

Some Unique Aspects of Waldorf Pedagogy

THE ARTS - drama, painting, music, drawing, modeling, etc. - are integrated into the entire academic curriculum, including mathematics and the sciences. The Waldorf method of education through the arts awakens imagination and creative powers, bringing vitality and wholeness to learning. No other educational movement gives such a central role to the arts, as does Waldorf education.

THE CLASS TEACHER takes the same class of children through eight years of elementary school (grades 1-8), teaching all of the main subjects. For the teacher, this means time to really know the children and help them unfold their gifts, as well as the enormous challenge of working with a new curriculum each year. The child finds stability and continuing guidance, which may not even be present in the home life.

TEXTBOOKS are not used in the elementary grade. Instead, the teacher creates the presentation and the children make their individual books for each subject taught, recording and illustrating the substance of their lessons. These books, often artistic and beautiful, are an important way in which art is integrated into every subject; they have been the focus of Waldorf exhibitions at American and European museums.

TWO FOREIGN LANGUAGES are taught beginning in the first grade, giving the children insights into and facility with other cultures. The languages vary according to the location of the schools.

THE SCIENCES are taught experientially - that is, the teacher sets up an experiment, calls upon the children to observe carefully, ponder, discuss, and then allow them to discover the conclusion - the law, formula, etc. Through this process rigorous, independent thinking and sound judgment are trained.

AN EXTRAORDINARY HUMANITIES CURRICULUM, which begins in second and third grade with mythology and legends, takes the children through the full sweep of their cultural heritage. The Old Testament in grade three, Norse mythology in grade four, the ancient cultures of India, Egypt, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Greece in grade five, all provide the background for the study of history and are presented through excerpts from original texts. By living into these cultures through their legends and literature, the children gain flexibility and an appreciation for the diversity of mankind. By the close of eighth grade, the students have journeyed from Greece and Rome to medieval history, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Exploration, up to the present day.

LETTERS ARE LEARNED in the same way they originated in the course of human history. Men perceived, then pictured, and out of the pictures abstracted signs and symbols. First graders hear stories, draw pictures, and discover the letter in the gesture of the picture. This process is accompanied by much phonetic work in songs, poems, and games that help to establish a joyful and living experience of language.

Through the grades, texts taken from the rich humanities curriculum - Genesis, The Bhagavad Gita, The Kalevala, etc. - provide material for reading practice.

A MORNING "MAIN LESSON" - a two-hour period in which the main substance of the day is presented - begins each school day. The subject - it can be algebra, Greek history, botany, or acoustics - is taught for a three- or four-week block, then dropped, often to be continued later in the term. This approach allows for freshness and enthusiasm, concentrated, in-depth experience, and gives the children time to "digest" what has been learned.

MUSIC PERMEATES and harmonizes life in a Waldorf school through a curriculum designed to develop the innate musicality every child is born with. In the first grade children sing and learn to play the recorder, a simple wooden flute; both activities are practiced daily through the elementary school years. In the third grade, simple string instruments like the lyre and children's harp are introduced, while the fourth graders have the challenge of learning to play a violin, cello, or viola, and joining a class "orchestra." Some schools provide instruction in wind instruments in sixth or seventh grade. Music is taught in a Waldorf school not only for its own sake and the joy it engenders, but also because it brings a strong harmonizing and humanizing force into the student's life, strengthening the will and capacities for the future.

ADMINISTERED mostly by its teachers, the Waldorf school encourages freedom and individual responsibility among the faculty who exist as a community of equals, without a principal or headmaster. The teachers take full responsibility for the operation of each school.

PRACTICAL WORK - crafts and handwork - are an integral part of the required curriculum from kindergarten through high school. Boys as well as girls learn to knit in first grade and crochet in second, creating many functional and colorful objects like cases for recorders or pencil boxes, potholders, puppets, etc. Decades before brain research could confirm it, Rudolf Steiner recognized that brain function was founded on body function. Learning to knit and crochet in the early grades leads to motor skills, which metamorphose into lively thinking and enhance intellectual development later on. Coordination, patience, perseverance, and imagination are also schooled through practical work. Activities like woodworking, housebuilding, gardening, and shoemaking, included in the elementary school curriculum, give the children an understanding of how things come into being and a respect for the creations of others.