



Waldorf Education ... An Introduction

By Henry Barnes

When children relate what they learn to their own experience, they are interested and alive, and what they learn becomes their own. Waldorf schools are designed to foster this kind of learning.

Waldorf education has its roots in the spiritual-scientific research of the Austrian scientist and thinker Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). According to Steiner's philosophy, the human being is a threefold being of spirit, soul and body whose capacities unfold in three developmental stages on the path to adulthood: early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence.

In April of 1919, Rudolf Steiner visited the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. The German nation, defeated in war, was teetering on the brink of economic, social and political chaos. Steiner spoke to the workers about the need for social renewal, for a new way of organizing society and its political and cultural life.

Emil Molt, the owner of the factory, asked Steiner if he would undertake to establish and lead a school for the children of the company's employees. Steiner agreed but set four conditions, each of which went against the common practice of the day: 1) that the school be open to all children; 2) that it be co-educational; 3) that it be a unified twelve-year school; 4) that the teachers, those individuals actually in contact with the children, have primary control of the school, with minimum interference from the state or from economic sources. Steiner's conditions were radical at the time, but Molt gladly agreed to them, and on September 7, 1919, the independent Waldorf School (Die Freie Waldorfschule) opened its doors.

Today there are more than 1000 Waldorf schools in over 50 countries. In North America there are over 150 schools affiliated through the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America and the Waldorf Early Childhood Association, and several public schools using Waldorf methods to enrich their teaching. There are also over 50 full-time Waldorf teacher training institutes around the world, of these 14 are in North America. No two schools are the same; each is administratively independent. Nevertheless, a visitor would recognize many characteristics common to them all.



EARLY CHILDHOOD

Infants and young children are entirely given over to their physical surroundings; they absorb the world primarily through their senses and respond in the most active mode of knowing: imitation. Imitation is the power to identify oneself with one's immediate environment through one's active will. Everything—anger, love, joy, hate, intelligence, stupidity—speaks to the infant through the tone of voice, physical touch, bodily gesture, light, darkness, color, harmony and disharmony. These influences are absorbed by the still malleable physical organism and affect the body for a lifetime.

Those concerned with the young child—parents, caregivers, nursery and kindergarten teachers—have a responsibility to create an environment that is worthy of the child's unquestioning imitation. The environment should offer the child plenty of opportunity for meaningful imitation and for creative play. This supports the child in the central activity of these early years: the development of the physical organism. Drawing the child's energies away from this fundamental task to meet premature intellectual demands robs the child of the health and vitality he or she will need in later life. In the end, it weakens the very powers of judgment and practical intelligence the teacher wants to encourage.

In the nursery-kindergarten children play at cooking; they dress up and become mothers and fathers, kings and queens; they sing, paint and color. Through songs and poems they learn to enjoy language; they learn to play together; hear stories, see puppet shows, bake bread, make soup, model beeswax and build houses out of boxes, sheets and boards. To become fully engaged in such work is the child's best preparation for life. It builds powers of concentration, interest and a lifelong love of learning.

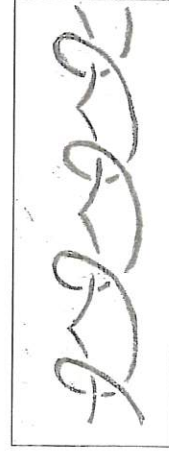


MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

When children are ready to leave kindergarten and enter first grade, they are eager to explore the whole world of experience for the second time. Before, they identified with it and imitated it; now, at a more conscious level, they are ready to know it again, by means of the imagination—that extraordinary power of human cognition that allows us to “see” a picture, “hear” a story, and “divine” meanings within appearances.

During the elementary school years, the educator’s task is to transform all that the child needs to know about the world into the language of the imagination, a language that is as accurate and as responsible to reality as intellectual analysis is in the adult. The wealth of an earlier, less intellectual age—folk tales, legends and mythologies, which speak truth in parables and pictures—becomes the teacher’s inexhaustible treasure house. When seen through the lens of the imagination, nature, the world of numbers, mathematics, geometrical form, and the practical work of the world are food and drink to the soul of the child. The four arithmetical operations can, for instance, be introduced as characters in a drama to be acted out with temperamental gusto by first graders. Whatever speaks to the imagination and is truly felt stirs and activates the feelings and is remembered and learned. The elementary years are the time for educating the “feeling intelligence.”

It is only after the physiological changes at puberty, which mark the virtual completion of the second great developmental phase, that imaginative learning undergoes a metamorphosis to emerge as the rational, abstract power of the intellect.



ADOLESCENCE

Throughout the glorious turbulence of adolescence, the personality celebrates its independence and seeks to explore the world once again in a new way. Within, the young person, the human being to whom the years of education have been directed, is quietly maturing. Eventually, the individual will emerge.

In Steiner’s view, this essential being is the product of neither inheritance nor environment; it is a manifestation of the spirit. The ground on which it walks and into which it sinks its roots is the intelligence that has ripened out of the matrix of will and feeling into clear, experienced thought. In traditional wisdom, it is this being who “comes of age” around age 21 and is then ready to take up the real task of education—self-education—which distinguishes the adult from the adolescent.



IN THE CLASSROOM

How is the developmental theory of childhood reflected in Waldorf classrooms? The school day begins with a long, uninterrupted lesson. One subject is the focus; the class deals with it in-depth each morning for several weeks at a time. This long main lesson—which may well run for two hours—allows the teacher to develop the subject at hand through a wide variety of activities. In the younger grades lively rhythmic activities get the circulation going and bring children together as a group; they recite poems connected with the main lesson, practice tongue twisters to limber up speech and work with concentration exercises using body movements.



After the day's lesson, which includes a review of earlier learning, students record what they learned in their notebooks. Following recess, teachers present shorter, "run-through" lessons with a strongly recitational character. Foreign languages are customarily taught from first grade on, and these lend themselves well to these later morning periods. Afternoons are devoted to lessons in which the whole child is active: eurythmy (artistically guided movement to music and speech), handwork, art and gym, for example. Thus the day has a rhythm that helps overcome fatigue and enhances balanced learning.

Class teachers continue with a class from one year to the next, ideally, right through elementary school. With rare exceptions these teachers lead the main lesson at the beginning of each day. Other teachers handle special subjects, but the class teacher provides the continuity so often lacking in our disjointed world today. The class teacher and the children get to know each other very well, and it is this teacher who becomes the school's closest link with the parents of that class.

When problems arise, the strong child/teacher/parent bond helps all involved to work things through instead of handing the problem on to someone else.

This experience of class community is both challenging and deeply rewarding to teachers. Having to prepare new subject matter as their students get older from year to year is a guarantee against going stale. Children begin to see that a human being can strive for a unity of knowledge and experience. When children reach high school age, the pupil-teacher relationship changes: Specialist teachers replace the class teacher.

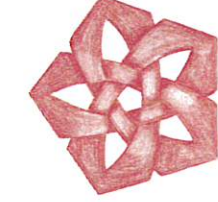
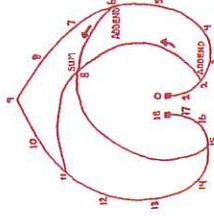


THE ASCENDING SPIRAL OF KNOWLEDGE

The curriculum at a Waldorf school can be seen as an ascending spiral: the long lessons that begin each day, the concentrated blocks of study that focus on one subject for several weeks. Physics, for example, is introduced in the sixth grade and continued each year as a main lesson block until graduation.

As the students mature, they engage themselves at new levels of experience with each subject. It is as though, each year they come to a window on the ascending spiral that looks out into the world through the lens of a particular subject. Through the main lesson spiral curriculum, teachers lay the ground for a gradual vertical integration that deepens and widens each subject experience and, at the same time, keeps it moving with the other aspects of knowledge.

All students participate in all basic subjects regardless of their special aptitudes. The purpose of studying a subject is not to make a student into a professional mathematician, historian, or biologist, but to awaken and educate capacities that every human being needs. Naturally, one student is more gifted in math and another in science or history, but the mathematician needs the humanities, and the historian needs math and science. The choice of a vocation is left to the free decision of the adult, but one's early education should give one a palette of experience from which to choose the particular colors that one's interests, capacities and life circumstances allow. In a Waldorf high school, older students pursue special projects and elective subjects and activities, but, nevertheless, the goal remains: Each subject studied should contribute to the development of a well-balanced individual.



If the ascending spiral of the curriculum offers a "vertical integration" from year to year, an equally important "horizontal integration" enables students to engage the full range of their faculties at every stage of development. The arts and practical skills play an essential part in the educational process throughout the grades. They are not considered luxuries, but fundamental to human growth and development.



THE ARTS AND PRACTICAL SKILLS

Waldorf teachers believe that the human being is not just a brain, but a being with heart and limbs—a being of will and feeling, as well as intellect. To ensure that education does not produce one-sided individuals, crippled in emotional health and volition, these less conscious aspects of our human nature must be constantly exercised, nourished and guided. Here the arts and practical skills make their essential contribution, educating not only heart and hand but, in very real ways, the brain as well.

The sixth grader who, as part of the class study of Roman history, has acted Cassius or Calpurnia, or even Caesar himself, has not only absorbed Shakespeare's immortal language but has learned courage, presence of mind and what it means to work as a member of a team for a goal greater than the sum of its parts. The ninth grader who has learned to handle red-hot iron at the forge, or the senior who caps years of modeling exercises by sculpting a full human figure have, in addition to a specific skill, gained self-discipline and the knowledge of artistic form.

Students who have worked throughout their education with color and form; with tone, drama and speech; with eurythmy as an art of bodily movement; with clay, wood, fiber, metal, charcoal and ink (and, ideally, with soil and plant in a school gardening program), have not only worked creatively to activate, clarify and strengthen their emotions, but have carried thought and feeling down into the practical exercise of the will.

When the Waldorf curriculum is carried through successfully, the whole human being—head, heart and hands—has truly been educated.



Revised for this publication, this article by Henry Barnes, former Chairman of the Board of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, originally appeared in the October 1991 issue of Educational Leadership Magazine.

Lower School Curriculum

History, language arts, science, math and history are taught in main lesson blocks of three to five weeks during the morning main lesson hours.

Special subjects also taught through the eight grades (depending on developmental levels) are *handwork: knitting, crochet, sewing, cross-stitch, basic weaving, toymaking and woodworking. Music: singing, pentatonic flute, recorder, stringed instruments, wind, brass and percussion instruments. Foreign languages (varies by school): Spanish, French, Japanese and German. Art: watercolor painting, form drawing, beeswax and clay modeling, perspective drawing. Movement: eurythmy, gymnastics, group games.*

PRIMARY GRADES 1-3



Pictorial introduction to the alphabet, writing, reading, spelling, poetry and drama. Folk and fairy tales, fables, legends, Old Testament stories. Numbers, basic mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Nature stories, house building and gardening.

MIDDLE GRADES 4-6



Writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry and drama. Norse myths, history and stories of ancient civilizations. Review of the four mathematical processes, fractions, percentage and geometry. Local and world geography, comparative zoology, botany and elementary physics.

UPPER GRADES 7-8



Creative writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry and drama. Medieval history, Renaissance, world exploration, American history and biography. Mathematics, geography, physics, basic chemistry, astronomy and physiology.

High School Curriculum

NINTH GRADE



English: literature, English skills, grammar, composition, vocabulary, speech. Foreign language: Spanish, French, German or Japanese (varies by school). Math: algebra I, probability and statistics, introduction to computer education. Science: chemistry, physics, biology and geography. US history: early American history and government. World history: revolutions and history through art. Music: performing choir, orchestra, and jazz band or beginning instruments (varies by school). Art/crafts: black and white drawing, woodworking, drama, calligraphy, clay (varies by school). Physical education and eurythmy.

TENTH GRADE



English: literature, term paper writing, grammar, composition, speech, poetry. Foreign language: Level II Spanish, French, German or Japanese (varies by school). Math: geometry and surveying. Science: chemistry, physics, biology and geography. US history: 1789 through 1914. World history: ancient history, Greece and the Far East. Music: performing choir, orchestra, and jazz band or beginning instruments (varies by school). Art/crafts: drama, woodworking, block printing, weaving, clay pottery, drawing, painting (varies by school). Physical education, eurythmy, health, keyboarding and first aid.

ELEVENTH GRADE



English: literature, composition, grammar, vocabulary. Foreign language: Level III Spanish, French or German. Math: advanced algebra, computer science (varies by school). Science: chemistry, physics, biology, biology lab. US history: World War to the present. World history: Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, music history. Music: performing choir, orchestra, and jazz band or string ensemble (varies by school). Art/crafts: bookbinding, clay, life drawing, drama, woodcarving (varies by school). Physical education and eurythmy.



TWELFTH GRADE

English: literature, review of English skills, word usage, vocabulary, composition, honors program. Foreign language: Level IV Spanish, German or French, honors program and AP (varies by school). Math: trigonometry, precalculus and/or advanced math. AP Science: chemistry, physics, biology, honors program and AP (varies by school). US history: development of 19th and 20th century economic theory from the rise of mercantilism to the present. World history: architecture, modern art, Third World nations, symptomatology. Music: performing choir, orchestra, honors program (varies by school). Art/crafts: clay sculpture, carpentry, jewelry, graphic design, metalwork, honors program (varies by school). Physical education and eurythmy.



RECOMMENDED READING

- The Recovery of Man in Childhood* · A.C. Harwood · Myrin Institute
- Education Towards Freedom* · Frans Calgren · SteinerBooks
- Rudolf Steiner Education* · L. Francis Edmunds · SteinerBooks
- Teaching as a Lively Art* · Marjorie Spock · SteinerBooks
- Steiner Education in Theory and Practice* · Gilbert Childs · SteinerBooks
- Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education* · Ronald Koetzsch, ed.
Waldorf Publications
- You Are Your Child's First Teacher* · Rahima Baldwin · Celestial Arts
- Waldorf Education—A Family Guide* · Pam Fenner, ed. · Michaelmas Press
- Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out*
Jack Petrush · Gryphon House, Inc.
- Wisdom of Waldorf: Mothering Magazine Reprint* · Rahima Baldwin-Dancy
Waldorf Publications
- Results of Waldorf Education* · Waldorf Publications
- Phases of Childhood* · Bernard Lievegoed · SteinerBooks
- Towards Wholeness: Steiner Education in America* · Mary Richards
Wesleyan University Press
- School as a Journey* · Torin Finser · SteinerBooks
- Steiner/Waldorf Education* · David Mitchell · Waldorf Publications
- The Millennial Child* · Eugene Schwartz · SteinerBooks
- Waldorf Education: Rudolf Steiner's Ideas in Practice*
C. Clouder & M. Rawson · Steiner Schools Fellowship
- Between Form and Freedom* · Betty Staley · SteinerBooks
- Lifeways: Working with Family Questions* · Davy Boors · SteinerBooks
- Natural Childhood* · John Thomson · Simon & Schuster
- Towards Creative Teaching* · Rawson & Masters · Steiner Schools Fellowship
- Quest for Meaning* · L. Francis Edmunds · Continuum Pub. Co.
- Annotated Educational Biography* · David Mitchell · Waldorf Publications
- Educating as an Art* · Bärteges & Lyons, eds. · Rudolf Steiner School, NY

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Waldorf education places the development of the individual child in the focal point, convinced that the healthy individual is a prerequisite for a healthy society.

—The International Conference on Education of the United Nations
Educational and Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Waldorf Education

the fastest-growing independent school movement in the world

Waldorf values

- Family and community life
- The healthy unfolding of childhood
- Joy in the learning process
- An education focused on wholeness in body, soul, and spirit
- Intellectual excellence, imagination, strong memory and problem-solving skills
- A viable alternative to high-stakes testing
- Age-appropriate use of media
- The training of ethical and moral judgment

For general information on Waldorf education and information regarding conferences, the directory of North American Waldorf schools and teacher education training programs, and subscriptions to Renewal magazine, contact:



Association of Waldorf Schools of North America
(AWSNA)

web site: www.awsna.org
email: awsna@awsna.org

For information on Waldorf early childhood programs, contact:



Waldorf Early Childhood Association
(WECAN)
www.waldorfearlychildhood.org



The Research Institute for Waldorf Education (RIVE), founded in 1996 in order to deepen and enhance the quality of Waldorf education, engages in sustained dialogue with the wider educational-cultural community and supports research to serve a wide range of educators in their work with children and adolescents.

The Research Institute supports projects dealing with essential contemporary educational issues such as attention-related disorders, trends in adolescent development and innovations in the high school curriculum, learning expectations and assessment, computers in education, the role of art in education, and new ways to identify and address different learning styles.



Publishing high quality resources for Waldorf teachers and parents who hold a view of the developing child: protecting early childhood, educating in love and beauty in elementary and middle school, and offering young people in high school expertise in language arts, mathematics, the sciences, technology, ecology, foreign languages, and many diverse fields; also providing classic literature and readers for children and young adults.

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