academic achievements. It is clear that Steiner did not want the students tested or evaluated in any special way other than what the teachers would prepare as an extra written report addressing their academic abilities in certain subjects.

Perhaps a better indication of what Steiner thought about at least one of the State tests of his day can be understood from the following statements by him in the fourth year of the School regarding the *Abitur*, which is a series of required exams for twelfth grade students who want to go on to university.

*Our chief worry is that in our top class we are, sad to say, actually being forced to deny our Waldorf School principles, for we cannot apply a curriculum that accords with them. We shall simply have to say that in the final year we shall have to teach all the subjects taught in local secondary schools, and do them the way they do them. In fact, I am already dreading the last half of the year when we shall have to stop everything else and concentrate entirely on the exam subjects. For one can scarcely imagine any other way of getting the pupils through the exams. It is a real worry.*<sup>110</sup>

Obviously, Steiner was not enthusiastic supporter of state testing. It is interesting to note how the whole matter of the *Abitur* was resolved during Steiner’s time. The faculty, partly at the request of the students, decided to keep the Waldorf curriculum intact during the four years of high school, and as a compromise they offered a special exam preparation course separately in a thirteenth year.