

The Beneficial Effects of Waldorf Education

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“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility—these three forces are the very nerve of education.”

— RUDOLF STEINER, FOUNDER OF WALDORF EDUCATION

Introduction

The Waldorf Education movement is a holistic style of education created by the Austrian polymath Rudolf Joseph Laurence Steiner. In addition to supplying background information on Steiner and Waldorf Educational itself, this paper presents the thesis that Steiner’s educational system is beneficial to students.

To support this thesis, an argument is developed that Waldorf Education is beneficial in three main ways.

The first way is that the Waldorf approach strives to educate the whole child – the body, mind & spirit – as opposed to only educating the child’s intellect. The second reason why Waldorf Education is beneficial to students is because Waldorf education emphasizes creativity as part of the learning process across the entire academic curriculum. Finally, evidence is provided that Waldorf

education is beneficial to students in the sense that both subjective surveys as well as objective scientific studies document the positive outcomes for students.

Background on Rudolf Steiner

To begin to understand Waldorf Education and why it is beneficial to students, it is helpful to have background information on its founder, Rudolf Steiner. Mays & Nordwall (2014) provide relevant background on Steiner's life and education which informs the summary supplied here.

Steiner was born on February 25th, 1861 in what is now known as Croatia. Steiner's own educational and scientific background is extensive. This fact is important to understand because the unfolding of Steiner's education and scholarly life is what led up to his eventual founding of his own school.

While still a teenager, Steiner was educated at the Technical University in Vienna. There Steiner's studies included many domains of knowledge, including at least the subjects of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and natural history. Additionally, while at University Steiner was exposed to the ideas of various influential German philosophers of the day, such as Robert Zimmermann and Franz Brentano. Steiner went on to earn his Ph.D from the University of Rostock where his dissertation concerned Epistemology, the theory of knowledge.

Additionally, Steiner himself was involved in teaching in several ways. The first example is from 1884 to 1890 where Steiner supported himself as a private tutor to the children of a rich family. Further, starting in 1899, Steiner also taught at the Berlin Workers' Training School. At the school, Steiner lectured in such subjects as history and literature – in addition to science.

Eventually, Steiner started his own school.

The circumstances surrounding this began with an invitation that Steiner had received to give a series of lectures to the workers at the Waldorf-Astoria

cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. Impressed with Steiner's ideas, eventually the owner of the factory, Emil Molt, asked Steiner if he could develop a school curriculum for the children of the factory's employees.

Steiner agreed, but stipulated several requirements.

The first thing that Steiner stipulated was that the school should be open to all children – regardless of ability to pay – and should include both boys and girls. Additionally, Steiner demanded that the school should consist of a unified twelve-year course of study. Finally, Steiner required that the teachers at the school should be in charge of running the school, with minimal outside interference.

The factory's owner agreed, and under Steiner's direction the first Waldorf school opened in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919. Waldorf Education has since grown to be the largest independent school movement in the USA (Mays & Nordwall, 2014).

Although some of Steiner's stipulations are still valid more than one hundred years later, it is also true that some things have changed. One striking example is that many modern Waldorf Schools today are no longer free! Another difference is that not all modern Waldorf Schools provide a full twelve year curriculum. On a positive note, however, according to Park (2018), there are more than one hundred Waldorf schools which **do** provide an early childhood education program in addition to K-12.

Background on Waldorf Education

To understand how Waldorf education is beneficial to students, it is necessary to become familiarized with the particulars of Steiner's approach.

Waldorf Education is unique in many ways. Mays & Nordwall (2014), for example, claim that Waldorf Education is best described by its stated goal "to

produce individuals who are able, in and of themselves, to impart meaning to their lives" (par. 9.)

To achieve this lofty goal, Mays & Nordwall (2014) summarize many distinct features of Waldorf Education which are drawn upon here to list several pertinent examples.

The first is that academics are de-emphasized in the early years of education. Specifically, Waldorf Kindergarten contains no academic content at all. This lack of academic content allows the children to develop socially through play and interaction before beginning to focus on intellectual knowledge.

Another distinct feature of Waldorf Education is that a single teacher stays with the students through multiple academic years. This fact is interesting because presumably a teacher can come to more fully understand individual students and their unique learning styles, thus guiding them through their development as unique individuals.

Another pertinent feature of Waldorf Education is that non-academic topics such as gardening, art, and music are central to the educational curriculum.

When combined together, these and other distinctive features of Waldorf Education prove the thesis of this paper, which is that Steiner's educational approach is very beneficial to students.

The rest of this paper develops an argument for this thesis.

Benefits of Waldorf Education

The first main way that Waldorf education is beneficial to students is the fact that the intellect is not the only – or even the primary – aspect of a child that is developed. Instead, educating the whole child – “the body, mind & spirit; the head, hands, & heart” – is a defining feature of Waldorf education (Mays & Nordwall, 2014).

One specific way that this is achieved is that Waldorf Education puts less of a focus on rote memorization, tests, or grades. Instead, as Mays & Nordwall (2014) explain:

Learning in a Waldorf school is a noncompetitive activity. There are no grades given at the elementary level; the teacher writes a detailed evaluation of the child at the end of each school year.

This de-emphasis on grades contrasts starkly with traditional public schooling. Nordlund (2013), for example, states that one outcome of teaching in a public school is a sense of being stifled by “a seemingly sterile education institution with its over dependence on and pedagogy aimed at standardized tests” (p. 13).

Eschewing this type of “teaching to the test” results in a beneficial outcome. This frees up additional class time, which is then available to educate the student’s “hands and hearts” too. One example of this is reported by Nordlund (2013) who notes that “it seems as if a freedom to wonder and explore is occurring within Waldorf schools” (p. 13).

Further, such resources as **Oberman (2008) and Goral (2010)** – which document examples of Waldorf-style education being adopted by the public sector – give further evidence that Steiner’s philosophy of educating the “head, hands, & heart” is being recognized as beneficial by the traditional education establishment.

The second main way that Waldorf education is beneficial to students is the focus on developing imagination across the entire academic curriculum. An example of this can be seen in the very beginning stages of the educational process.

According to Park (2018), many classrooms do not have picture books. Instead the teachers do their own storytelling, often using dolls and puppets. Telling stories in this way allows the children to develop their imagination be-

cause the lack of visual stimuli encourages them to picture the story in their own minds. While picture books are often associated with early childhood development, it is interesting that the Waldorf approach differs in this regard: instead of pictures, emphasis is placed on allowing children to develop the internal landscape of their own imagination. The reluctance to over-stimulate young children is further evidenced by the fact that no computers or tablets are used in the early childhood classrooms in Waldorf Schools (Mays & Nordwall, 2014).

Reliance on imagination is also supported by Nordlund (2013) where it is noted that many of the dolls and puppets used in Waldorf classrooms lack detail. The reason for this is so “children create their own reaction to the figures, in their own imagination” (p. 13). The benefit of developing the internal world of the child – their imagination in other words – is therefore facilitated from an early age, and continues across the entire Waldorf K-12 curriculum.

Further, the fact that developing imagination is beneficial to students is supported by Shank (2016) who argues that Steiner’s imagination-first approach to education should be utilized in teaching the government-mandated curriculum in Kenya. Shank summarizes the reason for this by specifically stating that imagination is “a key resource in all forms of learning” (p. 8).

The third main way that Waldorf education is beneficial to students is the fact that both subjective and objective measures provide evidence of positive outcomes.

Three major examples of this evidence are reported here.

The first example comes from Oberman (2008) who presents self-reported student feedback. This feedback indicates that the number of years of Waldorf education is positively correlated with several positive outcomes. Two provided examples of this included: “Ability to Do Independent Analysis” and “Ability to Serve as Global Citizens.” Additionally, the paper also concludes that Waldorf

schools “instill critical thinking, a concern for global issues, and an emphasis on relationships with others” (p. 14).

The second example is an objective scientific study found in Guichot-Muñoz et al. (2021). The study investigates the effects of Waldorf education on student emotional well-being. Specifically, the paper presents the hypothesis that Waldorf education creates students who possess “intrinsic motivation and happiness.” Impressively, the paper then statistically-proves that the hypothesis is true!

Finally, the third example is from Fischer et al. (2013). The question addressed by this study is succinctly described by its title: “The Effect of Attending Steiner Schools during Childhood on Health in Adulthood.” The paper presents a longitudinal study based on students from four Waldorf Schools, seeking to determine how health statuses relating to sixteen different diseases differed between Waldorf students and the general population. While the paper reports to be “exploratory” whose “results must be interpreted with caution” (p. 1), statistically significant health benefits of Steiner school attendance was found. The reported examples of this pertained to reduced instances of osteoarthritis and allergic rhinitis, as well as reduced symptom burden from insomnia, back-pain, joint-pain, imbalance, and gastrointestinal distress. While the paper emphasizes that additional study is needed to fully understand and bolster the results collected, the study seems to at least lend preliminary evidence to the conclusion that Steiner education has some long-term positive health effects.

As these three papers demonstrate, both subjective and objective measures of the positive outcomes of Waldorf education are well-documented.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Waldorf Schools provide a unique, holistic educational approach created by Rudolf Steiner that has existed for more than one hundred years. During that time, it has grown to include schools in more than sixty countries and even to influence the educational approach used in the public sector. Examples of the beneficial nature of Waldorf Education include the fact that it strives to educate the whole child – body, mind & spirit – while also igniting the student’s imagination. Finally, positive outcomes of Waldorf Education are well documented in both subjective and objective scientific studies.

When taken together, these facts firmly support the thesis that Waldorf Education is beneficial to students.

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