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## Educating the Whole Child, “Head, Heart, and Hands”: Learning From the Waldorf Experience

**M**ARLENE, A 16-YEAR-OLD TENTH GRADER, had been a Waldorf student for all of her elementary school years. She tried the local public high school for ninth grade. In an interview with me, she emphasized that it was the “quality of the students’ thinking” that made her come running back to a Waldorf high school. Marlene enjoys playing several instruments, singing, making music with friends, drawing, painting, and “discovering what else interests me.” She attributes her broad range of interests and her love of learning to the opportunities provided by a Waldorf education (Easton, 1995, p. 246).

A tenth grade boy who had been in a Waldorf school only since ninth grade volunteered:

Before I came to Green Meadow, I was a jock. All I thought about was sports. I played baseball, soccer, hockey, and basketball, with no time for anything else. Here I became aware and open to other interests; music, poetry and eurythmy.<sup>1</sup> I still like sports but it’s no longer my whole life. (Easton, 1995, p. 275).

Successive interviews with more than 50 students, grades 7 to 12, reiterated this awareness that Waldorf schools provided an “education with a difference.” Students spoke of the school as a caring community. They recognized that artistic work and the arts in the curriculum played a significant role

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in a process of learning to think holistically about what is important in life. Students talked about learning to balance the intellectual with the artistic and the practical, to enjoy work but “not get lost in professionalism or materialism,” to be a “person beyond one’s work,” to “think for oneself but consider others” (pp. 259, 277). Many had strong social concerns that transcended their own self-interest; a desire to help less privileged people, protect animals, and preserve the natural environment (Easton, 1995).

Waldorf educators strive to develop the aesthetic, spiritual, and interpersonal sensibilities of the child in ways that enrich, enliven, and reinforce intellectual knowing. By engaging the whole child in the learning process, “heart and hands, as well as head,” they find that children become more involved and enthusiastic about learning.

In the United States, Waldorf schools are independent schools that have served mostly students from families that can afford tuition. The first Waldorf school was established in New York City in 1928. The movement grew slowly until 1965 when the eight existing schools formed the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA). There followed a period of escalating growth until now over 125 schools are affiliated with AWSNA (Jaekel, 1996).

In this article, I (a) identify six key elements of Waldorf education, (b) describe the experience

of the Urban Waldorf School of Milwaukee (UWS), the first Waldorf inspired public school, based on an evaluation made by a team of non-Waldorf educational researchers after 3 years of the school's existence, (c) discuss what I believe mainstream educators can learn from the experience of Waldorf schools, and (d) conclude with a personal statement about the importance of such learning for educators, parents, and students in our increasingly high tech world where problems of alienation, substance abuse, and violence continue to escalate.

### **Key Elements of Waldorf Education**

Waldorf theory and practice are based on the work of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher, scientist, and educator who lived at the turn of the last century (1861-1924). Steiner said his purpose was to create a new impulse in education that would enable children from diverse backgrounds to develop the capacities necessary to cope with the demands and challenges of a post-industrial world. Steiner's thesis was that as cultures become more technologically advanced, human beings need to become more conscious of their capacity to become fully human, if they are to resist competing pressures toward dehumanization. Waldorf education resonates with increasing numbers of educators and parents today because it provides a framework that informs and inspires educators to think about ways to create a learning community that nurtures children's capacity to become whole human beings in a world that is becoming increasingly mechanized.

Within my perspective, the following are six key elements of Waldorf educational theory and practice: (a) a theory of child development, (b) a theory of teacher self-development, (c) a core curriculum that integrates artistic and academic work, (d) a method of teaching as an art that pays careful attention to synchronizing teaching methods with the rhythm of a child's unfolding capacities, (e) integration of teaching and administration, and (f) building the school and the greater Waldorf community as networks of support for students, teachers, and parents.

#### **Theory of child development**

Basic to Waldorf's philosophy is a complex image of the child as a threefold human being—body, soul, and spirit. Each of these three dimen-

sions is related to four senses, thus expanding our customary view of five human senses to twelve (Soesman, 1983).<sup>2</sup> The arts play a significant role in developing the capacities of each child to perceive both one's inner and outer world. When we actively contemplate, practice, or create artistic work, we become more aware of our sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

The aim of the Waldorf model is to educate the child toward a holistic thinking that integrates knowledge gained from thinking, feeling, and doing. Holistic thinking within this framework also refers to the integration of knowledge that is derived from considering beauty, goodness, and truth as complementary ways of more fully understanding reality.

Waldorf educators share a comprehensive theory of child development that shapes its educational practices. Waldorf educators view the child's trifold capacities as unfolding in 7-year rhythms from birth to age 21. They view each individual as being born with a unique inner self that is capable of evolving toward freedom, responsibility, and maturity if appropriate stimulation and nourishment are provided at each developmental stage: the pre-school years (0-7), the elementary school years (7-14), and the adolescent years (14-21).

During the first stage, the child experiences the world through physical activity and learns through imitation and play. Stories, songs, quality materials, and behavior worthy of imitation stimulate physical growth, language development, and curiosity, thus laying a sound foundation for the later development of imagination and thinking.

With the change of teeth, the child enters a second stage that continues until puberty. During this period, the child draws nourishment from experiences that develop consciousness of feelings and feed the imagination. Now stories become opportunities to create mental pictures that do not depend on immediate experience. This is a time when the senses become differentiated and refined through direct participation in a wide variety of visual, musical, and tactile artistic activities. Waldorf theory emphasizes that the child needs to have a caring authority figure make critical decisions until the child gains sufficient experience on which to base meaningful choices. It highlights that if children are given choice before they acquire the

ability to consider the long-range effects of their decisions, a pattern of immediate gratification is reinforced.

The high school years, when the child's capacities for abstract thinking unfold, become the third stage of child development. Students need experiences that enable them to understand and reflect upon the relationships between ideas presented in different subject areas and to make judgments about what is meaningful to them (Steiner, 1965). In an effort to develop holistic thinking, an appreciation of beauty and a sense of ethical responsibility are incorporated in the teaching of all subject areas. This is achieved in part by integrating information and consideration of how knowledge is gained and used. An emphasis is also placed on the form in which teachers present material and students present reports and projects.

### **Theory of teacher self-development**

Waldorf educators view their own self-development not only as a personal striving but as one of the most fundamental aspects of their qualifications as teachers. A basic Waldorf practice in the elementary school is for the main lesson teacher to follow the same class from first to eighth grade. Its aim is to provide continuity and intimacy with one teacher throughout elementary school. The teacher's role and expectations change with each phase of children's growth.

This demanding and challenging commitment by the main lesson teacher requires that the teacher follow a path of self-development that makes it possible to keep pace with the changing needs of students. Faculty discussions and shared artistic work such as choral singing, dramatic presentations, concerts, and eurythmy workshops become occasions for development and renewal that supplement the efforts of individual teachers.

### **Core curriculum**

To educate the thinking, feeling, and willing capacities of the whole child, Steiner outlined a core curriculum in which the visual, musical, and tactile arts are integrated in all subjects areas from preschool through high school. The metaphor of the spiral curriculum derives from the way the curriculum at each level builds on past experience and lays a foundation for work in later years so

that children learn similar content in different ways at each stage, deepening their learning as new capacities unfold.

Language and history, initially taught through fairy tales and songs, are subsequently taught through legend, poems, and chants. Later in high school, the more complex cultural achievements of different traditions are introduced through literature, the history of art, and the history of music. An emphasis is placed on the evolution of knowledge and its gradual division into the specializations that exist today, with an effort to recognize the connections between all knowledge.

At each level, specific main lesson topics are selected each year by the teacher from guidelines offered by the Waldorf core curriculum. Teachers have a high degree of autonomy to choose materials and activities as well as topics and to implement the curriculum in a personal way, thus making teaching and learning more creative and alive. Chalkboard drawings by the teacher, relevant to each topic, introduce each unit and remain on the board for the duration of the unit. Whether the main topic is math, science, social studies, or literature, artistic work such as form drawing, coloring, and painting are incorporated in the main lesson books the children themselves make for each topic. Primary sources are used as references and there are no basic texts.

For example, the presentation of a third grade social studies unit on the Northwest American Indians included a chalkboard drawing by the teacher of a longhouse decorated with characteristic designs and color. Students were asked to choose one of the designs as a border to decorate the pages of their main lesson book for the unit, and to select their own color combinations. As part of the same lesson, they were taught to play on their recorders a rain incantation typical of this particular group of Indians. The morning verse that day was followed by a traditional Indian poem invoking a new day. With each artistic activity, the mood and the life of the Northwest Indian became more alive for the children.

In an eighth grade main lesson block on geometry in art and nature, week 1 was devoted to making constructions of the logarithmic spiral as it appears in nature in the web of a spider, a pine cone, the shell of a snail, and the leaves of a fern.

Week 2 focused on understanding the golden triangle and the golden proportion that underlies growth in plant and animal life. Week 3 attended to forms in nature based on the pentagon. Week 4, which I observed, focused on the contributions of early Greek mathematicians; Thales, Pythagoras, and Euclid. Guided by the teacher, students read aloud and committed to memory Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet on Euclid, in preparation for a presentation they were to make at the next school assembly. Oral recitation of poetry is a way of reinforcing knowledge and learning to express content in an appropriately dramatic way.

These are samples of how artistic work is integrated in all subject areas in the Waldorf curriculum. Such practices extend and deepen intellectual experiences with images, sounds, and textures that stimulate the senses, enrich feeling, and discipline activity.

The Waldorf curriculum also involves students in a broad range of special artistic activities that enable children to experience the full spectrum of inner feeling and express themselves through a variety of disciplines. The visual and plastic arts develop sensibilities to color, line, form, and texture. The musical arts develop sensibilities to sound, melody, rhythm, and movement. The literary arts develop sensibilities to words and language.

Steiner and Waldorf educators developed a unique art form, eurythmy, for the specific purpose of teaching children to integrate the sounds of speech, poetry, and music through movement, gesture, and color. It provides an opportunity for the child to develop specific capacities such as spatial orientation, powers of concentration, and grace in movement, but most importantly it enables the child to experience a sense of inner balance and wholeness in community with others. Beyond its educational function, eurythmy has also been practiced as a stage art and a curative therapy. Some believe it is the quintessential Waldorf experience. Programs in schools vary in direct relation to the availability of a eurythmist and necessary financial resources.

In the Waldorf high school, the form of the main lesson is retained, but it is taught by teachers who are expert in specific subject areas. The curriculum becomes focused on enabling the students to understand themselves and the external world at

deeper levels of complexity than was possible before their capacity for abstract thinking unfolded.

### **Method of teaching as art**

"Consider the what, but consider the how even more" is an epigram by Goethe, frequently quoted by Waldorf teachers. In addition to integrating artistic work in all subject areas and involving students in a broad range of artistic activities, Waldorf method advocates teaching as an art by creating an aesthetic environment, and presenting subject matter in an artistic way.

Waldorf educators recognize beauty as critical to the health and growth of human beings. They believe beauty in nature and the classroom nurture the inner child and enable the child to experience a sense of well-being, reverence, gratitude, and harmony. The Waldorf teacher makes children in the elementary school aware of the natural beauty and rhythms of the seasons by arranging a nature table with objects typical of the changing seasons. Children are encouraged to add to the collection. The display of art objects that reflect the traditions of the cultures of the class is another way of making children feel at home in the school and sensitizing them to the expression of beauty in their own backgrounds.

The use of music to transition from one activity to the next is yet another way the Waldorf school fosters an aesthetic environment. There are no jarring bells to separate learning periods and mark the beginning or end of the school day. In some schools, each teacher chooses a different instrument on which to strike a note or a brief musical phrase to announce transitions from one activity to another.

Storytelling is another major artistic activity and learning tool in Waldorf education. Teachers tell, rather than read, stories in an expressive voice, modeling a quality the class is expected to imitate in group recitations. Stories are incorporated in all main lesson blocks and are alternated with poems or songs as opening or closing activities. Stories are an age-old means of enlivening the learning process and stimulating students' imaginations. Sometimes a candle is lit to create a contemplative mood. Children remember more easily information that is couched in the context of a story.

The Waldorf teacher intentionally uses the rhythms of time, sound, and movement in engaging

children in the learning situation. I had the opportunity to observe young children learn the shapes of circles, squares, and triangles through movement; learn their arithmetic tables through dancing, singing, and clapping; and learn their letters through stories and drawing pictures of words that begin with their sounds. For example, out of the story of the bumble bee comes the *B*. Artistic work and poetry are included in the study of science, history, and literature. Form drawing and the construction of five regular solids are basic to the teaching of geometry in a visual and tactile way (Sheen, 1991).

As children enter the classroom each morning, Waldorf teachers make a conscious effort to greet each child by name, with a handshake, an eye to eye look, a listening ear, and sometimes a comment. Leichter (1980) and Uhrmacher (1993) emphasize the importance of these “moments of focused attention” through which the teacher makes personal contact with each child in preparation for the learning situation. In a traditional Waldorf classroom, the teacher takes the attendance with the children singing in responsive rhythms:

Chrisopher Smith, are you here?

Yes, Mrs. Henley, I am here.

Alicia Marshall, Are you here?

No, Mrs. Henley, she’s not here.

(McDermott et al., in press)

Similar responsive singing is used to learn and spell the days of the week, the months of the year, and to move seamlessly into the next activity, dancing, singing, and clapping multiplication tables in rhythm.

### **Integration of teaching and administration**

In a traditional Waldorf school, administrative leadership is shared by the entire faculty, which selects members to a steering committee (referred to as the “College of Teachers”). A head teacher is selected by this steering committee. Traditionally, the head teacher continues in a major teaching role, often as a main lesson teacher. As changing social conditions have made children’s needs more complex, the desirability of asking the same person to carry major teaching and administrative responsibility simultaneously is being reevaluated.

The staffs of the three schools at which I did my research were all in the process of reconsidering the way in which their school was administered,

with an eye to relieving the overextension of teachers. Some think the advantages of a faculty-run school can be preserved if a person does not carry the role of main lesson teacher and administrative head simultaneously. Waldorf teachers value the voice they have in responding to students’ needs at the building level and, despite overextension, are in no way prepared to give up this meaningful role.

### **The school as a learning community**

The development of the school as a learning community is one of the major achievements of Waldorf education. Waldorf educators share a mission, a philosophy, educational theories, practices, and rituals that are key factors in building community dedicated to educating children toward freedom and responsibility. I have highlighted the philosophy and the specific theories and practices that Waldorf educators share. Most teachers say they enjoy teaching in a Waldorf school despite excessive demands because of the autonomy it allows the teacher in designing curriculum, the freedom from bureaucratic constraints, the community of support it provides, and the opportunity it affords for personal growth.

Lee Shulman, professor of education at Stanford University, emphasizes the importance for teachers of a network of support beyond an individual school and a wider forum for discussion. He views this as an essential element in continuing teachers’ growth and renewing their enthusiasm. Annual meetings and regional conferences provide such opportunities for Waldorf teachers. A worldwide community of more than 640 Waldorf schools (Jaekel, 1996) is coordinated by the pedagogical section of the Anthroposophic Society, headquartered in Dornach, Switzerland. There are international meetings, a cross fertilization of ideas in print, and an exchange of speakers.

### **The Urban Waldorf School of Milwaukee**

In 1991, the Milwaukee Public Schools opened the first Waldorf inspired public school in the United States, the Urban Waldorf School (UWS). In the midst of the national crisis in education, Milwaukee was casting about for educational approaches that represented “islands of educational success.” A unique set of circumstances

converged to bring the Milwaukee public school system and Waldorf educators together to establish this inner city school (McDermott et al., in press). It was hoped that Waldorf pedagogy could be adapted as an effective model for urban children in public schools.

In 1994, after 3 years of the school's existence, a team of seven non-Waldorf affiliated educational researchers were asked to evaluate whether UWS "works." After immersion in the life of the school for a week, all the members of the team agreed that despite the violence in the neighborhood that surrounds the school and many of its children, life inside the school is safe, well ordered, and relationally warm. There is little aggression, and misbehavior is consistently negotiated. UWS is a school where teachers teach and students learn. In the 3 years since its inception, students' performance on standardized reading tests increased from 26 percent to 63 percent above grade level. These are major achievements in the face of overwhelming odds.

The children and their backgrounds are treated with respect. The school emphasizes character development as well as cognitive learning in preparation for taking one's place as an educated citizen. The school is aesthetically pleasing, primarily because it is filled with the results of a strong art program. UWS is a setting where the principal and faculty are engaging in ongoing conversations about how they can help students cope with issues of poverty and racism in the larger environment (McDermott et al., in press).

Valid questions can be raised as to what variables other than Waldorf might be contributing to the ongoing success of UWS. Certainly, the unique set of circumstances that converged to make UWS happen were all important—support from the board of education, the superintendent, key persons in the central office administration, and the teachers' union. An adequate budget, funding for teacher training, and freedom from the usual bureaucratic constraints were equally necessary.

All agree that a principal and teachers, informed and inspired by Waldorf philosophy and practices to new ways of thinking about how to meet the needs of children who usually do not achieve educational success, were the most critical factors in achieving positive outcomes. If it is not

possible to tease out those factors directly attributable to the Waldorf model, there is consensus that what is happening at UWS would not have happened without the Waldorf framework.

A third grade teacher at UWS volunteered that the Waldorf teacher training program had empowered her to integrate the rhythms of nature, poetry, stories, songs, and movement into all learning and better fit the curriculum to the styles and needs of particular pupils (McDermott et al., in press). She found that her pupils settle down more quickly into a school mode if they are asked to do a cognitive task immediately upon entering the classroom. This task usually relates to the main lesson and is written on the blackboard for easy reference as they arrive.

This delays the class recitation of the morning verse from its traditional place at the beginning of the school day until 9:30 a.m., a half hour after the opening. Such modification allows for the inclusion of latecomers in this important class ritual and enables the students to better cope with the transition from home to school. The recitation of the morning verse is further modified to eliminate references to God and to include movements that help students burn off excess energy:

The sun with loving light, (arms reaching out in an embrace)  
Makes bright for me each day. (arms open)  
The light within myself (arms overhead)  
Gives strength unto my limbs, (arms extended forward)  
In sunlight, shining clear, (appropriate movements continue)  
I reverence the strength and power of humankind  
that lives in you and me,  
That I with all my might may love to work and  
learn.  
To me comes strength and light,  
From me rise love and thanks. (Easton, 1995, p. 360)

### Learning from the Waldorf Experience

I ally myself with Waldorf educators who do not think there can be a traditional Waldorf school in the public sector. Waldorf schools are Christian based and theistically oriented. It is not consistent with our pluralistic society and our "separation of church and state" tradition to have sectarian or theistic practices in public schools. At a recent Delegates' Assembly, AWSNA adopted a position statement that acknowledged the impossibility of

having a public Waldorf school in the United States because of separation of church and state issues. Henceforth, although no public school can call itself a Waldorf school, a particular school can be recognized as having a Waldorf inspired program (Alsop, 1996, p. 14).

We can learn from Waldorf education about the value and meaning of rituals, symbols, and ceremony, but the model leaves to others the task of developing truly pluralistic non-sectarian symbols, rituals, and ceremonies (Spretnak, 1991). I view the Urban Waldorf School as a Waldorf inspired program and not a traditional Waldorf school. Its achievements are attributable to the principal's and staff's understanding of the essential aims of Waldorf education and the creative ways in which they have transformed specific practices to respond to the particular needs of inner city children. Such a process requires a deep understanding both of the philosophy and aims of the Waldorf model and the needs of the particular children involved.

Other transformations are being realized as Waldorf inspired schools open in different cultural settings such as Israel and Japan. Such countries draw on the spiritual traditions of their own heritage and do not necessarily have to contend with issues of separation of church and state. It remains for mainstream educators in the United States to explore ways of linking scientific rationalism to a truly pluralistic spirituality. Steiner himself recognized that it is not only appropriate but necessary for all teachers to adapt the curriculum and materials to the particular traditions and backgrounds of the children being taught (Byers, 1995).

Byers (1995) emphasizes that Waldorf is as much a new way of thinking for teachers as it is a method or curriculum. From this vantage point, it is necessary for the faculty of a school to work together to use Waldorf theories of child development and teacher self-development as a framework and a guide to build a learning community committed to educating all children toward becoming whole human beings.

Waldorf education is both stimulating and demanding for teachers. Activities that promote the self-development of teachers are considered essential to renew teachers and avoid burnout. Such an emphasis is not unique to the Waldorf movement, but what distinguishes Waldorf efforts is again a

profound recognition of the role of artistic work in the continuing growth and renewal of adults as well as children. During the time I did research in three Waldorf schools, I participated in a community chorus, a speech and drama program, eurythmy, and painting workshops open to teachers and parents.

Waldorf educators emphasize the critical role of the arts at every stage in the development of the whole person. Every artistic activity demands disciplined coordination of our ability to think, feel, and do. Specific arts such as choral singing, group recitation of poetry, orchestral music, dance, drama, and eurythmy also develop the ability to collaborate with others. Children learn to experience the world more keenly as they strive to express themselves through various artistic disciplines. Their perception, imagination, insight, and creative thinking are cultivated by the demands of artistic work. Others can learn from Waldorf educators how to utilize the arts to enrich cognitive learning and educate the child toward becoming more fully human.

Waldorf education's method of teaching as an art empowers teachers to provide a more alive context for learning by creating an aesthetic environment that appeals to children's sense of beauty and order. By coordinating the rhythms of sound and movement in stories, songs, and poetry, children's imaginations are captivated and subject matter is made more vivid. Teachers are able to help children become more fully involved in the educational process by synchronizing teaching methods with the rhythms of a child's unfolding capacities. By utilizing such strategies, teachers can help children from diverse backgrounds become more enthusiastic about learning.

The Waldorf model demonstrates the overall advantages of empowering teachers to set policy and make the significant decisions about teaching, curriculum, and administration. Teacher self-esteem and job satisfaction are enhanced, as is their ability to relate to students and parents in meaningful ways. Although the integration of teaching and administration frequently results in the overextension of teachers, there is overall consensus that the benefits of teacher participation in decision making about policy and curriculum outweigh the problems.

The effectiveness of Waldorf education derives from their leaders' and teachers' willingness to struggle to build schools as cohesive learning communities that share a vision of the aims of education, a common image of the child, a core curriculum that respects teachers' professionalism and autonomy, and a common method of teaching as an art. The key elements of Waldorf education can become a framework for reframing the questions and broadening the conversation among educators and parents in the wider community about how we educate children to become more fully human in today's high tech world. Mainstream educators can learn from Waldorf educators a more integrated way of viewing children, teachers, schools, and education.

### Conclusion

As I reflect on what others can learn from the Waldorf experience, I come back to the mission and aims at the core of Waldorf philosophy. Waldorf educators strive to educate children to become whole human beings in the face of a scientific rationalism that views us as machines and technological advances that threaten to mechanize our lives. Waldorf provides a framework for envisioning a renewal of thinking that integrates imagination, inspiration, and intuition into our ways of knowing (Sloan, 1992). It recognizes the essential role of artistic work in educating children toward a holistic thinking that encompasses aesthetic and ethical considerations.

Artistic work provides opportunities to become more conscious of our inner and outer worlds. It helps children learn to concentrate, pay attention to detail, and envision the whole. It encourages the free expression of the human spirit in more disciplined ways and strives to balance freedom and discipline. By educating "head, heart, and hands," Waldorf education seeks to nurture a self-esteem that encompasses aesthetic and moral sensibilities as well as intellectual competence.

Waldorf aims, theories, and practices can inspire us to rethink our educational paradigms and structure conversations about how we can respond more creatively to the particular needs of children from diverse backgrounds in our pluralistic society. In order for Waldorf education to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, forward looking

Waldorf educators recognize their own need to re-evaluate, on an ongoing basis, whether their practices achieve their aims. This article suggests that the Waldorf model can provide a meaningful framework for all schools and educators to reevaluate their existing theories and practices.

### Notes

1. The section, "Core Curriculum," describes the art form, eurythmy.
2. Rudolf Steiner distinguished six senses that turn us inward to our own bodies—touch, life, movement, balance, taste, and smell. Taste and smell begin to relate us to aspects of the environment outside our own organism. The six remaining senses tend to take us more out of our bodies—sight, temperature, hearing, word, thought, a sense of "I." The latter defines our own boundaries and defines the world of the "other," beyond ourselves.

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