

The Wisdom of Waldorf: Education for the Future

By *Rahima Baldwin Dancy*

Mothers Magazine Issue 123, March/April 2004

In a world of accelerating change and increasing uncertainty, what values will help inspire and sustain children as they become young adults? Unlike past generations, children today can expect to have several careers during their lives, and can expect to be lifelong learners because many of the jobs they will have don't yet exist. The pace of change today is accelerating as never before in history. How can we prepare a generation that will be comfortable with change, and that will have the tools and the willingness to confront—and solve—the many problems of our global society, instead of sinking into cynicism or apathy?

Many parents, when they choose their first preschool or send their child to first grade, are unaware of the underlying values or the long-term implications of the educational system they have chosen. Overwhelmed by the demands of daily life, parents often don't have the energy or resources to consider how their choices today might affect their child's life as a teenager or adult. But an increasing number of parents are looking at the big picture and investigating Waldorf education, a worldwide approach to education for preschool through grade 12 developed by Rudolf Steiner and thousands of teachers on five continents. In the past 20 years, Waldorf has become the largest private-school movement in the world, and Waldorf methods are now being taken up by a growing number of homeschooling families and public charter and magnet schools throughout the US. But why is an approach to education that was developed in 1919 by an Austrian researcher and educator so relevant to today's world?

Educating for Cultural Renewal

The impulse behind Waldorf education is cultural renewal—an impulse for the future that Rudolf Steiner felt could be fostered through a new understanding of the individual and community. When a German factory director, Emil Molt, approached Steiner in 1919 to ask how children might be educated to prevent another catastrophe like World War I, Steiner responded by, six months later, opening a school for the 256 children of the workers in Molt's Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory—hence the names “Waldorf” or “Steiner” education.

Steiner felt that children need a balanced development of their capacities in order to be prepared as adults to contribute to cultural renewal, instead of to the ongoing dehumanization of society. His aim was not to inculcate in children any particular viewpoint or ideology, but to make them so healthy, strong, and inwardly free that they would become a kind of tonic for society as a whole. The purpose of education, he thought, should not be merely to instill knowledge, which can be coldly abstract and destructive when separated from human values and a feeling for the humanity of other people. Rather, Steiner's goal was to educate the whole human being so that thinking, feeling, and doing are integrated, and capable of functioning in a healthy way. Such people are more likely to discover and implement solutions that further human development, rather than fall prey to narrow and dogmatic doctrines such as National Socialism. In fact, when they came to power, the Nazis closed all Waldorf schools in Germany and, later, in the countries they occupied.

The universality and forward-looking thrust of Waldorf education was summarized by Steiner: “We shouldn't ask: what does a person need to know or be able to do in order to fit into the existing social order? Instead we should ask: what lives in each human being and what can be developed in him or her? Only then will it be possible to direct the new qualities of each emerging generation into society. The society will become what young people, as whole human beings, make out of the existing social conditions. The new generation should not just be made to be what the present society wants it to become.”¹

After World War II, the Waldorf schools in West Germany and Europe reopened, and new schools have since opened throughout North America and in South Africa, Palestine, Eastern Europe, South and Central America, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. At present there are more than 2,000 schools, preschools, curative (special education) centers, and teacher-training institutes in 46 countries, all based on Steiner's model.

Waldorf education put down roots in America in 1928 with the founding of the Rudolf Steiner School of New York City. Joining in this celebration of 75 years of Waldorf education in North America are more than 157 private schools affiliated with the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, as well as scores of early-childhood programs and a growing number of Waldorf-oriented approaches in public schools.

Another factor in this rapid growth is that Waldorf schools try to counteract the isolation inherent in modern life by helping parents connect with one another in community. For example, parents have opportunities to come together in parent-tot groups, toy-making classes, study groups, assemblies, and festival celebrations. Some schools have biodynamic gardens, or participate in Community Supported Agriculture programs. Steiner also explored new social forms for teachers, feeling strongly that schools should not be run by political appointees or principals who dictate from on high. Rather, decision-making in Waldorf schools is a collaborative process involving faculty, staff, and parent volunteers.

Meeting the Challenges of Today's Crisis in Education

The increased visibility of Waldorf education through private schools and Waldorf-method education in public schools has led to important alliances of Waldorf teachers, other concerned educators, and parents to support educational policies that protect childhood and honor sound principles of child development. The approach of the Bush administration to the crisis in education has been to tie federal funding to national testing, forcing legislators to emphasize raising test scores, and school districts to require that teachers "teach to the test." Parents may not be aware that district-wide curricula now prescribe exactly what must be taught, and how, on each day in each subject. This kind of teaching, with its mind-numbing drill, rote learning, and high-stakes testing, only increases the feeling of disconnection in students, who find little in the school experience that gives them a sense of meaning or purpose. It is an astonishing fact that more than a third of public-school ninth graders drop out before graduating from high school.²

An increasing number of teachers and parents feel that the current administration's response to the crisis in education is not grounded in an understanding of how children learn, nor does it foster the skills and flexibility they will need in tomorrow's world. The Waldorf approach, however, gives solid results without resorting to drill and rote memorization by addressing how children learn at different ages. Steiner was a pioneer in the area of developmentally based, age-appropriate learning, and many of his insights and practical applications were later borne out by the work of Gesell, Piaget, Gardner, and others. The Waldorf approach recognizes that children younger than seven years learn best when taught concretely through movement and example, whereas school-age children (ages 7–14) learn best when they are engaged imaginatively and artistically. Then, when children reach high school, around age 14, their growing ability to analyze and think abstractly has a rich body of experience on which to draw. An artistic approach to learning permeates the Waldorf curriculum at all levels—it is not something added on, or "extracurricular."

The Waldorf approach also goes against the current tide of teaching subjects such as reading and math at increasingly younger ages. This trend in public education began in the late 1950s, following the shock of the first Russian spacecraft, and has pushed the first-grade curriculum down into kindergarten and even into preschools. This has not led to improved learning, however; test scores at all levels have been falling ever since. In contrast to early academics, Waldorf preschool and

kindergarten teachers recognize that reading must be grounded in a rich field of oral learning and meaning, and thus they carefully lay the foundations for early literacy through storytelling, singing, and movement games. If abstract processes such as reading are not crammed into young minds but are taught when the child's brain is maturationally ready, at around the age of seven, failure and boredom are minimized. Neuropsychologist and author Jane Healy reports that several studies in different countries have shown that when five and seven year olds are taught reading by the same methods, the seven year olds learn far more quickly and happily than do the fives, who are more likely to develop reading difficulties.³

Similarly, teenaged children can learn to use computers in a week or two—they don't need to start "practicing" at age three. Three year olds need to be running, jumping, and skipping; they need to be experiencing concepts such as "heavy" and "light" by sitting on a teeter-totter, not by moving a mouse and watching a screen. As teenagers, they can easily use the computer for word-processing and research and be taught the basic principles of how a computer works, what it can do, and how it differs from human intelligence. Donald Bufano, former chair of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, explained in an interview, "There is nothing that 'isn't Waldorf.' It's just a question of when."⁴

What Do Children Need to Know in Today's World?

"Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings, who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives." If this goal, here articulated by Rudolf Steiner, is to be realized—if children are to be motivated of themselves to engage in the world as teenagers and young adults—then they must have both the tools for success and a sense of purpose and efficacy to counteract the apathy and cynicism so rampant in today's society. Waldorf education strives to recognize and value each child as an individual with unique talents and needs. Children in a Waldorf school develop a strong sense of community because they spend eight years not only with the same classmates, but with the same teacher, who stays with the class and teaches all the main academic subjects from grades one through eight. During these years students also have a wealth of "special subjects" teachers, in foreign languages, music, and art, for example.

Rather than being given letter grades and made to feel superior or deficient, each Waldorf student is encouraged to do his or her best work. Although individual capacities vary, each child is valued as a capable learner. Textbooks are rarely used in Waldorf schools; instead, lessons are taught through rich stories and conversations. Students then create their own "textbooks" or "main lesson books," which become written and artistic records of what they have experienced in class and learned in each subject. Gifted children in one subject area can do extra work according to their interest—or they might be encouraged to help a classmate, turning their gift to a social purpose rather than promoting egoism. The Waldorf teacher must work with the social element as much as with the intellectual, and—like a parent—doesn't have the luxury of getting rid of a "difficult child" in June, never to see them again. Instead, the teacher must find creative ways to work things through with each child through the years.

Because it is geared toward the way children naturally learn best, the Waldorf curriculum is especially rich and varied in the teenage years. In seventh grade, for example, the curriculum meets the young teen by introducing perspective and charcoal drawing in art classes, providing some "perspective" on the tendency of this age to view things as black or white. The physics curriculum works with fulcrums, levers, and pulleys, echoing in the physical world the rapid growth of their arms and legs that teens experience at this age. Algebra begins in eighth grade, with the development of the ability for abstract thinking noted by Piaget and others. And history is taught through biography, exploring ideals and role models through people who have made a difference in society.

The high school curriculum is also sensitive to the tremendous developmental changes taking place

at this time in a teenager's life. For example, ninth graders are plunging with new intensity into the materiality of their bodies even as they are being liberated into the immateriality of abstract thinking. This inner tension is reflected back to them in the study of such outer phenomena as heat and cold in physics, the age of revolutions in history, and the collision of tectonic plates in geology. The focus is on observation and on facts, helping to ground the student's emerging capacity for abstract thinking in the realities of the world around them.

In contrast, the junior year is often a time of newfound inner depth in the realms of thought, feeling, and deeds. This curriculum concentrates on experiences not accessible to the experience of our senses, through study of the Grail legends and Dante's *Divine Comedy* in literature, the world of the atom in chemistry, and the medieval and renaissance eras of exploration to unknown destinations. Students are challenged to understand at a new depth: "Why are things this way? Why did the events of history take this or that course? And even deeper 'why' questions—those of destiny, life's meaning, social responsibility—often find their way into the classroom at this stage."⁵

Criticisms and Challenges

In the area of education, parents need to clarify their values, investigate the ideals behind any given educational form (including public education), and observe the teaching methods used in the schools near them. They need to know themselves and their child, inform themselves about various approaches, and visit any school they are considering for their child. Some parents, when they see the beautiful, protected environment of a Waldorf preschool and kindergarten, wonder if it is going adequately to prepare children for "the real world." But the Waldorf approach of providing children, before the age of seven, with a foundation based on play, movement, and oral learning does not mean that these are "artsy" feel-good schools. Although reading may be taught more slowly in first grade as children learn to read from what they have written themselves, all four mathematical processes (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) are introduced in first grade. The curriculum is both academically stimulating and challenging, especially as children make the transition from the early grades to their teens. In fact, 93 percent of Waldorf high school graduates attend four-year colleges, and frequently report that they have trouble deciding on a major because their interests and skills span the humanities and sciences—something that is hardly a problem if the purpose of education has been the balanced development of the whole human being.

Waldorf schools clearly state that they are not religious schools and are nonsectarian, while maintaining that the human being consists of more than the physical body and a set of learned behaviors. But some critics claim that, in recognizing a spiritual dimension to the child's nature, the Waldorf method crosses over into the realm of religion and belief. Steiner, however, was completely against setting up any form of dogma. He always encouraged people to test his ideas against their own experience, not to accept them as a doctrine or as tenets of faith. There are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim Waldorf teachers, all of whom are careful to leave religious instruction to the parents and not put before the children their own religious beliefs, or even their study of Anthroposophy (Steiner's name for his approach to understanding human nature). Those who want to learn more about this area are encouraged to visit www.spiritworking.org or www.anthroposophy.org for more information.

Another criticism sometimes raised about Waldorf education has to do with its roots in Germany and the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum. The curriculum developed by Steiner in the first school certainly drew heavily on European folklore and traditions, as it was designed for children growing up in Germany in 1919. But as Waldorf education has spread throughout the world, Waldorf teachers have explored and adapted the curriculum to include the fairy tales, folk tales, history, and geography of each country in which the schools are founded. In the US, this has meant exploring multiculturalism and ways the curriculum can reflect our diversity as a nation. Steiner hoped the curriculum would remain alive and changing by always emphasizing that the most valuable element in teaching is the teacher's own creativity, and his or her struggle to teach each subject in the way that is

most engaging for the students. Waldorf teachers continue to develop the curriculum, and to explore such current questions as how to teach science and computers in today's world, how to meet the social challenges teens face today, and how to meet the needs of children who require special-education classes.

The high cost of tuition, as at private schools generally, makes it challenging to prevent the Waldorf method from becoming an elitist education. Having founded the first Waldorf school for factory workers, Steiner never intended that Waldorf education be accessible only to the rich. In fact, one of his central ideas was that education, and all of what he called "cultural life," should be a matter of truly free choice for all children and all families, and not be determined by economic privilege or the state. This was a radical notion, but one that he was convinced would pump new energy and life into society. Many European governments subsidize private schools, which makes Waldorf education accessible to many more people. This is in contrast to the financial struggles experienced by so many private Waldorf schools in the US, which strive to keep tuition as low as possible.

One attempt to address this dilemma has been to introduce Waldorf methods in public schools. The first public school using Waldorf methods was founded in Milwaukee in 1991. The growing charter-school movement has led to the increased development of charter and magnet schools that work with Waldorf principles. Many teachers have also responded to the challenge of taking Waldorf principles into education for at-risk populations, incorporating Waldorf principles into children's programs in homeless shelters, and using them successfully with juvenile offenders in a court-mandated program in Yuba City, California.

The greatest challenge to Waldorf education in this country has been its rapid growth. New Waldorf schools open each year, and the demand for trained Waldorf teachers now exceeds the supply. New training programs have developed in various regions, along with summer programs for teachers who need to complete the training as they teach. A full Waldorf training not only takes the teacher from the fairy tales of first grade through the chemistry and physics of grade eight, but also must develop the teacher's artistic abilities, which were probably neglected during the teacher's own school years. But the most important task of Waldorf teacher preparation is to awaken and encourage the teacher in his or her own inner development, through the arts and meditative practices. It is the teacher's own example of being on a path of constant growth and self-development that communicates most strongly to the growing child.

Until recently, the Waldorf approach has been mostly unknown to mainstream educators. But after 75 years of development in North America, Waldorf education is finally being recognized and validated in academic circles. In the words of Dr. Gabriele Rico, professor of English and creative arts at California State University in San Jose, "Steiner was very ahead of his time. What he recognized about learning in the early 1900s is gradually being substantiated by new discoveries in brain research. . . . It has been putting into effect what major brain researchers and educators are discovering about the human brain/mind. What Rudolf Steiner envisioned is only beginning to be part of the educational consciousness of the last two decades."⁶