

## **How Waldorf School graduates cope with the challenges they face during military service: a ten-year overview**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article reviews part of a study that dealt with how graduates of the Waldorf School integrate into Israeli society, as seen from their perspective. The purpose of the study was to explore how Waldorf School graduates integrate into society on completing high school, and examine the nature and quality of life readiness that the Waldorf educational method provides its graduates. Three main areas of life were reviewed in the study: graduates in the one-year volunteer framework, in the regular military framework, and in academic studies. Of these, the current study reviews only the area of military service. The study applied qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews with 46 graduates of the Waldorf School in Harduf, Israel, following twelve full years of study. This is the first study of Waldorf-educated graduates ever conducted worldwide relying solely qualitative methodology, and the only study conducted in Israel thus far. The study's main conclusion is that the Waldorf School, as an education system emphasizing artistic and creative manifestation, hands-on work, a connection with nature, warm personal relationships, and an absence of exams and grades, can produce graduates *who see themselves* as successfully cope with the challenges they face following completion of school, and in this particular case, the challenges of coping with military service in the IDF. One of the questions surfacing from the study is whether it is possible to implement Waldorf School methods and approaches fully or partially also in the framework of other governmental education systems.

*Keywords:* Waldorf education, empirical research, qualitative methodology, military service, Israeli society, coping, resilience, internal values, self-esteem

### **Review of the literature**

In recent years we have witnessed accelerated development of the Waldorf education system in Israel. This method commenced in Germany in 1919 but set its roots in Israel only in the late 1980s. Currently, as of February 2013, there are 95 kindergartens using this method, 21 primary schools, 5 high schools, 5 teacher training colleges, and numerous groups of parents interested in establishing kindergartens and schools based on Waldorf principles.

Over the years, many studies were conducted in Europe and the USA on Waldorf educated graduates (Barz, 2007; Gessler, 1987; Hofman, Prummer & Weidner, 1981; Mitchel & Douglas, 2007; Randoll, 2004). No study has yet been conducted in Israel. The need of research data in the context of Waldorf education is also linked to the fact that many kindergartens, approximately half the primary schools, all the high schools and some of the teacher training colleges are recognized by the Israel Ministry of Education and receive government support and resources like any other educational institution without any thorough

review of the system's output: the graduates themselves.

The innovation of the current study is in its being the first solely qualitative academic research worldwide into Waldorf schooled graduates, the first ever research into Waldorf graduates, and so far the only one conducted on Waldorf graduates in Israel. Furthermore, no research on Waldorf graduates has ever specifically examined their coping with the challenges of military service. Qualitative methodology is more sensitive to issues of depth and essence, which in this case are issues relating to life readiness and coping by young adults throughout their military service. The educational thrust of the Waldorf method and the way it prepares its graduates for entering real life displays, in the current study, a new and unique angle of observation.

Waldorf schools encourage values related to the arts, creativity, personal expression, and social relationships. It preserves a "childlike" learning atmosphere in younger ages and attempts to nurture diverse multidisciplinary qualities in its students (Steiner, 1988; Edmunds, 2004; Masters, 2005). Additionally, it does not promote achievement orientation, and focuses less on orienting pupils, in light of the social and cultural values of its surrounding community (Steiner, 1981; Richter, 2006). Waldorf graduates therefore set out into the world on completing their schooling and leave behind the educational, cultural greenhouse. The issue of their readiness, maturity and modes of coping with the very different atmosphere in the real world compared to that of school life is not obvious and requires in-depth review.

The purpose of the research was to examine how Waldorf School graduates experience their integration into society in various post-schooling spheres. Three main areas of life were examined: the one-year service framework (most graduates volunteer to work for one full-time year in social services such as special needs education, boarding schools, youth clubs in disadvantaged neighborhoods, youth villages and more, prior to recruitment for military service), the military service framework, and academic studies. This article reviews only the findings relevant to the sphere of military service.

### **The issue of preparedness for life...**

...in the school framework, or perhaps, whether and how the schools ready their graduates for post-school life, is highly complicated (Postman, 1996) and by nature, touches on philosophical and value-based issues. Numerous studies, especially those relating to resilience, show how a positive schooling experience can reinforce the child and support the child in later life, both during studies and afterwards (Gilligan, 1998, 2000; Sylva, 1994; Glover et al., 1995). A positive school climate can, for example, contribute to social development and the sense of belonging in the child and the adolescent (Cotterell, 1996; Wehlage, et al., 1989). The sense of belonging to the school may encourage both academic achievement and psychological health (Glover et al., 1995), and serve to protect against future behaviors that endanger health (Resnick, et al., 1997). The experience of success at school in studies, social connections and sports may assist in overcoming crises and hardships (Romans et al., 1995). It has also been found that components generally viewed as less significant relative to school life, such as playtime during recesses, has essential value in child development (Blachford, 1998). The teachers hold key roles in ensuring the child's development and psychological health (Gilligan, 1998).

### **Military service**

Military service is one of the most prominent facets of adolescent life in Israeli society and holds strong significance in their outlook (Israelashvili, 1997). Military service spreads over a relatively lengthy period in young adults' lives and includes intensive, highly impactful experiences (Scharf, Mayseless & Kivenson-Baron 2004). It is normal to view the transition into military service as a tough challenge for adolescents, and particularly so the period of cadetship known as the hardest stage of military service, during which most of the crises surface, including suicide attempts (Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron 2004; Israelashvili, 1997). Several reasons explain the difficulties experienced during this period: (1) military service is a new status and thus arouses anxiety; (2) the military is an especially demanding system which requires absolute

obedience and control over actions throughout almost the entire 24-hour cycle; (3) notable are physical deprivations and difficulties; (4) there is no privacy; (5) the military is a total institution which invades every aspect of the young adult's life; (6) the cadet is related to as part of a multitude rather than as an individual; and (7) there is a marked lack of clarity regarding the close and distant future (id.).

### **The Waldorf education system...**

... commenced after WWI ended, when a German industrialist in Stuttgart invited Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925), a lecturer, philosopher, author and esotericist (Barnes, 1995; Hemleben, 1984; Steiner, 1986) to establish a school for his laborers' children (Esterl, 2006). The school was set up (id.) and led by Steiner until his death (Zander, 2007). Waldorf education is based chiefly on Steiner's books, lectures and research, and the period in which he served as the school's first principal (Steiner, 1975). Steiner's starting point was observation of each child and her or his development:

*The basis of all things learned, and every educational activity, must be founded on the knowledge of the person coming into being, and her or his individual capabilities. Practical anthropology needs to be the basis of education. We do not need to ask: what should a person know and do for the currently existing social order, but rather, what does the person inherently possess and what can be developed from it? (Steiner, 1988: 8).*

Steiner established an educational theory which in his own time became an expanding educational movement, including Waldorf schools in diverse cities in Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, England and the USA (Dietrich, 2006). Currently, in 2013, the Waldorf school system is considered the large private education system in the world, with thousands of kindergartens, and more than one thousand schools across five continents (Zander, 2007). The educational method can be characterized by the following principles:

### **Applying developmental thinking**

Waldorf education is based on developmental psychology derived from Steiner's esoteric studies (Steiner, 1988). In principle it is similar to the developmental perceptions of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg. Childhood is divided into three periods of some six to seven years each, in each of which the educational focus nurtures different qualities: activity, senses, play and movement in the first time frame; arts and esthetics, internal pictures and working on moods in the second time frame; abstract thought, professional manual labor in workshops and crafts, and community involvement, in the final phase (Edmunds, 2004; Masters, 2005; Steiner, 1988).

### **Holistic view of the child and of educational processes**

In his educational writings, Steiner repeatedly emphasized that education and teaching must derive from the whole person: "It (the pedagogy of that time) must come wholly and solely from a vital knowledge of the whole person" (Steiner, 1988, p. 17). This relates to the holistic, multifaceted process of teaching, education and follow-up with children. The holistic approach manifests in many characteristics of Waldorf schools (Easton, 1997), including balance between academic, artistic and physical disciplines in the education system, such that each student has, by the end of her or his schooling, experienced all realms of study and been educated through diverse activities and studies without making specific choices or specializations, even in high school.

### **The importance of the artistic experience in all processes of teaching and education**

"We do not aspire to nurture dogmatic education; we aspire to create the art of vital education, derived from the science of the spirit" (Steiner, 1980, p. 15), declared Steiner in his opening speech at the first Waldorf school. Indeed, the term "the art of education" occurs frequently in his educational lectures and writings. He related to the determining role of art and the artistic processes of schooling from diverse directions.

## Joint management: a republic of teachers

At the opening event for the first teacher training course Steiner held with the opening of the first school, he emphasized his intention to establish a school based on joint management (Steiner, 1980, p. 205). Many Waldorf schools, including Israeli Waldorf institutions, operate under a democratic management structure without a principal, the managerial decisions being made through joint discussion.

## Life readiness from the Waldorf education perspective

In his lectures and educational writings, Steiner related frequently to the issue of life readiness (Steiner, 1979, 1980, 1983). He viewed the 1919 establishment of the first Waldorf School as part of his efforts during that period to renew and influence social life in central Europe. For him, the educational act was linked entirely to broader social, cultural and spiritual issues (Steiner, 1979). Steiner considered the following characteristics of the Waldorf school as tied to the matter of life readiness: (1) a developmental approach that reinforces the child both physically and psychologically; (2) integrating the arts into teaching method; (3) authoritative guidance at a young age; and (4) teaching infused with imagination and inspiration.

## Previous research on Waldorf educated graduates

In recent years four large scale studies on graduates of Waldorf education were publicized in four different countries: Germany (Barz & Randoll, 2007), Switzerland (Barz & Randoll, 2007), USA (Mitchell & Douglas, 2007) and Sweden (Dahlin, 2007). These studies researched Waldorf educated graduates in their own countries from diverse angles. Summaries of the research findings for Germany and Switzerland (Barz & Randoll, 2007, *Die Zeit in der Waldorfschule*: pp. 175 – 232; Randoll & Barz, 2007: pp. 129 – 187) indicated several weak points: insufficient professionalism in several spheres of knowledge, particularly the sciences and foreign languages; weak learning techniques; and difficulty in coping with achievement oriented situations. The positive points including strong, autonomous personalities; strong interest in diverse areas of life; strong connections with life challenges; good social skills; and a positive life outlook.

In the American study, and particularly in its qualitative section (Mitchell & Douglas, 2007: Chapter 9: pp. 57 – 74), the greater majority of graduates note the training they received in the Waldorf school framework as highly significant in their integration in life and coping with challenges. They chiefly stress the following characteristics as directly linked with their education: “Creative abilities, love of learning, self-expression, interest in diverse perspectives, and the ability to work with others” (Mitchell & Douglas, 2007, p. 60).

For our purposes, it is important to note that no study has yet focused on the integration of Waldorf schooled graduates in military service in their country.

## The research methodology

The main research question was:

*How do Waldorf School graduates perceive the Waldorf system relative to readying them for coping with the specific challenges and issues of Israeli society?*

Researching the issue of coping by Waldorf School graduates with the challenges they face on completing high school and entering society attempts to encompass, describe and characterize a complex and rich world of content, and in many instances may bring to the surface unique outlooks that are different and often contradictory. It was intended to provide space for each interviewee, her or his perceptions, stances, feelings and outlooks. All these indicated that the qualitative research method would be the most appropriate (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999; Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 1995). Qualitative methodology is consistent with the researched field, the research question and the researcher's intentions.

The research is based on semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 1995) with Waldorf School graduates. The interviewees included graduates from the Waldorf High School in Harduf, in northern Israel, and the only Israeli Waldorf School currently providing education to the end of twelfth grade. Interviewees had completed their studies within ten years from the study's date. The interviews themselves were conducted during 2010 and 2011. The research focused only on graduates who completed 12 full years in Waldorf schools, starting at first grade through to the end of twelfth grade. Hence, the researched group included young men and women aged 19 to 29 years old. Participating in the research were 46 graduates comprising 27 women and 19 men, chosen by an external committee having no connection to the researcher, and according to the following criteria:

1. Twelve full years of Waldorf schooling
2. Two women and two men from each year group, as far as possible
3. High level external (matriculation certificate) and internal (Waldorf Evaluation) academic recognition
4. Encompassing graduates currently in their volunteer year, military service or higher academic studies or who had already completed any/all of these activities.

The main research tool I used was the semi-structured interview (Fetterman, 1989; Spradley, 1979) conducted with Waldorf School graduates. The average interview time lasted two hours. The interview's design, its questions, and their order of appearance derived from analyzing and processing some five open depth interviews conducted in 2010 with graduates from Israel's Harduf Waldorf School.

Analysis of the interviews followed "The Ethnographic Interview" processing method set out by Spradley (1979). The first stage examined the main categories by conducting a comparative analysis of the interviews using the "Domain Analysis" methodology (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999; Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 1995). Next, each domain was examined separately while attempting to structure it methodically and as appropriately to the specific domain as possible (Spradley, Taxonomic Analysis, 1979, Step 8) by applying structural questions, deep review of the written materials, and additional questions posed to the interviewees (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999; Wolcott, 1995). The third stage included analysis of the domain's components, including relating to contradictory, oppositional and extraordinary components and characteristics (Componential Analysis, Spradley, 1979, Step 10). The fourth and final stage of data analysis included exposing the principles or rules according to which a specific culture conducts itself and exposes internal significance relative to its actions (Spradley, 1979: 186).

## Findings

Research indicates a range of difficulties and crises with which young people must cope during military service (Scharf, Mayseless & Kivenson-Baron 2004; Israelashvili, 1997). Some cope better, some less so. Recruitment to military service involves a sharp, extreme transition from the familiar home environment to the military framework, which is rigid, is conducted with different standards and traits from those that recruits were accustomed to previously (Israelashvili, 1997). The cadetship period is therefore considered the toughest and most crisis ridden of the entire military service period (id.). Such difficulties also surface from the interviews:

*You leave school and home with a sense of being able to do anything, and that goes with the feeling that you deserve everything, and that's tough. Because in the army not everything is possible, mostly it isn't, and there are loads of disappointments. Because the people aren't the same people, it's not the same level of communication that you're used to, there's no comparison at all, suddenly you're thrown into the fire pan, it's completely out there, it's a really tough and depressing and unpleasant system, mainly at first, and then afterwards it cools off (Lee, 4th year-group).*

The difficulties described by the graduates are similar to those surfacing in previous studies. Several graduates, however, did not consider the transition as requiring serious coping and adjusted quickly to the military atmosphere and requirements. Roi from the 7th year-group describes his basic training cadetship: "Cadetship was OK. We'll just play along and get through it and then get to the unit and see what's next."

He also noted that “it wasn’t hard at all.” In summary, for some graduates the transition to military service involved complex coping with difficulties, which sometimes lasted for a lengthy period of time, and for others the transition was not particularly problematic, and they adapted quickly to military routine. Some of the interviewees did experience crisis but it was relative minor, or passed quickly. All the interviewed graduates continued on to full military service following the basic training stage.

Interviews with the graduates brought coping with a broad range of difficulties during military service to the surface. One of these difficulties relates to the ethical issues and the question of the degree to which the individual is prepared to fulfill orders sourced in from the military framework relative to that individual’s personal values. Michael, of the 5th year-group, stated: “My hardest areas of coping were ethical, moral issues [...] lots of situations in which my ethics were of far greater weight than for my peers and that really bothered me.” I asked him for examples, and after hesitating briefly, he offered the following narrative:

*I was a combat sergeant in Gaza, during the Lebanon War, which was a little before I was drafted, there were all kinds of things going on [...] there were entire units who didn’t get provisions for a whole week, there was no food, so when we went into Gaza, it was based on the conclusions of Lebanon [...] they said we could eat from the homes, if necessary we could eat from the homes, that was the approach. And very quickly in the field, after the first day or two of aggressive entry the supply line was opened and there was no such problem [...] there was the pressure of war and that’s not pleasant, but there was food all the time and despite that, people were cooking food from the locals. It really bothered me, I didn’t agree, I didn’t want to eat, I said, there’s no reason to cook the family’s rice. I was in the minority, and I was the commander, I was the combat sergeant, which is a role model, I’m their friend but I’m also entitled to tell them not to eat [...] it wasn’t at the level of conflict, I told the guys what I thought, and I didn’t eat, but most of my work was personal example.*

An additional area of coping is with the military framework itself, as surfacing from the interviews. Maya from the first year-group indicates her inability to identify with the army:

*I had trouble dealing with the military framework. It aroused huge internal resistance in me, disgust, really; it was really hard for me to wear the uniform. I took it really hard, the whole system. Basic training... I took it hard. So, I coped with it, I got through it, it was clear that I’m going to be doing something I do want to do, and it’s worth the sacrifice, but it was really hard for me. I wasn’t at all happy with it, belonging to this organization.*

The interviews show a further difficulty for graduates in their contact and communication with people from difficult social backgrounds with whom, prior to military service, graduates had almost no contact. Tom, of the 10th year-group, saw this as his main difficulty during his army service:

*When I came to the army, there were a lot of basically good people there, I have a lot of good friends from there. But there were also what’s called ‘greasers’, and I didn’t know how to cope with them, how to eat with them, because mostly they were violent, mainly verbally [...] I was in shock at first, from their verbal violence, so much swearing, aggression, and unbelievable lack of caring for anyone else. I couldn’t quite understand why no one cared about me or anyone else. At first I didn’t know how to handle it, and I have to say I was also a little scared of coming into conflict with them.*

Other graduates raised areas of concern such as emotional difficulties, coping with authoritative figures, difficulty with lack of logic in the military framework, struggles with military bureaucracy, self-criticism, and coping with practical exams in the framework of specific military courses.

How did Waldorf School graduates cope with military service issues? Of the interviewees, 41 spoke about the military framework: 4 other interviewees had just completed their volunteer year and were about to be recruited; one interviewee had served in National Civic Service instead of regular military service; and two women never completed their service, leaving partway through (they are related to later). All 41 interviewees were either currently serving or had completed full military service; some of them extended their period of serving by becoming officers. These graduates define themselves as having coped successfully with the military recruitment challenge, and were ready for it both physically and mentally. Below are three representative examples.

Yiftakh, from the 6th year-group, was recruited following his volunteer year to the Navy and at the time of interviewing had just completed his training successfully. He says of himself:

*I feel that I'm managing in the 'real' world, even if I got to the navy by chance, and I got through it well. The course relative to this (military) world is considered a high level achievement. I went for it in order to work with people, to be a commander, to be at sea a little, I wanted the sea, and not so much for the prestige that the course gives, and the title, and the really high salary. But by chance it all worked out well, as far as the parameters and achievements of the world outside our bubble.*

Guy, from the 8th year-group, began military service immediately on completing high school, joining an infantry unit. When asked how he coped with the difficulties, he responded:

*I never had trouble coping with difficulties. The track we do is full of really tough situations, physical and mental, and I feel that I handled them all really well. The fact is that now I'm at the end of a really difficult track, and a lot of other good guys have dropped out for all kinds of reasons. I always handled difficulties well. I always felt ready, mature perhaps.*

Emmanuel of the 8th year-group was recruited as a pilot. At the time of the interview he was on the verge of completing his training. He noted that “there were more difficult things, and less difficult things” but that “so far, I've had a really good time.” When I asked which challenges were the most difficult for him, he answered:

*There were some tough challenges. This whole training, which draws you from one challenge to the next. With field work I had no trouble, nor with navigation, I never had a problem, perhaps that has to do with the school, that I have a feeling for it. The studies are currently the hardest part for me. There's challenge with the flights, sometimes you come down and don't feel so great. Actually I think I take it all more easily than many others. I think that if I came back from a not great flight, I'd just separate it from myself in some way, I'd just say, 'ok, so it wasn't a brilliant flight, so alright, I'll examine why'.*

Since the greater majority of graduates, both men and women, felt able to cope successfully with the challenges posed by military service, I further used the interviews to explore the areas which in their view enabled them to cope. A central motif surfacing in this context was the graduates' ability to see their difficulties 'from the outside'. Tirzah, from the first year-group, considers this ability to be the main strength of her personality:

*I coped excellently. Everything came so easily to me. It started with the IDF theater, where I auditioned and was accepted easily. I couldn't believe they'd really take me, since I had no idea how it all operated, and I thought it really worked on insider contacts, so I just came innocently enough. And then suddenly, I was in [...] basic training! Basic training was a kind of trauma, but in total I think I went through it well, because I kept telling myself the whole time that it isn't real life, it's a kind of game happening in the here and now. An eighteen year old girl screamed at me, ok, so let her scream. It's basic training stage, another three weeks and it'll be over and everything will be just fine. So in the army there was also child-play.*

Another factor surfacing from the graduates' interviews was their ability to manage and adjust to the military framework. Yoav, of the 4th year-group, whose military service covered diverse areas, felt he possessed adaptability:

*I spent some time in the army's department for the injured. I adapted to the work, I did all the tasks well, and they wanted me to stay, they also wanted me to take the officers' course, but at some point I felt it didn't suit me and I wanted to go back to working in education. All in all, it wasn't so hard for me to adjust. It was very easy for me to start working with people, it was only a change in role from one in education or mentoring, it was pretty easy for me.*

Boaz, from the 2nd year-group, descriptively discusses his basic training: “In basic training you go into shock, there's nothing you can do about it, as though you're being pushed into some kind of blender, your personality is broken down and you start over.” I asked how he coped with that. “I always knew how to look beyond such things,” he answered. “Maybe that's what made being in the army meaningful, because you learn to manage with this very closed system, I learned to get out of it the best for myself, and also do really good things.”

The ability to work hard without self-indulgence appeared as another factor in successful coping, as with Gal from the 8th year-group:

*It was clear to me that I need to work hard in order to achieve things. But I did work hard for them. That's why I've just finished the officers' course, and not from anything else. And it was much harder for me than for anyone else there. Of course I got some goodies out of it, (certificate of) excellence here, (medal of) exemplary service there. In every course I got some kind of recognition at the end. In basic training I received the excellence certificate for the entire unit. In another course I finished with the Excellence Award. Later in the officers' course, another award for excellence.*

Gal was clear about her ability to work hard and her schooling: "I have no doubt that it's linked to school." When I asked why she thinks that, she answered: "Maybe it's linked to not being spoiled. What needs to be done, you do." On thinking a little longer, she added: "Mostly what helped me with all these things is willpower." During an earlier part of the interview, Gal indicated that one of the significant traits she gained from school was "willpower" and connected it with the way learning processes were integrated with the arts and practical work, especially in primary school.

The motif of ability to create social connections and good communication surfaced as an assistive factor:

*It started with me for sure in school, a people's person, loving people, being able to connect with all types at all levels, able to work with them and bring results and enjoy the work I'm doing. It was really significant in my last role both because there was some really tough teamwork, and also because there were a large number of people needing to be managed. (Lee, 4th year-group).*

Several graduates indicated that they felt mature relative to the challenges they faced during military service. Michael, of the 5th year-group, felt no noticeable difficulty in his service:

*As far as coping, I think I did relatively well, particularly since I'd completed the volunteer year, and I think it was all much easier for me than for many others in my unit. I was more mature.*

In the same context, Noam, of the 4th year-group, indicated that he possessed "the tools to play the game" and also ties it to his schooling:

*I had a really good time of it and even surprised myself, I constantly felt capability, I didn't feel at all lost relative to the army, which a lot of people do, feeling helpless. I felt I could navigate any track. I feel that I managed really well with the military framework, that I overcame a lot of things by myself which gave me some difficulty, and yes, the school gave me the tools to play the game.*

As noted above, two women of the total 46 graduates interviewed did not complete military service. Both decided, after a brief army stint, to leave. Neither saw ceasing their service as an inability to cope but a brave and correct way of coping with their situations at the time. Inbar, from the 3rd year-group, tells the following narrative:

*I recruited to a general department in the army, I was very optimistic, full of enthusiasm, and wanted to stay in the course. Afterwards began regular duty, and then I started to really come apart, to crash, I lost weight, I was so depressed, it was dreadful. Later I left on a mental health clause. Until I left I experienced failure, not being able to hold out. I wanted to prove that I could make it to the end. Part of me wanted to prove that, and part, just wanted out. It was an act that I needed to do, to go. I experienced it in the end as a huge success, I saved myself. I needed to save myself. I see it as doing something very positive.*

In summary, it is possible to see that the overwhelming majority of Waldorf schooled graduates coped successfully with the challenges of military duty. They noted several factors that promoted their coping: the ability to set aside the immediate situation in order to observe it as though from the outside; the ability to adapt; diligence and ability to work hard; the ability to create personal connection in a wide range of situations and diverse populations; maturity and readiness. A large number of graduates linked these traits to the education they received at school.

## Summary and conclusions

The current qualitative study related to the question of how graduates from Waldorf schools coped with the challenges they faced when entering the Israeli reality on completing their education. In this article, I limited myself to a description of the findings relating to solely to military service. These findings show that



the overwhelming majority of Waldorf School graduates coped successfully and with a sense of capability with the challenges faced during their military service.

When Steiner established the first Waldorf school, he anticipated preparing his graduates for coping with the challenges of reality following schooling and noted the following traits as resulting from Waldorf education: strength and resilience, multidimensional health, responsibility and maturity, vitality and interest, independent personality with self-criticism, flexible thinking and strong willpower (Steiner, 1980, 1981, 1983). The traits of strength and resilience, responsibility and maturity, independent personality and willpower manifested in the graduates' comments concerning themselves and were further offered as explanation of their coping with the challenges of military service.

Relating to one of the most common criticisms of Waldorf schooling which claims that this educational method creates an educational 'bubble', distances its graduates from the world, and does not ready them for reality (Grandt, 2009; Zander, 2007), it is possible in summary to state that Waldorf education creates, in a conscious and calculated way and as part of the developmental perception on which it is based, an educational, personal and learning bubble. Pupils in kindergarten and primary grades learn in an artistic and experiential manner, are not exposed to tests of any kind, do not come in contact during school hours with various media, and do not necessarily uphold the standards set by the Ministry of Education. This educational bubble is part of the developmental path which by definition opens the real world up to the pupils, relative to the developmental stages indicated by Steiner (1988). The purpose of this bubble is to prepare the pupils better and more thoroughly for coping with reality's challenges, based on the premise that faster is not necessarily better, and that the necessary skills providing adults with coping abilities are learned gradually over a lengthy, multidisciplinary set of phases. In light of the current study's findings, it would appear there are significance and a realistic foundation to this educational path. At the interdisciplinary level, and in light of the graduates' own testimony concerning themselves together with data on them, it seems that they are resilient and capable of coping.

What factors affect these experiences of capability and readiness? What, in this educational method, is the main factor supporting the experience of successful coping among graduates? I find two main factors, surfacing from the graduates' statements, in the context of the issue of coping. The first is the good, supportive connection with teachers throughout schooling. Findings of multiple studies indicate that teachers hold the most significant role in the child's healthy mental development and ability to cope with crises, and that teachers hold determining influence over various parameters that define the school's quality (Gilligan, 1998, 2000). This factor is also pointed to by the graduates. All the graduates I interviewed for the current study viewed their primary and secondary school teachers in a positive light (id.). Many also felt that their teachers exerted positive, instructive influence during adolescence.

A further explanation relating to the graduates' ability to cope is linked to the fact that almost all noted the positive learning experience, the sense of belonging to the school, the positive educational climate and sense of success in various areas of learning. Positive learning experiences which may assist in acquiring mental wellbeing are the reinforcing and protective factors relative to dangerous behaviors, and build resilience when facing life challenges (id.).

The research findings indicate the individualistic aspect of independent, aware personalities among the graduates. This trait surfaced in almost all areas of the study. One main dilemma typical of the graduates throughout the research was the struggle between internal values and identity and the demands of reality. This dilemma points, in my view, to the graduates' independence, their strong personalities and the moral and ethical values on which they were raised.

Another, somewhat surprising, conclusion is that no noticeable differences were found for men or women. I expected the gender division to be more significant for different parts of the study but this did not occur. Differences did exist, but they were marginal at best; nor were there significant differences among the various year-groups relative to the main research issues. Any differences were generally linked to the interviewees' ages and life circumstances (for example, graduates of the earlier year-groups were naturally more involved in pursuit of academic studies).

This study on graduates of Waldorf Schools conducted according to qualitative methodology invites follow-up research on several spheres. Firstly, value could be had from conducting research in several years' time, once a considerable number of graduates have entered the professional workforce, to explore graduates' coping skills relative to employment. It may also be interesting and important to research more personal issues such as couplehood or family life relative to Waldorf graduates.

A quantitative study of Waldorf graduates would be important for examining comparative aspects such as the distribution of subjects chosen for academic studies, areas of employment, areas of interest and hobbies, number of children per family, and more. Studies conducted in other countries on Waldorf School graduates (Barz & Randoll, 2007; Dahlin, 2007; Mitchell & Douglas, 2007) indicated wide range differences relative to results from European countries, and between Europe and the USA. Findings from Israel might prove unique and significant to the academic discourse and to any person or organization delving into Waldorf education in Israel.

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