

WELLSPRINGS OF WALDORF

(text-only for printing)

The Anthroposophical Society in America

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THE ORIGINS OF WALDORF

Waldorf education is approaching its 100th anniversary; the first “Waldorf” school opened in Stuttgart, Germany, in September 1919. From that first school, a global educational movement has developed and there are now over 1,000 schools in 64 countries with an additional 1,800 early childhood centers or kindergartens in over

70 countries. Waldorf education is an established part of the modern educational landscape, one of a number of proven “progressive” or “alternative” approaches.

THE ORIGINS OF WALDORF

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was the founder of the first Waldorf school; he was an Austrian philosopher and researcher with a wide range of interests, research, and knowledge including education, medicine, arts, eurythmy (a form of expressive movement that he created), and biodynamic agriculture.

Steiner developed a philosophy, anthroposophy, or knowledge of the human being. This included an expansive picture of human development and the evolution of consciousness and a recognition of the spiritual in all dimensions of life.

His philosophy is at the core of Waldorf education, although it is not taught to students (compared, for example, to the presence of religious instruction in a Catholic or Jewish school). An exception to this may be in the final year of high school, when young adults may be given an introduction to his philosophy.

Steiner had deep interest in the human condition and produced a remarkable body of work through lectures and books. He was deeply interested in questions of individual and social transformation and development.

The term Waldorf originates from the first school, started in the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in post-World-War-I Germany, during a time of extreme social, political, and economic unrest and uncertainty about the future.

The factory's owner, Emil Molt, invited Steiner to create a school that would truly address the human being. Steiner put his thoughts about "a new art of education" and his view of the developing human being into action and Waldorf education was born.

Steiner remained very involved with the school until his death, providing teacher training and guidance. These have continued to be a source of information and inspiration for Waldorf education.

The schools today may be referred to as Waldorf or Steiner schools, either referring to Steiner or to the first school. This first school was the foundation for all that would follow.

Steiner's interests included education; he saw the need for a "new art of education": if we wish to change the future, we need a new approach to education.

ANTHROPOSOPHICAL VIEW OF THE HUMAN BEING

Any approach to education is informed by a view of the human being, the purpose of life, and the purpose of education. Rudolf Steiner's view of the human being was very comprehensive. Although anthroposophy (Steiner's philosophy) is not taught to students, Steiner's view of the human being directly and indirectly informs Waldorf education.

His view was holistic in that he stated that the human being encompasses physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions, all of which are important.

Steiner viewed each human being as a unique individuality who is on earth in order to develop and achieve certain tasks. Within this framework, life is purposeful and meaningful.

The spiritual realm is a non-negotiable part of Steiner's view; as humans we each have a unique "self" and are connected to spiritual forces.

The education is itself holistic or whole-child, including a curriculum and activities that address multiple aspects of being human. This is sometimes summarized as "head, heart, and hands" or "thinking, feeling, and willing (doing)".

Head, heart, and hand are integrated or connected out of an understanding that the healthy human being is not compartmentalized.

Of equal importance, yet not so often spoken of, is a spiritual perspective that invites the teacher to view each child as a unique individuality with intent and self-direction; the teacher's task is to support that emerging individuality, help to remove any obstacles that may be in the way, provide tools and knowledge, and recognize and honor the purposefulness of life.

This framework provides a deep sense of meaning to teaching; the teacher, too, is a person of intent and purpose. It is perhaps this aspect of Waldorf education that sets it apart from other progressive pedagogies, many of which also address the student's "head, heart, and hand".

Based on Steiner's view of the human being, education is given the task of supporting individual and social development and transformation.

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Education does not happen in isolation; schools are social institutions with social agendas and goals. They represent a set of beliefs, values, and understandings. Waldorf education incorporates many aspects of Steiner's worldview, adapted for time, place, and new insights.

The curriculum reflects Steiner's interpretation of the evolution of human consciousness and human development. Theories of the evolution of consciousness propose that human consciousness has evolved over long periods of time – and will continue to evolve. There are numerous theories and models of this process of development.

Steiner's model of the evolution of consciousness proposes that human beings have moved through a path of development that has taken them from a dreamy state of being many eons ago, in which there was little separation between the human being and the cosmos, to the individualistic, intellectual, self-aware consciousness of today. Major phases of development can be identified within this process. Steiner stated that each individual human being's development is a microcosm of this large picture of human development.

This can be readily seen in children's art; young children start with uncontrolled scribble, gradually developing simple forms to represent what they see and experience, becoming increasingly detailed and focused, later incorporating aspects such as ratio, perspective, dimension, technical details, mechanical representations, scientific principles, and complex tools. Their art represents their inner development as they become increasingly autonomous, aware, self-controlled, and intellectual.

The indications that Steiner gave for the Waldorf curriculum acknowledge and support this process. The curriculum takes the child through the journey of human development from a dreamy, interconnected state without a real sense of time or place – or even of self – to growing awareness of self, other, and world. This can be traced in many subjects. The language arts/ history curriculum is an excellent example. It progresses from fairy tales to fables to legends, then to Hebrew stories, Norse mythology, and ancient civilizations. It moves on to recorded history in Rome to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and then finally into revolutions and modern times.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Each individual human is unique, yet the path of human development is predictable for almost all children. Waldorf education is, perhaps above all other considerations, a developmental education. What is taught, how it is taught, when it is taught, is related to why it is taught – to support the child's lawful and healthy development. The curriculum is designed to meet and engage emerging interests and abilities, to appropriately challenge the child, and to support the growth of skills knowledge, and inner capacities.

Human development is described as occurring in phases, each approximately seven years long. We continue to develop throughout life, but schools are largely concerned with the first three phases, 0-7 years, 7-14 years, and 14-21 years.

0-7 years: a period of enormous physical growth. Education needs to support healthy physical development and the child's need to be active. Imitation is a strong mode of learning. The teacher provides a protected space, appropriate materials, predictable routines, and is a model for imitation.

7-14 years: a period of imagination and a rich feeling life. Children have pictorial thinking. The teacher is a loving guide and an authority for the child. Stories, images, and artistic work support learning during these years. The children are artists and seek beauty.

14-21 years: young people are on a search for truth. Teachers and the curriculum support the growth of independent thinking and judgment. Young people search for meaning and ask how they can make a difference in the world.

Although each phase has a primary emphasis (physical/ willing, imagination/feeling, thinking/truth), the physical, emotional, and intellectual are present in each phase, appearing in a developmentally-appropriate way.

The developmental framework informs the school and classroom environment, types of activities, and content of the curriculum.

Time is an important element of a developmental approach. Human development needs time to unfold; Waldorf education strives to challenge but not rush students, understanding the need for time to be fully immersed in each stage, to meet its developmental tasks without pressure to accelerate or rush.

The concept of readiness is key. If we meet the developmental needs at each stage, the children will be ready for what comes next – academically, socially, and emotionally. In this way, each child can build a solid foundation for life.

THE INNER WORK OF THE TEACHER

Children are not the only learners in a school. Waldorf education emphasizes the need for a teacher to be continuously learning and developing, to maintain a lively interest in the world, and to develop inner capacities that will allow for teaching to be responsive to the children, creative, and purposeful. Waldorf education emphasizes this “inner work” of the teacher; this emphasis distinguishes it from most other approaches.

There is a body of practice to support the teacher’s development. Steiner gave some of these to the original Waldorf teachers and emphasized the absolute need for teachers to develop inner capacities such as reflection and contemplation.

There is a highly developed and unique approach to teacher development. It includes reflective verses, concentration exercises, and practices of study and review.

The need for this is supported by contemporary knowledge; the mood, attitudes, and unconscious opinions of a teacher have a significant effect on classroom climate and children’s ability to learn.

This aligns with brain research and with Parker Palmer’s statement that “we teach who we are.”

Teachers are asked to develop self-awareness, not to reinforce their own egos but in service of the children’s development.

The capacity to accurately and objectively observe is important and is supported by artistic and other practices.

Teachers reflect on each day as objectively as possible, based on their observations.

Ongoing self-development allows teachers to continuously refine and improve themselves and acknowledges the essential role of a teacher in a child’s development and education.

FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY OF THE TEACHER

Every teacher assumes great responsibility for what happens in a classroom and its impact on students. In addition, teachers must balance several aspects of accountability: to children, to parents, to the school’s philosophy and guiding principles, and to external bodies that have an interest in schools and their outcomes. Waldorf education must balance forces of freedom (e.g. of the teacher and school) and responsibility (to core principles of Waldorf education and to measures of accountability).

Waldorf education views teachers as “pedagogical experts” who should have a major voice in all decisions that impact what is taught, and how it is to be taught.

The teacher understands the needs of a particular group of students in a particular place and time and must be given freedom to address those needs in an appropriate way.

Steiner reminded teachers that education is an art form and that teachers must balance adequate knowledge and preparation with the need to continuously reinvent and enliven their teaching to keep it alive and relevant.

There is a danger of getting prescriptive; this is not unique to Waldorf. Although there is an accepted body of practices, we need to guard against fixed thinking that prescribes “that is or is not Waldorf.”

As Waldorf education has expanded throughout the world, teachers and schools have been challenged to research how to best meet the cultures and customs of diverse settings yet remain consistent with the core principles that sit at the heart of Waldorf education.

Different school models—e.g. independent or public schools) must each address the tension between freedom and responsibility to determine how decisions will be made.

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Although each teacher and school is asked to be responsive, relevant, and creative, there is an established body of Waldorf practices, resources, and methods. These help us to know that a school is a Waldorf school; the signs given through the school culture, environment, and teaching style show that a school is working out of the primary indications of Waldorf education: a truly holistic view of the human being, a comprehensive model of child development, and a unique approach to teacher development. These form the organizing principle and foundation of Waldorf education and should be part of the reason for all that takes place within the school.

These principles show in a curriculum that is deeply developmental, reflecting and supporting the individual child’s development and the broad sweep of human development.

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND SCHOOL CULTURE

The curriculum is supported by a wide range of methods. These include the use of rhythm, arts, storytelling, and movement.

Classroom and school mood support learning and community. Colors and materials are chosen with care and with mindfulness for their impact on the children. Natural materials and tools are preferred.

Assessment is an ongoing, essential process in any school system. In Waldorf, the goal of assessment is to support learning and development; it is formative. Schools may also use summative or conclusive assessment, e.g. standardized testing, if required by external bodies or for college entry.

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Although Waldorf schools are typically recognizable by their environment, each school develops a unique culture and community. Community life is valued and supported.

Nature, and our connection to the natural world, is viewed as an essential partner. Schools often develop gardens and as wide a range of outdoor activities as possible.

WALDORF EDUCATION

WALDORF EDUCATION respects the nature of childhood, giving it protection, time, and space. There is emphasis on fostering healthy connections (to self, others, society, and the earth) and cultivation of qualities of awe, wonder at the world around us, gratitude and respect.

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