

## Seven “myths” about the social participation of Waldorf graduates

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São Paulo, Brazil, Oct. 2007

### 1. Introduction

Waldorf Education continues to be relatively unknown. When first making contact with this pedagogy, people in general tend to find in it certain oddities that may provoke admiration or incredulity, as well as sometimes doubts.

Parents who decide to send their children to a Waldorf school know that they are taking a courageous step to be “different”. The decision is not easy, because Waldorf Education really presents many differences in comparison with other teaching methods. Here are some of the most obvious ones:

- No text books are used – students create their own;
- There are no tests and no exams;
- There is no failing of a grade;
- Reading and writing begin only in first grade and may take a long time to learn;
- All students remain grouped together from the first to the last (twelfth) grade (with occasional exceptions due to students entering or leaving the school);
- There is a teacher, called a “class teacher”, who takes a class in grade 1 and ideally stays with the class until grade 8, teaching all the main subjects: Mathematics, History, Geography, the native language and sciences;
- These main subjects are taught in “main lessons”, in daily classes which run over three or four weeks;
- Ideally, students learn sciences such as Physics, Biology, Chemistry and Geology using the so-called “Goethean phenomenological principle” – this means that first of all they intensely experience and describe the related phenomena, and only later come to learn and elaborate intellectual concepts about them;
- Arts have the same importance and receive the same attention as all other school subjects; this means that they are not organized as extra classes or elective subjects; they include form-drawing, sketching, painting, sculpture, pottery, weaving, music, drama and handicrafts; furthermore, in the elementary and middle schools (grades 1- 8) every subject is taught in an artistic way;
- Waldorf Education is based on the Anthroposophical concept and understanding of the human being developed by Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly with regard to concepts involving the processes of child and adolescent development. The content of each school subject and the way the subject is taught follow specific concepts about the characteristics of each age level.

In Brazil and many other countries, many doubts arise when people first hear about Waldorf Education, because these and other aspects lie far away from what they are used to finding in conventional schools. Some of these concerns have to do with the imagined difficulties graduates may meet when pursuing a higher education in good universities, their perceived tendency to stick to professions connected to the human sciences and the arts, their ability to later succeed in the job market, etc.

The authors of this study were confronted with similar questions and doubts. Their daughter Renata presently attends class 10 at the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School of São Paulo (RSWS) in Brazil (“Escola Waldorf Rudolf Steiner de São Paulo”). Some years ago, when they first learned about Waldorf Education, Juan Pablo’s reaction was a feeling that he had somehow found a place for his child where human beings could be well prepared to later act in the “real world”. Wanda, on the contrary, experienced many doubts. She thought that Waldorf Education was interesting enough, but unfortunately “far away from reality”. In 2001, when Renata was 9 years old, after trying some “conventional” schools they decided on Waldorf Education. Later on, Wanda had no more doubts about the excellence of this method.

Nevertheless, when they began to meet other parents in that Waldorf school the authors were surprised to find other parents struggling with the same old doubts that Wanda had once had, and which the majority of people outside the school usually have. So they felt the need to objectively clarify such doubts and verify whether they corresponded to some reality, or whether they were simply “myths”. (In this paper, “myths” will be referred to as the phenomenon described in the *American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd Edition* with the following words: “A fiction, or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology”).

Resorting to Wanda’s experience as a social scientist, they decided to begin with a statistical data research project. Furthermore, this was an opportunity for Wanda to examine several other aspects that had attracted her interest when she first learned about Waldorf Education. Juan Pablo decided to collaborate in the study, in order to collect “serious” arguments when talking about Waldorf.

The research started in August 2003 and was based on interviews of Waldorf graduates, who are the real actors in this process and the only people in a position to bring truth and light to all these speculations and “myths”.

The results brought answers to many questions and a lot of information on Waldorf Education itself. This paper presents some of the statistical results collected in the interviews. Of course, numbers alone can hardly express the essentials of what was learned in this study or what Waldorf Education really is, but they can surely shed some objective light on common doubts.

This research is not a pedagogical work: there are no discussions about education theories and approaches. It is a sociological work, which investigates the results of the application of Waldorf Education. This is what will be here called “social participation”.

## **2. Methodology**

The field of investigation was the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School of Sao Paulo (RSWS) for the following reasons: first, it is necessary to locate a piece of research in a specific time and place; second, the school has a large enough cohort of graduates to provide a reliable base for a statistical sample; third, this was the pioneer school in the application of Waldorf Education in Brazil; fourth, it has graduates covering a wide range of ages, providing for a wide view of the aspects the research wanted to explore.

135 graduates of the school were interviewed during the period 2003 to 2006. For this first research the authors considered just those who had finished high school at the RSWS, comprising a total of 108 who graduated between 1975 to 2002. This period was chosen because 1975 was the year of the first high school graduation, and 2002 because it was found important that some distance be left from the year of graduation for the analysis of social participation. The number of 108 students represents a statistical sample with 95% confidence, with an error margin of 10%.

During the period 1975-2002 the school graduated 1,345 students, according to its own records.

Subjects to be interviewed were chosen sometimes on the basis of recommendation by people outside the school, sometimes by other former students, or by randomly selecting participants of the school’s Alumni Association (“GEA”, for “Grupo de Ex-alunos Waldorf”) particularly during its 2003 and 2004 annual meetings.

The authors designed a questionnaire with “open questions”. This means that the interviewees could say anything they wished. There were no pre-determined answers to be chosen. We present here only quantitative results of this first research. Qualitative elements will be presented elsewhere, and will constitute an outcome of the main goal: showing the distinguishing characteristics of a Waldorf school from a qualitative point of view. 35 questions were designed with the goal of clarifying many aspects, some of them not included in this paper, such as the students’ relationship with their class teachers, their opinions about watching TV, about people with whom they work and so on.

In 82% of the cases, interviews were personally made, recorded and transcribed afterwards. During the interviews the authors wanted to apply a basic principle of Waldorf Education, i.e. having a personal contact with each subject. Only 11% of the interviews were conducted by telephone and 7% by e-mail. The authors planned an investigation about Waldorf Education, and not about the RSWS. This means that the same questions can be applied to any Waldorf school. Furthermore, this research does not compare Waldorf Education with other pedagogical systems.

The questions helped to make an assessment of what the authors call “seven myths about Waldorf Education”, detailing and expanding the doubts referred to in section 1. These myths are as follows:

1. Waldorf graduates are not able to pass the admission examinations to Brazilian colleges and universities (called “*Exames vestibulares*” in Brazil<sup>1</sup>);
2. They are not admitted to first-rank colleges and universities;
3. Once accepted by a good college or university, they are not able to finish their course;
4. Most Waldorf graduates become artists;
5. Waldorf Education does not prepare its students for the job market;
6. It does not prepare its students to be professionally competitive;
7. Waldorf is a religious education.

These myths summarize just some of several common prejudices about Waldorf Education in Brazil<sup>2</sup>; they constitute what seemed to the authors to be the most frequently expressed and typical doubts about the education.

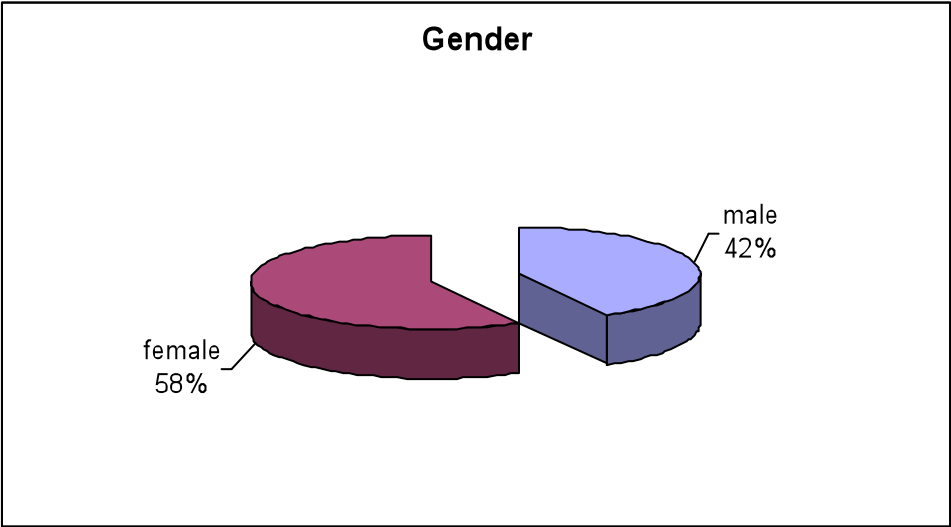
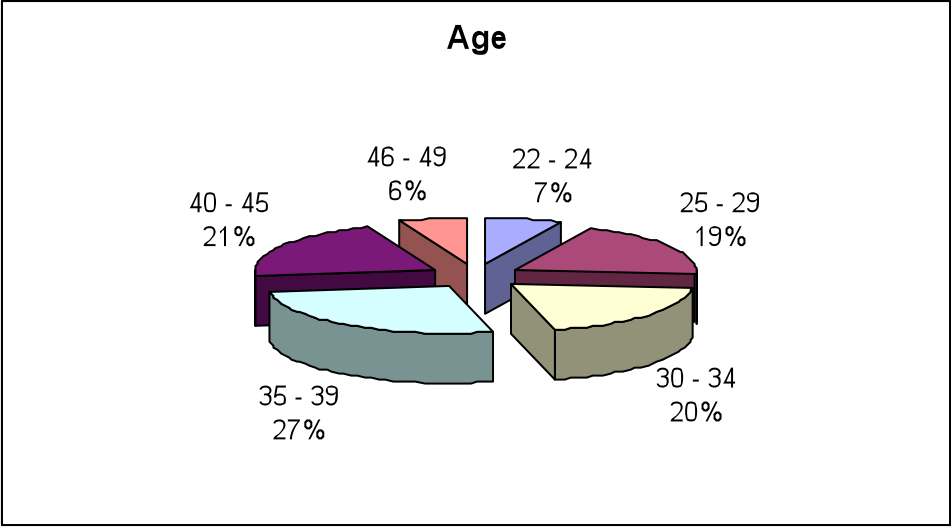
### **3. Outline of the sample**

At first some quantitative aspects about the graduates who were interviewed are shown. The graphs below show the distributions according to age and sex.

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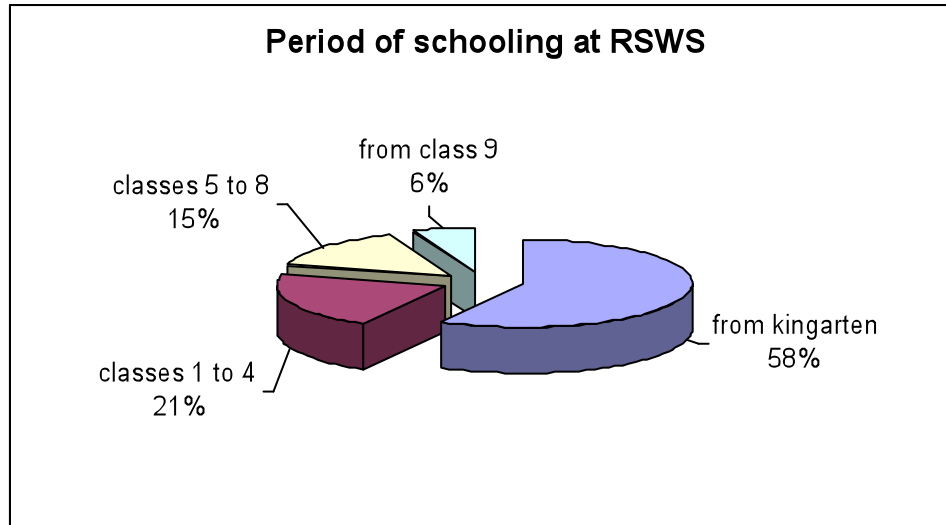
<sup>1</sup> These examinations, given by each college, university or group thereof, are considered of extreme importance in Brazil because passing the examination and getting a sufficiently good mark in order to be offered one of the limited number of available places is the only way a student can be admitted to a college or university.

<sup>2</sup> The site of the Association of Waldorf Schools in North America shows some “frequently asked questions” (FAQ’s, see [www.awsna.org/awsna-faq.html](http://www.awsna.org/awsna-faq.html)); some of our “myths” are there. There is a video made by Freunde der Waldorfschulen (“Friends of Waldorf Education”) for the 44th International UNESCO Conference on Education, which took place in Geneva, where some of the same doubts are expressed by parents.



It is interesting to note that our sample had about the same distribution of gender as the total number of graduates of the RSWS.

The next graph shows the classes in which the interviewed people had begun their schooling at that school.



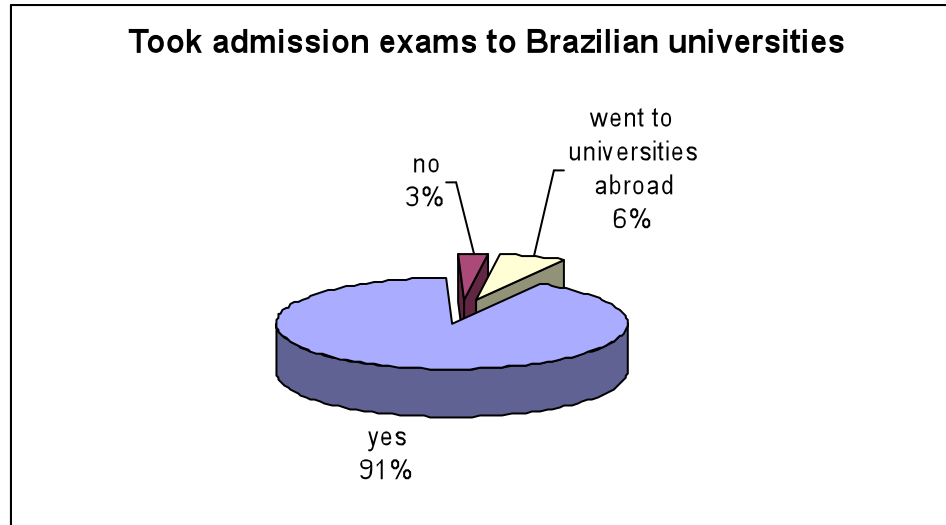
This graph shows that 58% did their whole schooling at the school, 36% came into the school in elementary or middle school, and 6% came into high school; all of the latter came from “conventional” schools. It is interesting to call attention to the fact that for many years RSWS was the only Waldorf School in the city of São Paulo (in fact, in Brazil) with a high school.

It is also interesting to note that graduates who entered the school in the upper classes said that their own opinion was fundamental to this decision. They said they looked for a “different” education.

#### **4. Assessment of the seven myths**

##### **4.1 Myth number one: Waldorf graduates are not able to pass admission examinations to Brazilian colleges and universities**

Not all graduates tried to follow a university course. The next graph shows the percentage of those who did.



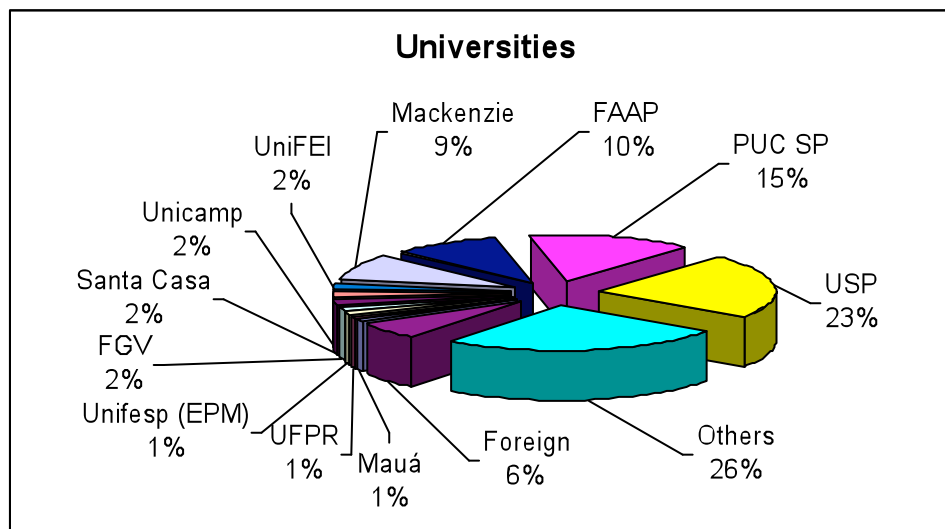
100% of the students who took admission examinations to colleges and universities passed them. This shows something very significant in terms of academic achievement. There are many private high schools that specialize in preparing their students to take admission exams to universities; this is done, for example, by separating classes into various vocational streams (because of differences in subjects and difficulties tested in those exams), such as the physical sciences, maths/computer science and engineering, biological and medical sciences, law, etc. and directing teaching to the programmes of admission exams. No Waldorf School in Brazil has a curriculum with this goal: all of them provide for a general education. Nevertheless, the results of graduates in the admission exams to colleges and universities were absolutely exceptional. One has also to understand that certainly many Waldorf graduates take 1-semester or 1-year preparatory courses for those exams after graduating from school, but the end-effect shows that Waldorf Education does not hinder going to a university, on the contrary, as the only 3% that did not pursue a university degree show.

This study showed another, very significant piece of information: 91% of those interviewed who did take admission exams were admitted into a university on their first attempt, 8% on the second attempt and only 1% after the third attempt. It should also be noted that very rarely does a student in class 12 take a preparatory course in parallel to attending school, because the curriculum of class 12 is very demanding. As a matter of fact, 21% of the interviewed graduates passed admission examinations to universities without going to preparatory courses, which is also a very high percentage in comparison to good high schools.

#### **4.2 Myth number two: graduates are not admitted to first-rank colleges and universities**

This myth is a consequence of the previous one. In the authors' experience, after telling someone that graduates did very well in admission exams, they would immediately be confronted with the statement that the students were probably not able to enter a good

university. Therefore, they decided to investigate the institutions that were attended. The next graph shows in detail universities and colleges that are ranked as good ones by the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

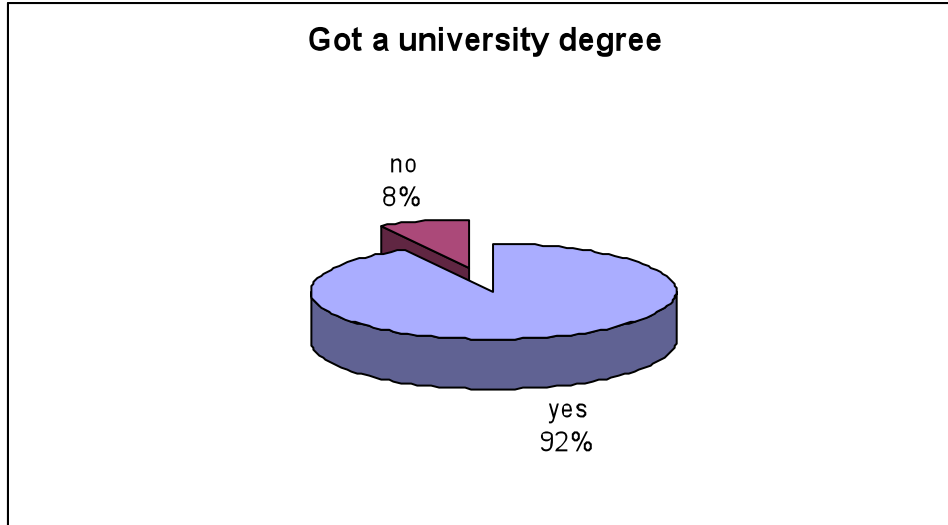


In the graph above, USP stands for “University of São Paulo”, by far the most scientifically productive in the country, ranked among the best 150 in the world; PUC/SP stands for the Catholic University of São Paulo; E.P.M. (“Escola Paulista de Medicina”) and Santa Casa rank among the main faculties of medicine in the country, etc. “Others” stands for universities and colleges not so well ranked. So, it is possible to see that 68% of all graduates went to very good institutions.

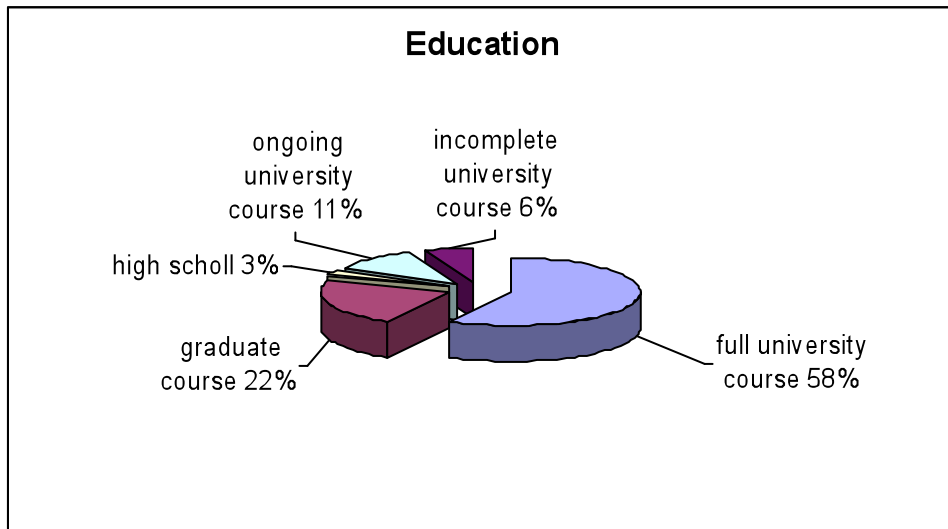
#### 4.3 Myth number three: graduates are not able to finish their university courses

Another common statement is “if Waldorf graduates pass the admission exams to universities they are not able to finish them successfully”. The next graph shows the percentage of Waldorf students who finished their higher education, getting a college or university degree.





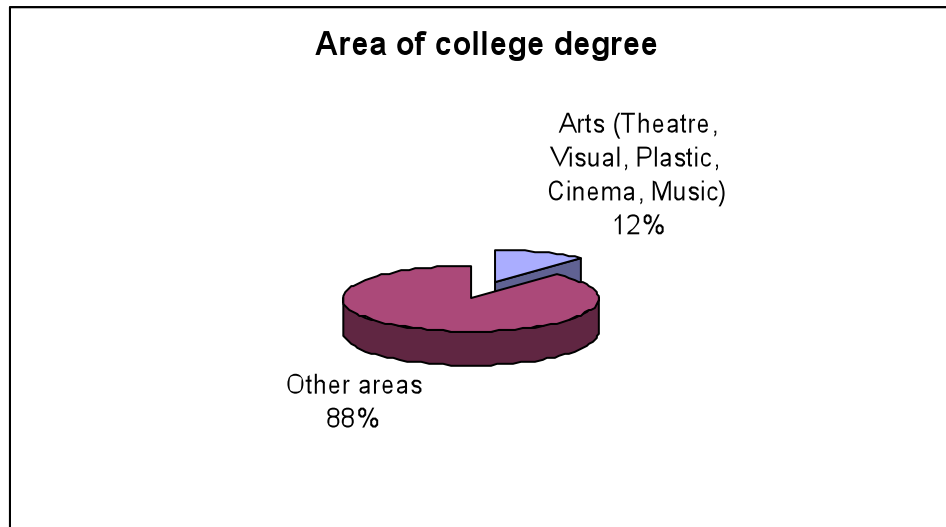
The next graph completes the preceding one, showing with more detail the educational grade attained by Waldorf graduates:



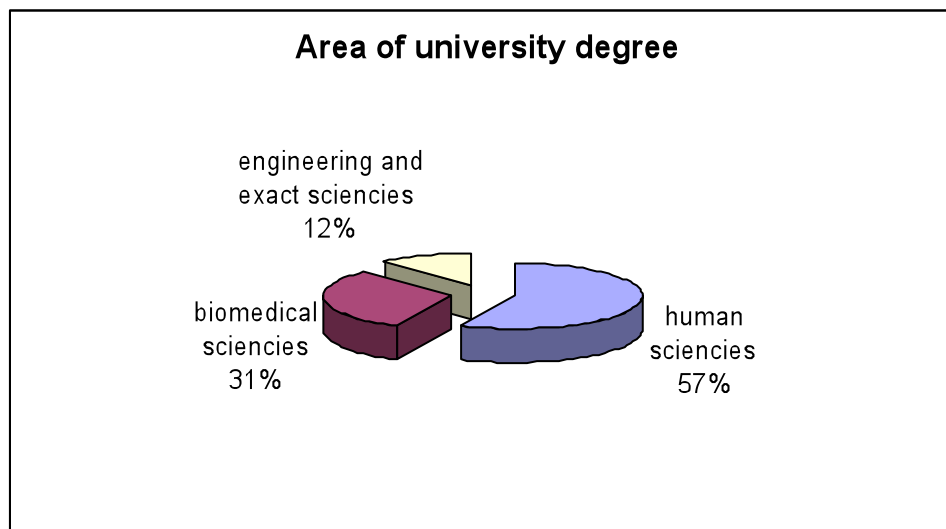
This graph shows that 80% of Waldorf graduates successfully finished university; one should also take into consideration the 11% who were still attending university at the time of the assessment.

#### 4.4 Myth number four: Most Waldorf graduates become artists

As Waldorf Education gives the same importance to artistic subjects as it gives to traditional academic subjects, besides using artistic means for teaching every subject in elementary and middle school, people think that the education just produces artists. The first graph shows the choice of Waldorf graduates in various college areas, separating the artistic ones (theatre, the plastic arts, visual arts, cinema and music).



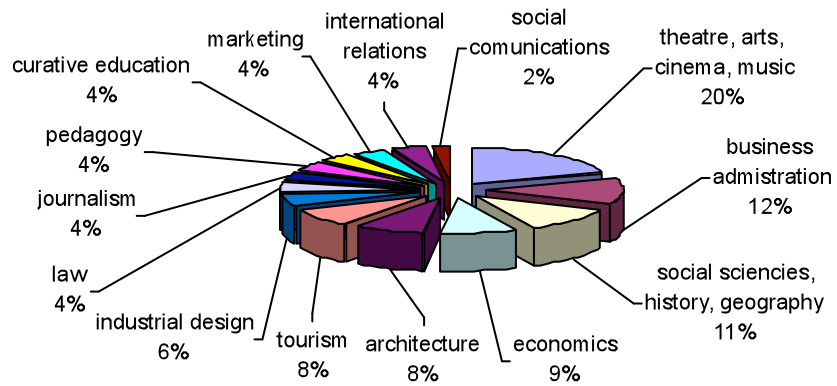
The next graph shows the areas of college degrees subdivided among biomedical, engineering/exact and human sciences areas (these are areas used in Brazil for large admission exams to universities, such as Fuvest (USP along with some other independent faculties) and Vunesp, the two admission exams in Brazil with the largest number of candidates).



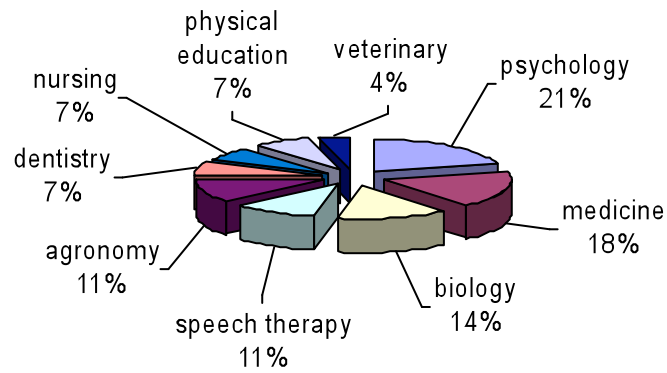
It is interesting to compare this distribution of candidates with the overall distribution of candidates who took the two admission examinations cited above: 50% for human sciences, 30% biomedical and 20% engineering/exact sciences. This contradicts the common myth that Waldorf graduates tend towards the human sciences.

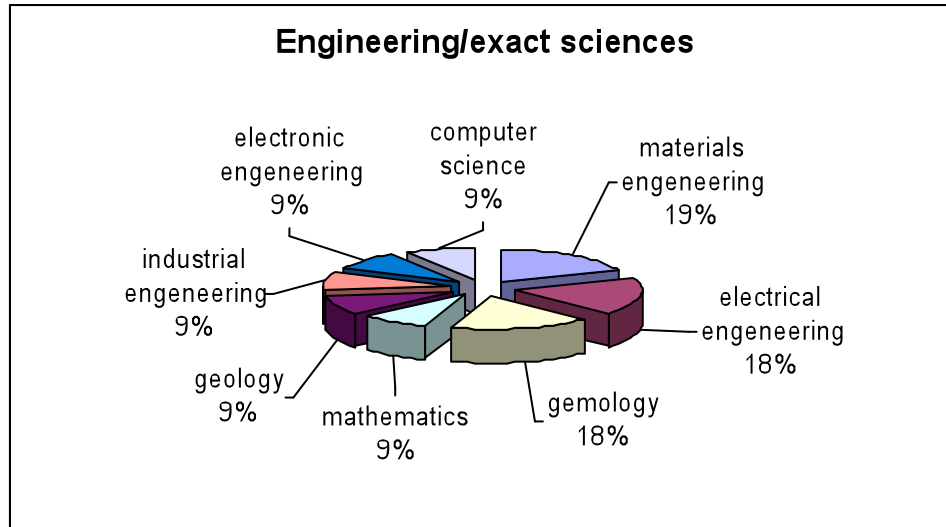
The following graphs show details of these three areas in corresponding sub-areas.

### Human sciences



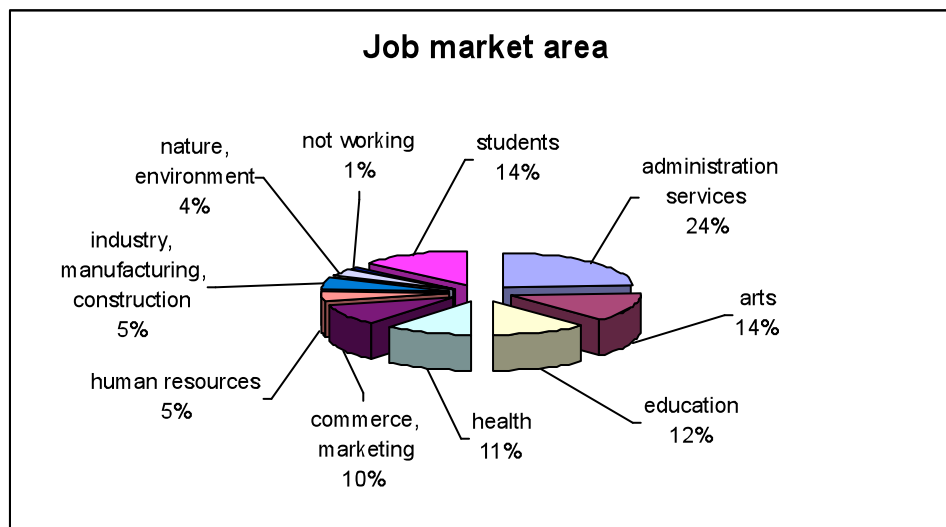
### Biomedical sciences





#### 4.5 Myth number five: Waldorf Education does not prepare its students for the job market

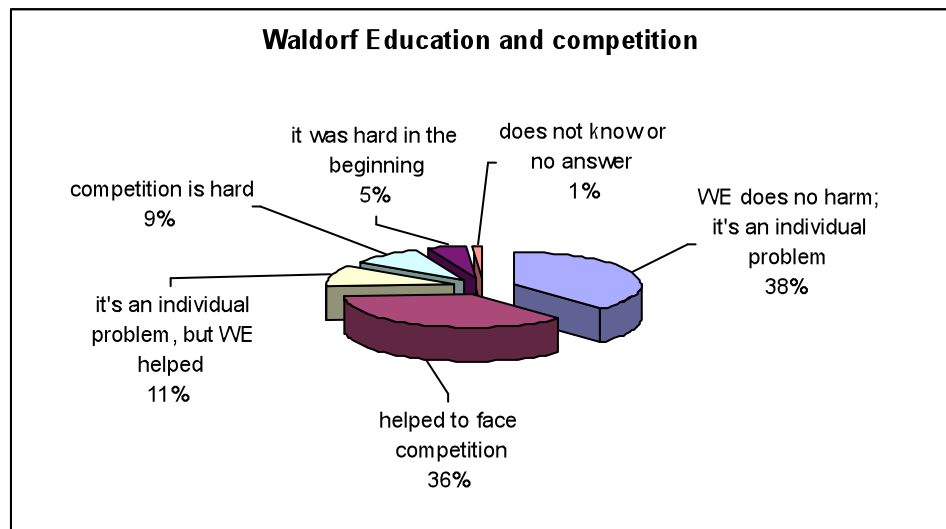
There is a belief that Waldorf Education educates people to work just in artistic areas. The next graph shows data about the jobs currently being held by the interviewed graduates.



#### Myth number six: Waldorf Education does not prepare its pupils for a professional competitive world

As Waldorf Education gives a strong emphasis to social relations among students as well as being a humanistic form of education, there is a myth that its graduates leave school unprepared to or have difficulties in dealing with competition in their jobs. To gain an

insight into this question, graduates were asked if this had happened for them in their professional activities. The answers are plotted in the next graph.

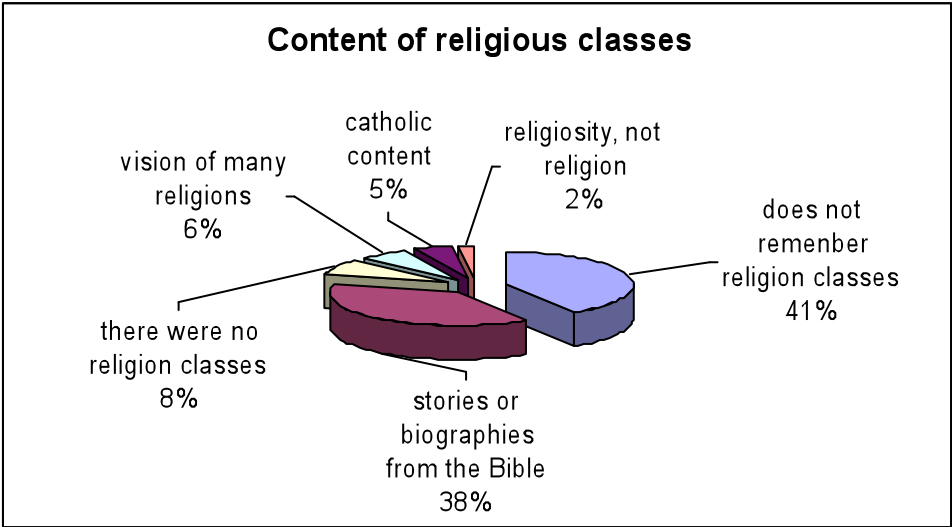


The subtitles in this graph require some further explanation. 38% thought competitiveness in the job market and a humanistic background were completely different things: for them, to be prepared or not for competition is essentially a personal question, so Waldorf Education did no harm; 36% thought Waldorf Education helped because it prepared them to think and act in flexible ways and that these attributes were positively recognized when they were seeking a job; 11% said it is a personal question, but Waldorf Education gave them elements that helped in some competitive situations, or gave them some ethical support; 9% thought they were harmed by Waldorf Education because they did not feel prepared for any kind of competitiveness; 5% believed Waldorf Education provided for a hard beginning as far as competition was concerned, but after some time they found their way, and 1% did not know how to answer this question.

#### 4.7 Myth number seven: it is a religious education

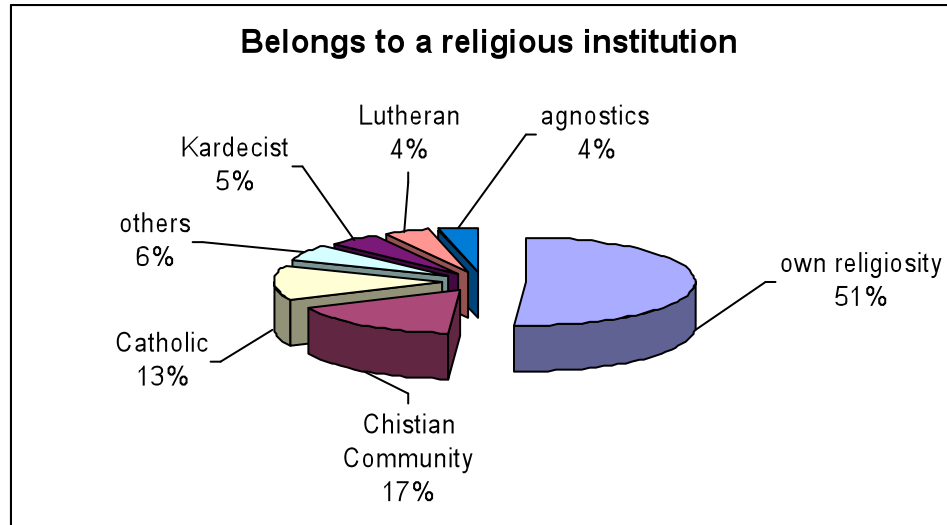
Waldorf Education is strongly based upon the spiritual world view introduced by Rudolf Steiner, which he called Anthroposophy. Some people regard it erroneously as a religion and claim that it contains a religious doctrine. Anthroposophy is explicitly not part of the school curriculum, and is in general never mentioned by teachers. Every religious school follows a specific doctrine or confession and has religious classes. Waldorf Education recommends that students, mainly in their younger years, should have a religious education provided by their parents, church, synagogue, etc. In former years, the RSWS had religious representatives of various confessions coming to give religion classes, but this ended due to the lack of interest on the part of the religious representatives. Applying Steiner's recommendation that small children should receive a religious education, some Waldorf Schools offer so-called "free religion classes", in general given by the teachers themselves. On the other hand, bible stories and also stories from many old religious traditions (like

Hindu, Greek and Nordic Myths, etc.) are part of the curriculum in terms of the history of mankind. The myth of Waldorf Education being religious was investigated by asking what the subject of the graduates' religion classes was.



Some subtitles need further explanation. 38% remembered that classes covered stories or biographies from the Bible but without any religious doctrine; 8% said they had no religious classes because they entered the school during high school and there are no religion classes for that level; 6% reported that they received a view of several religions; 5% answered their religion classes had Catholic content because their parents were Catholic; 2% said religion classes did not bring any religious doctrine, and that Waldorf Education is not a religious institution but it has a religiosity that can be noticed in several aspects, for example, in the verse that the students say at the beginning of every class day.

The next graph shows the distribution of graduates according to religious confessions.



For the Christian Community, see note<sup>3</sup>. for Kardecism see note<sup>4</sup>; “others” include Baptists, Jewish, Presbyterian, Buddhists, Cabalists, or adepts of Candomblé<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4.8 Summary

**Myth number one: Waldorf graduates are not able to pass admission examinations to Brazilian universities**

100% of the graduates who took admission exams were approved for admission

**Myth number two: Graduates are not admitted to first-rank colleges or universities**

68% got into the best universities

**Myth number three: Graduates are not able to finish their university courses**

92% graduated from their university courses

**Myth number four: Most Waldorf graduates become artists**

Only 12% had chosen artistic careers

**Myth number five: Waldorf Education does not prepare for the job market**

99% are participating in the job market

**Myth number six: Waldorf Education does not prepare for a professional competitive world**

<sup>3</sup>The Christian Community is a “movement of religious renewal”. Its founders had seen in Rudolf Steiner’s world view “the decisive spiritual help for the age of natural science and, with this, a means of preserving Christianity in the Twentieth Century” (Hemleben, 1989: 142). .

<sup>4</sup> Kardecists are those adept of Alan Kardec’s world view, which is based upon mediumship and is quite popular in Brazil

<sup>5</sup> Candomblé is an African religion which is a syncretism of Christianity with a kind of voodoo religion

84% did not experience any damage to their capacity to compete in the job market.

**Myth number seven: It is a religious education**

100% did not notice any kind of religious indoctrination

## **5. Conclusions**

This study shows that the seven myths do not correspond to reality. The authors had the opportunity of presenting these results in lectures that they gave to parents and teachers and the general public in 12 Waldorf schools around Brazil. It was very gratifying to meet many people who were anxiously awaiting confirmation of their positive feelings with regard to Waldorf Education. The audiences found these results important because they shed light on some of their own questions regarding Waldorf schools.

Waldorf Education has its own specificity. One of its distinctive features is the essential participation of parents, teachers and students. This participation is very important because Waldorf Education does not follow the usual educational standards, so students and parents develop a feeling of being “different”. Many people don’t like to be called “different”, so it is important that they become aware of the good results provided by this education.

The number of differences between Waldorf Education and all other educational methods is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the interviewed graduates found that the differences they saw during their education mainly fell into two categories: the respect for the individual rhythm and maturity of each student, and by assigning to the arts the importance they really have in education, and in developing personal abilities and sensitivity.

Herewith we reproduce some quotes from the interviewed graduates about these two aspects.

***On the respect for the individual rhythm and maturity of each student:***

- “Waldorf’s aim is considering the necessities of each human being according to his age.”
- “There I could be myself. It is a question of trust.”
- “Human development for the whole of life, not just preparing for college.”
- “Respect for each student’s learning process and individual assessment of each one’s progress.”
- “The range of different kinds of experiences led to a deeper and wider development of the self.”
- “Respect for individuality.”
- “Creative autonomy.”

***On the importance of the arts in the whole educational process:***

- “It gives a global view of life.”
- “It gives flexibility to act in the world.”
- “It teaches many capacities.”



- “It gives self-confidence, and leads to self-knowledge and respect for people.”
- “It makes the world bigger, shows other universes and expands your action.”
- “Art is a serious thing and we need to regard it as such.”

The authors did not have the intention of stating that Waldorf Education is the salvation for the world; they simply wanted to bring, by means of this paper, some objective elements to help people learn about the results of some specific non-standard practices and get to know other points of view regarding education. Moreover, they know that school is an essential period of the human life, but that it certainly is not the only aspect in the formation of an individuality. There are others like family, friends, culture, religion, etc.

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**About Waldorf Education in Brazil**

The first Waldorf School in Brazil was the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School of São Paulo, founded in 1956 and was originally called Escola Higienópolis (this was the name of the neighborhood where the school was founded). In Brazil there are now about 70 schools that follow the principles of Waldorf Education, including elementary/middle schools, with and without high schools and independent kindergartens (see the Waldorf Education directory for Latin America, <http://www.sab.org.br/ped-wal/lawaldir.htm> and the Waldorf Kindergarten directory for Brazil <http://www.sab.org.br/ped-wal/jardins.htm>). There are a number of Waldorf teacher training courses (the oldest and main one is situated at the RSWS), for those who want to become Waldorf teachers – the demand for Waldorf teachers is steadily growing every year.

**About the authors**

Wanda Ribeiro ([wandar@uol.com.br](mailto:wandar@uol.com.br)), has a B.Sc. degree in Social Sciences from the University of São Paulo (USP) which she got in 2001, and a degree in Social Education in 2003 also from USP. She has been a “Waldorf mother” since 2001 and took the Waldorf Teacher’s Training at the Rudolf Steiner School of São Paulo

Juan Pablo de Jesus Pereira ([jpjeng@uol.com.br](mailto:jpjeng@uol.com.br)) has a B.Sc. degree in civil engineering from the University of São Paulo (USP), in 1978. He has also been a “Waldorf father” since 2001 and took the Waldorf Teacher’s Training.