

# A small but very bright light: Impressions from my trip to Pakistan

Founding new Waldorf schools is anything but alien to him: from the beginning of his class teacher career, Andreas Pelzer has been involved in the establishment of various schools. In 1989, about a year after its foundation, he came to the Freie Waldorfschule in Kaltenkirchen, Germany, where he completed a course for class teachers. In 1998, he participated in the foundation of the Waldorf School Aalen, Germany. After his first eight-year cycle as class teacher in Aalen he went abroad and in 2006 supported the newly founded Green Earth School in Pakistan with a four-week training course. Since then he has been providing guidance to this school on a regular basis.

How does one get to Pakistan to establish and remain involved with a school there? In 2006, in between two class teacher cycles, my former school had granted me a sabbatical month, which I wanted to make use of by supporting a school abroad. So I called the *Friends of Waldorf Education*, described my profile and the Friends promised to get back to me as soon as a school was in need of support. At about the same time, that is to say two days later, they received a request from Pakistan for initiative support and forwarded the request to me. The contact was quickly established and soon we were in contract. For the first time in April 2006, I gave a four-week training course for the teachers of the newly founded school.

Although the school was founded in February 2006, its history began a little earlier: When the World Trade Center collapsed in New York in September 2001, the curative education institution Roshni - translated: Light - began its work in Lahore/Pakistan, inaugurated by the founding couple Shahida Perveen-Hannesen (Pakistan) and Hellmut Hannesen (Germany). After some time the need for a Waldorf School became more and more apparent and thus in February 2006 - out of the curative institution Roshni - was founded the first and so far only school in Pakistan that works according to the methods and approaches of Waldorf Education:

The Green Earth School. Unfortunately, the impulse could not spread any further at that time, even though I believe the Pakistani school system urgently needs reformation. I attended schools that were anything but suitable for children. Whether a child gets support or not depends mostly on the financial situation of the parents. Those who have no money receive a poor school education, which leads to an even greater increase in the already existing social differences; and there is hardly any chance of reducing them.

The name "Green Earth" stems from a local plastics recycling company whose owner provides both the buildings and the land to enable children in the area to attend school. The owner of this company takes one of the five pillars of Islam very seriously: to share part of his possessions with poorer people. This was the only way the school could come into being.

The Green Earth School leads up to eighth grade and is attended by 225 children. Currently, the school is not considering further expansion beyond eighth grade, as there is a lack of teachers for the upper grades and of resources for setting up special rooms for upper-grade subjects, such as physics and chemistry. After eighth grade, most students transition easily to another school or learn a profession. The teaching staff at Green Earth



Top left: Monthly celebration at the Green Earth School. Top right: Seminar for the teachers. Bottom left: Press conference on the art exhibition of the curative education institution Roshni in the local museum. Bottom right: Excursion to the salt mine near Lahore.

School consists exclusively of women; and a steady group of teachers has been with the school for many years. There is also a regular influx of young female teachers joining the school, so the school has a good and balanced age mix – but without male colleagues. During all of my five stays, the teachers showed a very high level of commitment and great interest. They gratefully accepted the methods of Waldorf education and the seminars on child development and tried to implement their findings immediately during my classroom visits.

The student community is rural, as the school is located on the outskirts of Lahore. At first the students wore their private clothes, but school uniforms traditionally play a very important role. You only “really” go to school if you wear a school uniform, and the uniform is so important that everyone pays special attention to it and treats it very carefully. Another point in favor of the uniform was that it made the underprivileged circumstances of the school children less visible.

All children are very respectful towards the teachers, because in the Pakistani tradition the younger children respect and appreciate the older people. The school events are a special joy and a feast for the eyes: everyone puts on their best dresses in a great variety of colors. The shirts and blouses are accurately ironed and what is presented

on stage is rich in enthusiasm and joie de vivre. I have always enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Pakistani people.

I have never once experienced the image of Pakistan conveyed in the media – men screaming wildly against America and burning flags.

With each stay I delved a little deeper into the world of Islam and got to know a very spiritual side: the so-called Sufism. In a conversation with a Sufi, the following image of the rose got stuck in my mind: The thorns stand for the often rocky road of man, the stem is the direct way to the blossom, which is the symbol of truth and the scent of roses stands for the gained knowledge. The often-quoted “holy war” of Islam makes no sense to anyone who thinks and lives this way.

It is a great honor for me to be part of the special pioneering work that is being done at the Roshni curative institution and at the Green Earth Waldorf School. Every singly day, both institutions shine a small but very bright light.

*Andreas Pelzer*