

Educating the Whole Child

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"I like to use the analogy of a Waldorf School as a garden and the teacher as the gardener. Our job is not to turn a cabbage into a rose or a rose into a cabbage, but to weed and mulch so the cabbage is the healthiest and best you've ever seen and the rose is the most beautiful and the best you've ever seen," says Susan Stevenson, a teacher at Chicago Waldorf School.

"One of the chief tasks of Waldorf education is to bring life to knowledge," said Waldorf education founder Rudolf Steiner, in "Deeper Insights into Education." He believed teaching could never be boring if it was related directly to life. Thus, Waldorf students learn the same main subjects as those of traditional schools -- language arts, math, science, geography, and history -- but they stray from traditional schools in how and when they are taught. The subjects are taught in a hands-on experiential style, without textbooks. Waldorf classrooms use the arts, storytelling, rhythmic work, and music so that students use all their senses to achieve a deeper and more meaningful learning experience.

In addition, the Waldorf curriculum is based on children's developmental stages. Steiner believed students go through three major developmental stages. The first, early childhood, lasts until about seven, when children start to get their permanent teeth. During this stage, Steiner posits that children learn best through physical activity and play. The second stage is said to go from seven to fourteen, when children learn through feeling and imagination and the arts speak deeply to them. The final stage is the thinking stage, when students are expected to begin developing their intellectual abilities.

Steiner accused traditional education of focusing too much on the intellectual and dry textbook-style of learning, and noted that children who only learn on one level become bored.

"From the Waldorf point of view, the absence of fantasy in the early years leads directly to the problems of stress, burnout, and inability to think that now plague so many American students," writes Waldorf teacher Joan Almon, in "Educating for Creative Thinking: The Waldorf Approach."

The Roots of Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian scientist and philosopher and the founder of anthroposophy, a philosophy with a spiritually-based world view. Steiner started the first Waldorf School in 1919, for the children of factory workers at the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. While Waldorf education is based on anthroposophical beliefs, the schools are non-denominational and do not teach anthroposophy. The first school in the United States was founded in New York city in

1928; there are now about 140 private schools in the U.S. and a growing number of Waldorf-inspired public schools. There are about 800 schools worldwide.

Though Waldorf education is some eighty years old, it seems to be coming of age now, in this time of increasing dissatisfaction with traditional schooling. Parents are attracted by the fact that Waldorf Schools have a core curriculum, but the teachers are responsible for presenting the subject matter creatively, in order to stir the feelings and imagination of the children and become part of them.

Many also like that fact that children stay with the same main lesson teacher from grades one through eight. Because class teachers remain with the class year after year, they provide continuity. Stevenson says, when she started with her one through eight class, all the children came from homes with both parents. By eighth grade, seven of ten couples had divorced. She was told by some parents that the continuity at school was very helpful.

Long-term teachers also can plan for long-term learning. In fact, Waldorf proponents believe that the path to knowledge itself is through a loving and respectful relationship with the main teacher. Indeed, Waldorf teachers become specialists on each individual child over time. A challenge for Waldorf teachers is relating to the children at different ages, recognizing that their personalities can change dramatically over a single summer.

"You have to become a completely different human being," asserts Stevenson. "The right way of being with first-graders won't work with eighth-graders. You're reinventing yourself as a person -- but parents need to do that too." She adds, "if a child is having a problem [with a student], you have to deal with it. You look at yourself as a teacher and you reach out to the parents to find a better way of working together," says Stevenson.

"When you're a Waldorf teacher, you have to be creative the whole time. You have to enter each class as a kind of art work," says Magda Lissau, coordinator of Arcturus, a teacher training institute in Chicago.

The Structure

In addition to the conception of teaching as an art, the Waldorf curriculum stresses the arts. In the early grades, each day begins with lively rhythmic exercises, such as circle games and rhythmic clapping. Children may sing, play the recorder, and recite poetry or tongue twisters. "Speaking, singing, and playing the recorder, all use the human breath in different ways and actively encourage deeper breathing," says Stevenson. "By doing all these things, the children are woken up and ready to concentrate, so when you introduce the content, nothing is in the way of them taking it in."

After the rhythmic work, students review the previous day's work. Then the teacher introduces a long lesson through a variety of activities that stimulate all the senses. The classrooms don't use textbooks; children create their own books, which include drawings and creative expressions revealing what they've learned. After the main lesson and a short break, the children study foreign language.

The afternoon is devoted to shorter lessons that involve the whole child, such as handwork (skills such as sewing or woodworking), gardening, music, visual arts, or eurythmy -- a form of performance that visibly expresses the sound of speech and music. These lessons are taught by specialized teachers. Computers, considered stifling, are not introduced until later grades.

Intervention of the Spirit

Steiner believed movement and rhythmic exercises to be healing. "We have in human movement a magical effect, a direct intervention of the spirit into bodily movements," said Steiner. "We're not assuming every child is healthy," adds Stevenson. "In our culture, children spend way too much time indoors and in cars."

The rhythmic exercises children do also can be applied to conventional learning. In his book, *School as a Journey*, Waldorf educator Torin Finser tells how rhythmic clapping prepared his first-graders for multiplication. "Much of the movement work also prepared the way for arithmetic, since the rhythmic counting was easily transformed into multiplication tables: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8," writes Finser.

More profound results seem to be possible, as well. Currently, Waldorf methods are proving effective in helping juvenile offenders at the Thomas E. Matthews Community School in Yuba County, California. "The integration of the arts is extremely important in teaching children who haven't been able to learn in the traditional way," says Arline Monks, coordinator of the program for public school teachers at Ruth Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California. "When children are approached through the arts, they haven't built up their defenses."

"You have a seventeen-year-old who is reading at the second grade level, but is learning to read music.... You hear kids reciting from the great poets -- Frost, Tennyson," says Monks, describing students at the Matthews School. "It's helping them focus on oral language, through recitation of poetry, and it builds a foundation for literacy."

The miracles taking place at Matthews School are not due to extraordinary measures taken; all students approach their main lessons through narrative, including classic fairy tales, fables, mythology, and stirring biographies -- much as humans have learned for many millennia.

Mark Birdsall, an administrator and teacher at the Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, explains that Steiner believed the development of children corresponds to the development of mankind. For instance, Aesop's fables, moral tales about human strengths and vices in the guise of animals, speak deeply to children of about seven or eight, says Birdsall. "At the time they were written, the fables were not considered children's stories, but the epitome of wisdom," says Birdsall.

"Even botany can be taught through a biographical story," says Birdsall. "Children can take a lot of information from a story, much more than if someone were to preach at them."

In addition to promoting literacy, the storytelling approach has significant advantages. For one thing, the interconnectedness and beauty of life are easier to communicate through narrative than through one-dimensional instruction. "We want the children to have a rich overall picture of the world, one that concentrates on the beauty of the world," says Stevenson.

Of course, not everything in the world is beautiful and positive. But when teachers need to tell students of social problems or ecological disasters, they bring hope into that lesson and talk with the students about what can be done about the problem. Waldorf's focus on positive values also means that holistic subjects such as ecology naturally wend their way into many of the main subjects. "When we teach botany, zoology, chemistry, physics, we relate it to the human being, so that sets it up as ecology," says Stevenson.

The great stories and mythologies also build a foundation for moral and ethical behavior that can help individuals through personal struggles. Birdsall, for example, credits his own Waldorf education -- he graduated from a Waldorf school in Pennsylvania in 1961 -- with getting him through the stresses of Vietnam. "I was immensely grateful for my Waldorf education at that time," says Birdsall, who decided to go through Waldorf teacher training after his service as a Navy officer.

Waldorf Connections

Dru Muscovin, a parent of two children at the Chicago Waldorf School, says she can appreciate the difference between Waldorf and traditional methods.

"My children have always gone to a Waldorf school, so I don't have experience with the public school system. I can only relate my personal experience.... When I pose a problem to my fourth-grade daughter, she thinks about it. I had to memorize dates and names, which had no connection to history for me. She is learning about history through musicians and literary figures. I couldn't have told you which literary figures related to a historical time period. [In her] future, there will be those connections," says Muscovin.

Public school learning is often geared toward performance on state tests, while Waldorf students are not usually tested. However, the increase in Waldorf-inspired charter schools, which do test students, provides some indications of the method's success on conventional terms. According to Monks, students in the Waldorf charter schools in California and Arizona have performed extremely well on state tests.

"After about the third grade, if a child in a private Waldorf school is transferred to a public school, they [are] well above average," says Mary Gorall, a professor at Mt. Mary College in Milwaukee, and a proponent of Waldorf methods. "They know the subjects so well because everything is learned on a much deeper level -- what Waldorf educators like to refer as a cellular level."

Locally, Waldorf is thriving. The Chicago Waldorf School offers K-12 learning and schools are developing in Wheaton and Evanston. (They do not yet go all the way to

eighth grade.) Two new schools are opening in Oak Park and Lake in the Hills. There are also several Waldorf schools in Wisconsin.

"It's an incredibly high ideal, what we're trying to do, and like any incredibly high ideal we don't usually reach the ideal," says Stevenson. "We're human and we trip and stumble...but then we say 'what can we do to make it better?'" From the looks of Waldorf schools across the country, Stevenson and her colleagues are doing their part to "make it better," not only for their students, but for the wider world they will someday inhabit.

Resources

Arcturus Rudolf Steiner Education Program, 6531 N. Lakewood, Chicago, 773-761-3026

AWSNA (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America), 916-961-0927

Chicago Waldorf School (K-12), 1300 W. Loyola Ave., Chicago, IL 60626; 773-465-2662

Great Oaks School (Pre-K/K -5), 933B Chicago Ave., Evanston, IL 60202; 847-864-9980

Four Winds Waldorf School (Pre-K/K-6), 30W160 Calumet Ave., Warrenville, IL 60555; 630-836-9400