

Literacy, Not Just Reading

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To appreciate fully how and when reading is taught in Waldorf Schools, one must first understand the purpose of the entire curriculum. Rudolf Steiner hoped that Waldorf schools would serve as centers for the reawakening of spiritual life. The curriculum and pedagogy would serve as practical tools for this task by directly countering the hardening and narrowing forces of materialism in modern life. One of the focuses of this work was to develop in children faculties of imaginative thinking capable of inspiring them in their adult lives to morally purposeful deeds. Waldorf education was seen as no less than a seed for the future.

No one would think of giving a child one pair of rugged steel shoes which must last a lifetime. The difficulties of such short sightedness are immediately apparent. But as a society we think nothing of giving our children ready made concepts and, without much reflection, expect them to go forth with these bits of information and meet life. But true knowledge springs from understanding, and understanding grows out of experience. Experience, understanding and knowledge change through life; just like a child's foot, they grow. A shoe which is flexible and supports one's foot as one travels down the hard paths of life is a good one, and when it is worn out one tosses it aside, regretfully but appreciative of the service given. A shoe, on the other hand, which can never be outgrown, worn out or cast aside will only maim and cripple its wearer. Materialistic, informational education is such a shoe; instead of the foot, it cripples thinking and thinking's ability to engage one's feelings so they can inspire one's will.

The goal of the Waldorf approach to the language arts, of which the teaching of reading is only one integral part, is to inspire in every child a love for the powers of language. In Waldorf education the introduction of reading grows out of the child's own experience of living language. Reading like all the traditional academic subjects is not taught in the Waldorf kindergarten. If a child teaches herself how to read at this time, fine and good; no attempt should be made to actively suppress or develop this skill. What we are seeing in such children is a loving imitation of an adult activity. During these early years the healthiest thing a child can do is experience the natural substances of the world while developing, side by side, a deep and reverent love for nature and fellow human beings. Activity is primary, both the activity of the child herself, and adult activity worthy of devoted imitation. Singing, role playing, running, skipping, building up and tearing things down, doing simple but essential domestic tasks, and learning to get along socially with the other children are the child's most important jobs at this age. Later on, in the elementary school, there will be time enough for academics.

Like standing, walking and speaking children learn to read at their own pace. While children can be rushed into reading earlier than they would normally master this skill, it is always at a cost, either emotionally, physiologically or academically. One of the saddest signs that children are being rushed in reading prematurely are the escalating numbers of reading difficulties among children of normal ability and intelligence in the early elementary grades. (Television and electronic entertainment bear no small share

of this responsibility.) Children who would have learned to read perfectly well in an unhurried and stress free environment now carry a deep resentment towards and fear of reading. It is a sad commentary on our society that the political forces driving American education continue to fail to observe the harmful effects of their programs on children and the future well being of learning and society in general.

In Waldorf education there are no rigid, time-specific goals for reading or any other subject towards which a class will be driven, and before which individuals will be sacrificed if they do not achieve quickly enough. Rather a class teacher works broadly and flexibly with the materials to be learned and the differing temperaments, maturational rates and abilities of the children in a class. The goal is not test-oriented skill levels but rather an environment in which the picture forming faculties of imagination are nourished and learning becomes a living force within each child.

When a teacher gives imaginative pictures to a class each individual in the class can then transform these pictures into personal experiences which will form the foundation for a healthy and inspired relationship to knowledge. An education founded on imagination, as opposed to one on bits of information, permits children to develop flexibility in their conceptual lives. Education which is full of life and life's pictures is healthy education and acts as a seed for the future, both for the individual and human cultural and social life as a whole.

Now back to reading and how it is taught. In the first grade the picture making quality of Waldorf education is clearly visible in the introductory work with the letters. The first lessons in reading grow out of the archetypal moral images of the fairy tales. Say a tale has a magical snake. After the teacher has reviewed the story with the class, they draw pictures of the snake. In the course of drawing, the undulating gesture of the snake emerges. The teacher then shows the children how the sound of the snake can be found in its picture image as well as the initial letter of its word. The letter 's' thereby emerges. In a similar manner other pictographic relations between the archetypal sounds of the consonants and their modern representations are developed. The work of the eurythmist who creates parallel images of language in the archetypal gestures of speech eurythmy supports and deepens the class teacher's work. Not every consonant needs to be presented in this way; imaginative images are a very economical way of educating, and the child himself will be able to develop additional imaginations of his own. Once all the letters have been presented-the consonants through images of the external world and the vowels through inner soul gestures-the teaching of writing begins.

Writing is slightly more important than reading in that writing is active while reading is passive. Historically, people had to write before they could read, and Waldorf education tries to follow the development of human consciousness as faithfully as possible. So the Waldorf reading curriculum is actually a writing curriculum, and the ability to read emerges out of the activity of writing. One of the most important experiences for a child is the realization that the markings on a page suddenly make sense and that she can now read. By having the children copy their teacher's compositions into beautifully made

lesson books Waldorf education prepares children for this experience, thereby establishing a much more intimate relation with reading than otherwise possible.

Taught through writing, reading starts with the imaginative presentation of letters, moves onto the copying of simple sentences and, in turn, whole stories. Parallel to these imaginative experiences phonics and sight word skills are developed as essential tools for decoding. It is important to emphasize that in first grade the pedagogical intent is to build deep and strong foundations, capable of supporting the very demanding language arts curriculum of later grades.

Throughout first grade the child is given a rich experience of language through the daily use of poetry and story telling. Poetry trains a sense for language's beauty while developing memory. The fairy tales present profound archetypal soul images while developing a sense for narration. The teacher's own compositions, copied from the board by the children, are designed to address the particular needs of that class. As in the better primers (the Dolch series in particular), the language and syntax are controlled, and specific phonetic patterns are emphasized; but most importantly, the composition is alive and was created for that particular class and moment in time. No text book can ever achieve this degree of relevancy. The children receive this type of writing as they would a handmade versus a store bought gift.

The very good question is often asked-how does the Waldorf approach challenge the children who enter first grade already knowing how to read? What will such children learn; won't they be bored? All depends on how open parents are to the goals of Waldorf education. If a child experiences doubt or hostility towards their school from a parent the child will naturally and rightly assume the attitudes of that parent, and the work of even the finest teacher will be of no benefit. But if parents want a child's power of imagination to be nourished and cultivated, if they have faith that not learning to read as quickly as a neighbor or relative expects is fine then even the most academically advanced child will retain the openness necessary to enjoy and benefit from the Waldorf approach. All children are nourished by imaginative activities; they resonate in a child's soul and impart a purpose and flexibility to life which quantitative, informational based curricula are incapable of giving.

In second grade reading instruction more closely resembles conventional methods of phonetic and sight vocabulary instruction. Second grade is also the time when the majority of the children discover that they know how to read. This discovery takes place in the most wonderful manner. Each day during a writing block the class teacher reads from that day's writing assignment. The class "reads" along, following the teacher's voice. One by one the individual children come to the wonderful realization that the teacher's voice is no longer needed, that the reading can be done alone. The child lowers her eyes to her own book, looks upon the writing from a previous day and realizes she can read her own hand. One of life's great threshold's has been crossed.

In third grade the students read from "real" (printed) books as well as their own lesson books. The use of readers may happen as early as second grade, and this decision is left to the discretion of the teacher. But by third grade it is an integral part of the reading

program. Third grade is also the time when the students begin to write out most of the lesson book stories in their own words. This independent work was first introduced in second grade, but now it becomes a focal point of the language arts curriculum. Using the class teacher's presentations as starting points each individual student explores his or her own individual voice. Some students write copiously, some cautiously, and others eloquently. The important thing, however, is that each is drawing up to the level of consciousness all they have experienced of narration, character and description in the earlier grades.

In fourth grade and up very little of the teacher's writing as copied into the student's books. Only in cases where very concise information or stylistic examples are needed should the writings be anyone's other than the students' themselves. By now reading is a regular part of each individual's day. Students should be reading at home on a daily basis, and book reports, oral and written, can be continually in process for sharing with the class. Parallel to and supportive of the work with composition and literature is the study of grammar. The work with the modern languages also reinforces and deepens the students' understanding of their mother tongue. By the beginning of middle school children in a Waldorf school have a strong sense for living language and excellent foundations upon which to explore its forms, as well as find their own voices in the succeeding years.

A word about children with learning difficulties in regard to language skills is important. In any class there are increasing numbers of children who experience difficulties with language greater than simple maturational slowness. The reasons for this occurrence can be found in many places, ranging from the destructive influences of television, to physiological and psychological handicaps. There are no easy answers for dealing with these children, but the three essential ingredients in any approach must be patience, compassion and hard work, by both the student, teacher and parents. Worrying about, pampering and procrastinating with these children do them no good. From kindergarten on teachers and parents need to objectively observe their children and watch for signs of any type of learning disability. Many types of screening tools exist to assist us in our evaluations. The evaluation of these diagnostic results, however, can prove problematic, and it must always be remembered that, while a child certainly needs to learn basic skills, over-reliance on information based remediation without attention to curative work on a constitutional level does little to address the fundamental problem. The imaginative and artistic work of Waldorf education is not a luxury suitable only for seemingly normal children, just like an enlivening cultural life is not only for the economically privileged. If teachers and family can understand each other and work together to give such a child the supplemental help needed all the gifts of Waldorf education can be experienced by the child. If no such understanding can be reached, then just like in the cases of an academically precocious child the school/family relationship will not work.

All learning in Waldorf schools strives to imbue the child with a deep appreciation for and love of knowledge. Out of experience develops understanding, and out of understanding develops thought. Through imaginative experiences the language arts curriculum, like all the other subjects, assists each child to develop the visions and

thoughts capable of inspiring the strength, faith and courage needed for meeting what comes to us out of the future. We rebel as human beings against being programmed like machines. Inflexible information deadens us. We feel, if not understand, that our future and, thereby, our freedom is being stolen. Waldorf education, on the other hand, stands in opposition to such materialistic education. It is able to do so because at their very core is a spiritual image of the human being which recognizes the evolutionary implications of all our deeds, even something as remote as how we learned to read.

This article first appeared in Leading Forth in 1988 and was republished in the Garden City Waldorf Schools Alumni newsletter in 1994.