

# The Economy of a Waldorf School

A Waldorf school is a fundamentally altruistic organization and as such is loosely subject to three development phases – a foundation or pioneer phase, a bureaucratic (in a positive sense) one, and an integration phase. The first phase is difficult, but also the most enjoyable in many ways: few people are involved, who get to know each other well, they are not only friendly, they often become friends. They frequently innovate, whether rightly or wrongly. A mistake, if recognized as such, can be immediately corrected.

The second phase is when the organization becomes too large to continue feeding on the founders' intuition. In other words, efficient but, hopefully, not rigid or dogmatic. The name of the third phase, “integration”, may imply that all problems have been solved and there's smooth sailing from now on. No, integration – very difficult to achieve – means having sufficient flexibility to adapt to new necessities without sacrificing fundamental principles, accepting healthy tension but avoiding destructive conflict. And so on.

The objective of the Waldorf school is to educate children in order that they can develop into free individuals who can think for themselves – not always correctly, but at least in freedom, enabling them to learn by experience. In other words not to become a loyal citizen, but a free human being. Of course teachers receive a salary, and some may be teaching mainly for that reason. Parents send their children to the school because they want the best for them. Even so, the objective of the institution is as described above, whether everyone involved is aware of it or not.

In anthroposophy we like to talk about a threefold society, and some even try to structure a school according to this concept. A school is not society as a whole though, so such attempts are usually unsuccessful. A threefold structure may be found, not implanted, in a Waldorf school however. It looks like this:

The spiritual sphere --- the Interaction sphere --- the Economic sphere

The spiritual/cultural sphere is Waldorf pedagogy. It is a known quantity that can be learned and applied. Much of *how* it is applied depends on the teachers' ability and dedication.

Interaction is the working together of the various human elements – parents, teachers, administrators (Teachers College/Board of directors, for example).

The economy – the subject of this essay: It is said that “Money is the root of all evil”. The saying is unclear, however, about whether it defines money itself or the lack of it. Certainly a Waldorf school needs money to operate. But what kind of money? Or,

rather, which function of money? Actually there are three kinds or functions of money: Buy-sell money, loan money, and donation money. When you walk into a store or a supermarket you find various items on sale from lawn mowers to onions. Their prices are either attached or written on signs. you will buy, if you do, using buy-sell money (you buy, the store sells), whether you use cash or a credit card. Loan money is the money you loan to a friend or a bank loans to you. In the former case you expect the friend to pay you back; in the latter case the bank demands the money back plus interest.

Donation money is money given freely without any expectation of ever getting it back.

A Waldorf school is neither a commercial nor a lending organization. It is a spiritual/cultural entity and as such needs donation money that is given freely in order to insure its survival and enable the teachers to continue their spiritual mission. (A mother once asked me if she could pay in whole grain rice instead of money. I don't remember my exact reply, but I'm sure it was polite.)

If a prospective family is interested in the school, its first contact is usually the secretariat where, hopefully, the school's principles and method are explained. Eventually they will ask the amount of the monthly fee. If the answer is "X pesos", they may feel that they are in a supermarket instead of a school, because that is a buy-sell answer. Furthermore, it is false, because you can no more sell education than you can sell the absolution of sins. If the amount of sale is posted on a bulletin board or otherwise printed (kindergarten: \$ X; primary school: \$ X; secondary school: \$ X) the supermarket sensation is amplified.

Ideally, the teacher of the appropriate for the child will interview him and the parents, and if the child is accepted, the next step will be to speak to someone authorized to determine how much the fee will be for that child, according to the family's ability to pay. There is no reason for the teacher to know how much they pay. A kind of contract could then be drawn up in which the parents promise to pay a certain yearly amount in one, ten or twelve installments. The contract is not legally binding; its purpose is to allow the school to prepare a realistic budget.

I know that this will seem like an overly idealistic concept to some, but I don't think it is. According to experience it can actually work better than traditional fixed fees. When Ute Craemer (Sao Paulo) visited us earlier this year, someone asked her what should be done when some parents object that they pay the full fee while others do not. Ute answered: "It is the child who is important, not how much the parents pay." When periodic economic crises occur, it can become impossible for some families to continue paying the school's fees. They take their children out rather than endure

the constant pressure to pay up. People do have pride after all. I recall in two cases, of two different schools, when I had to go to the children's homes to plead with their parents to allow the children to continue, paying less or nothing. In the first case, many years ago in Buenos Aires, the little girl was one of the school's first pupils, who were few, so when she no longer attended it was immediately noticed; in the second case, here in Traslasierra, I only noticed the boy's absence when he came to visit his friends wearing his new white *guardapolvo*.<sup>\*</sup> When I asked him why he changed schools he said, in tears, that he didn't know. Both children returned to the school.

It is really necessary to remember Ute's words: it is the child who is important, not how much the parents pay.

Frank Thomas Smith, September 2017

<sup>\*</sup> *guardapolvo* = a obligatory smock in state schools.