



# Exploring Waldorf-Inspired Tribal Schools

by Charles Morin, Loren Silver, and Lars Helgeson

This article arose from lunchtime discussions during the 2014 and 2015 summer sessions on Waldorf Inspired Public Schools at Rudolf Steiner College in Sacramento, CA. Further discussions at various tribal schools added to the topic. We believe there is a close match between American Indian educational needs and the philosophy and methods of Waldorf Schools.

**Spirit** The American Indian is first and foremost a spirit centered being, as are all humans. At this time in our history there is a rebirth of the need to seek an understanding of what constitutes reality. Among the American Indians there is reverence for the Creator, Who by sacred means brought everything into being, in Reality. Rudolf Steiner says that human beings are soul and spirit, and that our nature is physical, soul, and spirit. He says that when reality returns to our lives then spirit returns too. The education that fits the American Indian is that which nurtures spirit and sustains the expression of the soul.

**Language** There is respect for Elders, and it is understood that the spoken language is culturally very important. There is a strong movement among tribal Waldorf and Waldorf-inspired schools to preserve the indigenous languages and culture. Waldorf education advises teaching a foreign language as soon as the child starts elementary school. If a child



Sculpture at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, where the Anthroposophical Society in America held its 2017 conference.

has only heard English then the traditional tribal language is not the child's native language. So the traditional tribal language needs to be taught early, as one might teach German, French, or Latin.

Rudolf Steiner recognized that different languages each have a different logic and cadence. If the child hears and mimics, for example, the Dakota or Navajo speech in the home and experiences the legends, art, and dance of the tribe from the earliest years, then the memories and culture are established early, too. But that is less and less the case as English is emphasized in most tribal schools. Indeed all humans go through the same developmental sequences and growth with the formation of localized memory, rhythmic memory, and picture memory to form the ego, and then develop the ability to think. We argue that those stages can indeed be in any language, and we believe that language should be the tribal traditional language if at all possible.

**Culture** Tribal mythology, fables, imaginary characters are as rich in moral lessons, heroes, and examples of various human behavior as any European mythology. Even as Greek, Roman, and Norse skies are rich with images, animals, gods, and demons, so are the skies of all the Native American tribes. All ancient peoples sought to explain the astronomical and natural phenomena with mythical characters and events. The art and dance of indigenous people of the western hemisphere bring these myths to life for the people. The dances give meaning to human existence and connect us to the Creator in a real way. Dancing, according to Black Elk, provides the means to bring the spiritual power of visions into the real world.

In the tribal as well as the traditional public school the elementary grades are rich with drawing, painting, basic writing, and especially gardening activities. Making pictures is good for long-term memory, and thinking in pictures aids development of imagination.

**Models** The teacher is the model for children to imitate in any culture. Learning respect is a key to further imitation of the loving authority who builds a trusting relationship, one who demonstrates how to be a learner. Children learn about specific human characteristics through fable and myths. They develop the basics for developing the capacity for order by farming, cooking, cleaning, and measurement, and gradually learn to become an individual.

The cooking activities are excellent for developing discrimination as to what is good food through discussion and example. Throughout the grades, the tribal

children are probably more in touch with their spiritual nature than typical public school children. There is more discussion of the importance of visions, intuition, and omens. So it is easier to develop a closer relationship to plants, animals, and spirits. It is our experience that it is traditional to express gratitude to the Creator among children on the reservation—more than in typical city elementary schools!

**Mythology & consciousness** It is not only in Norse mythology that children encounter the trickster. All across North America in every native culture the coyote, the raven, the spider are the equivalent of the Norse Loki who is jealous of the hero, who is the creator as well as the one who forces the hero to become conscious. The coyote is a partner in the hero's liberation.

Throughout the elementary grades there is the gradual evolution of consciousness as is told in myths and legends. It takes the aware Waldorf teacher to help the students in any culture to see what they might eventually become. Tribal culture and western cultures all deal with light and dark, life and death, birth and rebirth. It takes the sensitive and aware Waldorf teacher to lead the children along this path of learning. One of the great advantages of the Waldorf methodology is that the teacher stays with the same class year after year and watches over their maturation, much like the shared responsibility that one finds on many reservations among the young and the elders.

**The challenge** While the Waldorf curriculum includes a heavy emphasis on Eurocentric history there is sufficient discipline, battles, survival training, horsemanship, animal interdependence, heroism, love, strength, and courage among the various tribes to fill books with teachable stories for children. We see the challenge for tribal Waldorf schools to make the comparison between American and European history to draw the same conclusions so that tribal schools teach the same lessons that are commonly taught by Roman, Greek, English, Germanic, and Nordic myths, legends, poems, plays, and art. Waldorf emphasis on gardening, art, music, dance, languages, math, science, and sociology are easy to integrate into the tribal education and we encourage that to happen.

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# Native-America and Waldorf-Inspired Education

by Joaquin Muñoz

## Meditations on Philosophy and Practice

*Editor's note: this is a brief summary of a longer paper which is available at [www.anthroposophy.org/articles](http://www.anthroposophy.org/articles)*

In my research, I explore Waldorf and Waldorf-inspired education, and its potential impact as reforms in modern schools. The U.S. education system possesses great diversity in ethnicity, language, and cultural difference. With this diversity comes a sense of challenge, a sense of possibility, and a beautiful opportunity. For some, though, this diversity represents a problem, a deficit, and a hindrance to teaching—challenges seen as surmountable only through standardization of curricula and testing to prove, quantitatively, the efficacy of schooling practices.

Students often express frustration and discontent with these practices; this may be even more acute for students of color, who often do not see their lived experiences or values reflected in the culture of schools. As a Native American person myself, I am interested in Waldorf as a potential reform for supporting students of color and linguistically diverse student populations. At both a practical level and at a philosophical level, Waldorf education attempts to address the full experience and life of the young person to develop their unique talents and abilities. This work has coincided with the emerging interest in many Waldorf schools to diversify student populations.

It is important to consider both parallels and divergences. Waldorf, born as “a uniquely German reform,” ... would seem to be completely out of sync with the needs of Native American populations. [But] Waldorf education is learner centered, with particular stories and mythologies to challenge children in specific ways—an “organic structure that mirrors the developmental changes that take place over the grade school years” chosen due to their relevancy to youth and their changing inner worlds.<sup>1</sup>

To work with cultural sensitivity, one needs to consider the full potential of each student, while recognizing and appreciating their unique experience in the world. “Steiner was clear that Waldorf education must be

responsive to the space and time in which it would be enacted.”<sup>2</sup> In many compelling ways, Waldorf education is a functioning system which addresses these needs, providing both a stable structure and a flexibility and fluidity that is open to change and adaptation.

Beginning from a mechanistic view of the constitution of a person (often the case in traditional education), the spirit of a person is fundamentally misconceived. The human spirit is ignored or disregarded, misnamed or misunderstood. The epistemology of Waldorf challenges this stance, holding the human spirit in sacred regard. This is a stance Native American communities might support.

Steiner's ideas were based on the reality of an “inner life,” and where “philosophy...linked up the world of science with that of spirituality.”<sup>3</sup> The cosmology of my community (and indeed, of many Native American communities) includes aspects of life permeated by spiritual beings, spiritual forces, and the potential for knowing and experiencing these beings in some way. It is important to consider deeply whether a model which conceptualizes a spiritual life of its students is in fact beneficial and consistent with Native American cosmology. Conversely, it is also essential to interrogate the possibility that the use of Waldorf education is simply a new form of proselytizing and manipulating a population.

I wonder how Steiner would have sounded in talking with tribal elders. The stories sound very similar, and I imagine a difference in terms, but not in beliefs. This is not to say that they are perfectly matched, or identical. Spiritual worldviews deserve consideration when constructing an education system for Native American youth. Waldorf might be one avenue for this work.

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1 Petrush, J. (2002). *Understanding Waldorf education: Teaching from the inside out*. Gryphon House, Inc. p.64.

2 Larrison, A.L., Daly, A.J., & VanVooren, C. (2012). “Twenty years and counting: A look at Waldorf in the public sector using online sources,” p.4. *Current Issues in Education*. 15(2), 1-22.

3 Nicol, J. (2007). *Bringing the Steiner Waldorf approach to your early years practice*. Routledge.