



## Developing Pedagogical Quality

by Dr. Richard Landl (September 2018)

*The German Association of Waldorf Education (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen) has used a pilot project to develop an accredited method to improve the quality of teaching. The project ran for two years and started in summer 2008. During that time, three schools in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg tested the method in practice. The tests showed that the “kind look of a stranger” is in principle welcomed by teachers. Nevertheless, it is important to address any doubts and fears as early as possible in order to promote transparency and trust. The accredited method for the development of pedagogical quality described in this paper has been made available to all Waldorf Schools in Germany since the summer of 2011.*

### ***Improved Quality in Teaching as the Result of Continuous Reflection***

Every improvement in quality has to start with a definition of the goals for holistic education. In this paper we define pedagogical quality as a process which includes the acquisition of knowledge and skills by children and adolescents as well as the development of their entire personality. All pupils should become aware of the possibilities within them, and these possibilities should be allowed to unfold. We focus not only on the years at school – with their limited time span - but on the whole of a person's life with all its professional and personal challenges.

What then is pedagogical quality in the light of the above? One of the basic assumptions of this paper is that educational quality can be improved only if the teacher is aiming for quality and if she is prepared to continuously reflect on her work. In addition, she needs an external view and stimulation, but they can only be successful if they lead to intrinsic motivation. In the long run, if there is no intrinsic motivation, educational quality cannot be achieved by actions from outside. Further, our experience shows that the good quality of yesterday's work is a valuable basis for today's actions but does not guarantee future quality. **Only continuous striving for quality, only a process which is continuously reflected and created anew can be successful:** today's best practice does not automatically grow out of yesterday's success.

Good teaching is always original and authentic; it needs teachers who are enthusiastic about the lesson content and their classroom practice. But what can we do to ensure that this common knowledge is more than empty words? Examining schools still in their early stages, which are still dynamic and lively, helps us to understand some basic principles. Such schools and their teachers are part of an ongoing process and are continuously faced with outside challenges. In later years, change

really needs to be consciously sought. It is only the people who are part of the educational process who can initiate such changes.

**Experience shows that quality can only grow in schools where teachers always want to learn and develop.**

A teacher who wants to change and develop will gain access to the inner growth of her pupils and based on this quality of the mutual process a relationship between teaching and learning can grow. To put it simply: only a teacher who develops and educates herself can educate pupils and motivate them to develop themselves further.

What can we do to spark our own motivation without feeling any pressure from outside? The method described in this paper encourages teachers to inspire each other in a mutual process; it aims at continuous motivation for development and improvement inside a school. This process is supported by educational experts from outside the school.

It is crucial to prepare the college of teachers well. Any resistance to change – which is mainly caused by fear – needs to be broken down at the beginning – at least partially. Therefore, it is important that the procedure is transparent for everyone and that it includes clear guidelines for its internal and external aspects.

**The Elements of the Method**

The method is based on three pillars: collegial reflection groups as well as classroom observation with colleagues and with external mentors. Based on the above, there are two basic assumptions:

1. The development of the individual is achieved through discussions with peers and with those who are affected by similar questions.
2. Objectivity and sustainability are achieved by external ideas and reflection, i.e. by experts from outside the school. Attainment targets must be agreed upon, but they will become effective only through the discussion with external experts.

Collegial Reflection Groups

Collegial reflection groups need to be prepared through further education courses for the whole college of teachers. In these courses, the teachers learn about and practice communication techniques. They also establish guidelines for successful communication. A crucial element here is the mutual exchange between equals – independent of age or experience. People need to take turns in assuming responsibility for the process by getting involved in the questions and problems of the peer who can be “discovered” in this way.

The college of teachers needs to be divided into groups that regularly work together over a longer period of time. The groups each consist of four to five people. The following procedure has been successful in many schools: Each group consists of teachers representing a variety of subjects, age groups and gender.

The groups meet every fortnight or they choose their own schedule, but a fixed number of meetings needs to be held during the course of the year. Sixty minutes of the weekly faculty meeting

(sometimes called “conference”) ought to be reserved for these discussions. Teachers should not have to spend any extra time at school when working in collegial reflection groups.

In the meeting, one colleague presents a case briefly, in a spirited and imaginative way. The case can be about any daily situation at school which has become a question or a problem for the teacher. The other members of the group try to shed some light on the question by following a strict procedure of communicative steps, each with a different quality. The teacher bringing the question may be inspired by the views of her colleagues and may ask for more help in a subsequent step.

#### External Classroom Observation

A group of external experts visits the school regularly. The group consists of teachers who are experienced in teaching and mentoring, having previously taken part in a mentoring program with external supervision.

External classroom observation takes place twice a year. The expert watches the lesson, and follows it up with an evaluative discussion. The main findings are summarised at the end of the discussion and the teacher records his goals for improvement which become the basis for future classroom observation. The two main requirements for the evaluative discussion are that the teacher’s strengths are acknowledged and that her areas for improvement are discussed in a clear and understandable way. It is crucial that the external mentor creates a relaxed atmosphere that fosters mutual trust. The main aim of classroom observation is to help the teacher recognise his own strength and weaknesses and therefore to identify personal areas for improvement. The main effect of the discussion should be that the teacher feels inspired to use her potential even more effectively and that she feels empowered to change clearly identified problematic aspects of her teaching. Further, the expert and the teacher should look together for ways to improve classroom practice and find out which kind of help is available or needs to be created. Lasting success can be achieved only if the evaluative discussion motivates the teacher to undergo a process of change. Trust is the most important ingredient in this process.

The discussion should last a minimum of sixty minutes. If the teacher so wishes, the results of the external classroom observation may be discussed in the collegial reflection group. The group may wish to help the teacher implement her goals for improvement. There is also the possibility that a peer observes the classroom practice as well and thus the results of the expert may be confirmed or put into perspective.

#### Internal Classroom Observation

Further, it is suggested that the teachers who work together in the collegial reflection group observe each other’s classroom practice as well. It is helpful to first have the experience of the external observation in order to understand the possibilities of an evaluative discussion. The peer observation might be discussed in pairs or in the group. However, the standard procedure for collegial reflection meetings should always be followed.

Further education courses are needed to set up peer classroom observation. The courses prepare the colleagues for the task of observing and the evaluative discussion which should help the teachers being observed reflect on their own practice and find their individual pedagogical approaches.

### **The College of Teachers' Group for Quality Development**

The college of teachers creates a group of about three teachers who coordinate and organise quality improvement plans. Their task involves the following areas:

- The coordination of the collegial reflection groups
- The organisation of external classroom observation
- The planning of faculty meeting reviews, evaluation and exchanges of information
- To be the contact people for the school community in all questions concerning pedagogical quality improvement
- To be the contact people for the external mentors

### **Agreement with the School**

The conditions and guidelines set out above are recorded as a written agreement between the school and the representatives of the German Association of Waldorf Schools (BdFWS). This is to ensure clarity and transparency. Because the whole process of improving educational quality takes two years, it is helpful for both sides to be able to re-read the agreement at any time. Depositing a paper with an external institution helps to comply with the agreement.

### **From Evaluation to Monitoring the Process**

An important element in the method for quality improvement is the scientific monitoring of the process, including a comprehensive evaluation at the end as completed by the Institute for Empirical Social Research at the Alanus University in Alfter/Bonn, Germany.

The Institute conducted interviews with the management groups of the schools and with individual teachers, including the participation of the external mentor in some cases. The final evaluation was based on questionnaires and group interviews with the management groups of the school.

The questionnaires were subdivided into the following areas:

- Questions about the personal motivation of the teachers
- Questions about the three elements of the process
- Questions about the overall effect of the project
- Questions about the connections between the components of the project
- Open ended questions
- Personal data

The three schools taking part in the project submitted a total of 80 completed questionnaires, representing 90.9% of teachers involved in this enterprise. The following tables show a selection of the relevant data.

The main reason for getting teachers to be personally motivated to participate in the project was to improve educational quality and the expectation of new impulses for teaching. Table 1 shows that this aim was mainly achieved.

(The participants were asked to rate the statements with one of four possible answers: Agree completely, agree partially, don't agree partially, don't agree at all)

Results for Classroom Practice

	Total of 80 participants
The external classroom observations have helped me to develop new perspectives for my teaching practice.	77.5%
The peer classroom observation was helpful.	71.2%
The results of the peer consultations were helpful for my teaching practice.	63.7%

Right from the start, the classroom observations by external experts were viewed critically and they also triggered the most anxiety. However, the many years of experience of the external mentors led to widespread acceptance by the teachers. It was important that the teacher's professional practice was never questioned in principle. Review discussions were conducted eye to eye and strict confidentiality was applied to both classroom observations and review discussions, as previously agreed. Further, it was helpful that there was the opportunity to discuss the overall experience openly in review meetings. And finally, the voluntary aspect of the external observations was welcomed; however, in the course of the project almost every teacher welcomed external observation. The results of the external observations are summed up in Table 2.

Results for External Classroom Observation:

	School 1	School 2	School 3
Positive Reviews	87.0%	86.2%	92.9%
Received comprehensible evaluation	82.6%	82.8%	85.7%
New perspectives for teaching practice	73.9%	75.8%	82.8%
Classroom practice has improved	73.9%	65.5%	64.3%

The results show that the discussions were mainly positive and that comprehensive reflections and suggestions about the teaching practice was offered. The positive effect on classroom practice is clearly visible.

Collegial reflection is a further element that fosters trust in a college of teachers. Initial apprehension concerning the random make-up of the groups was soon overcome. Fundamental trust was quickly established in the groups thanks to regular meetings, regular changing of roles between talking and listening, and the practice of having to understand and sum up a situation quickly and suggest possible solutions. Table 3 shows the results of the questionnaire referring to the collegial reflection groups.

### Questions about Collegial Reflection Groups

	School 1	School 2	School 3
We have gained new pedagogical insight	52.1	86.2	60.7
The quality of discussion was higher than in the faculty meetings	69.6	86.2	64.3
The results were helpful for teaching practice	47.8	82.8	57.2
The communication rules were followed	46.5	69.0	50.0
Collegial reflection is welcomed as an integral part of professional practice	60.8	75.8	85.7

The results show an overall positive trend. However, in the course of the project it became clear that there were also some marked differences regarding the success of the project. The discussions about the causes of these differences became important in the groups in the individual schools as well as between the three schools. The results in Table 3 show a strong correlation between adhering to the communication rules and the positive results in the classroom practice of the teacher who presented her case to the group. It became apparent that a number of groups did not follow the communication rules. Their meetings turned into “nice chats” between colleagues but profound inquiry became impossible. It is therefore clear that only adhering to the somewhat strict communication rules and the disciplined work of each individual make profound, intense inquiry possible and allow for meetings to go beyond the usual more familial chats among colleagues.

Once the two elements of the project had been established, there were no problems at the three schools in starting peer classroom observation no later than during the second year of the project. Anxieties regarding opening the classroom door to a peer and discussing classroom practice with colleagues had disappeared for most teachers by this point. See Table 4.

### Questions about Peer Classroom Observation

	School 1	School 2	School 3
The visits were helpful.	56.5	86.2	67.8
I was able to learn from my colleagues' observations.	56.5	86.2	64.7
Review discussions led to positive change.	39.1	79.3	53.6
I was able to offer reflections and suggestions that helped my colleague.	56.5	82.8	46.5
The review discussion took place.	69.6	93.1	46.4
Internal classroom observation is welcomed as an established part of professional practice.	69.5	79.3	78.6

We see above that peer classroom observation was regarded as helpful in each of the three schools, even if only a small group rated the review discussion as helpful. A similar picture emerged at another school where less than half of the classroom observations were followed by a review discussion. We suspect that in both cases the mere enactment of an internal classroom observation had an effect. With hindsight, three quarters of the teachers welcome peer classroom observation as an established part of professional practice.

The answers about the overall effects of the project show in particular an improvement in the cooperation among the members of the college of teachers and an improvement of the atmosphere at the school – results that were not a goal of the project. See Table 5.

#### The overall effect of the project

	School 1	School 2	School 3
The atmosphere at school has improved.	52.1	89.7	64.3
I see my colleagues in a different light.	74.7	89.7	57.1
It was worth making an effort for the project.	78.2	89.7	67.9

To sum up, we consider the project at all three schools to have been successful. Taking part in the project had in particular a positive effect on the cooperation between colleagues in connection with classroom practice. Further, the teachers reported an improvement in the atmosphere at the school.

#### **Awarding a Certificate**

The certification process was completed in Autumn 2012 with the awarding of a quality certificate based on DIN/EN 45011:1998 and DIN EN ISO/IEC 17021:2006. By this point, several schools were already using the method. The certification was based on intensive work which included two workshops attended by the quality team of the German Association of Waldorf Schools and representatives of the schools that had taken part in the pilot project. The certification process was completed by an audit at one of the pilot schools. The certificate confirms that the aims of the project can be achieved by the means provided. Additionally – but independently – each school can apply for a certificate to confirm that the steps of the process have been conscientiously executed.

Translated from German by Karin Smith

A detailed description of the process, including the results of the accompanying scientific research, can be found in:

*Landl, R., Peters, P., Röhler, A.: Qualitätsentwicklung an Waldorfschulen, Entwicklung und Evaluation eines zertifizierten Verfahrens; Peter Lang Verlag 2016*