

Learning That Grows with the Learner: An Introduction to Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner founded a school to educate the whole child—head, heart, and hands.

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.

There are more than 500 Waldorf schools in 32 countries. No two are identical; each is administratively independent. Nevertheless, a visitor would recognize many characteristics common to them all.

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, man 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.

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, the 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 for later life. In the end, it weakens the very powers of judgment and practi-

cal intelligence the teacher wants to encourage.

Middle Childhood

When children are ready to leave kindergarten and enter 1st 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

About the Waldorf Schools

The Waldorf schools began in 1919, when Emil Molt, owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, asked Rudolf Steiner to establish a school for the children of his workers. Steiner agreed, under the condition that the school be a unified 12-year school open to all children, independent of political and economic control, with educational responsibility in the hands of the teaching faculty.

Today, 552 schools in 32 countries work with the Waldorf principles and methods. There are 134 schools in Germany, 259 in other European countries, 120 in the United States

and Canada, and 17 in Australia. Each school is administratively independent.

Thirty-three full-time teacher training institutes operate in seventeen countries; five are in North America. The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) sponsors an annual conference and regional conferences. The association also sponsors conferences and workshops for schools, parents, and the public. Twice a year, an informal international circle meets in Stuttgart and the Hague.

—Henry Barnes

speaking 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 1st 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 neither the product of inheritance nor of the 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 this developmental theory reflected in Waldorf classrooms? The school day begins with a long, uninter-

rupted 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 a wide variety of activities around the subject at hand. In the younger grades lively rhythmic activities get the circulation going and bring children together as a group; they recite

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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 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 1st 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, or 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 teachers provide 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 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 6th 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 profes-

sional 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 of 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 constantly be 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 6th 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 9th 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. □

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