Rudolf Steiner founded a school to educate the whole child—head, heart, and hands.

HENRY BARNES

When children relate what they learn to their own experience, they are interested and alive, and what they learn becomes their own. Waldorf schools are designed to foster this kind of learning.

There are more than 500 Waldorf schools in 32 countries. No two are identical; each is administratively independent. Nevertheless, a visitor would recognize many characteristics common to them all.

Waldorf education has its roots in the spiritual-scientific research of the Austrian scientist and thinker Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). According to Steiner's philosophy, man is a threefold being of spirit, soul, and body whose capacities unfold in three developmental stages on the path to adulthood: early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence.

Early Childhood

Infants and young children are entirely given over to their physical surroundings; they absorb the world primarily through their senses and respond in the most active mode of knowing: imitation. Imitation is the power to identify oneself with one's immediate environment through one's active will. Everything—anger, love, joy, hate, intelligence, stupidity—speaks to the infant through the tone of voice, the physical touch, bodily gesture, light, darkness, color, harmony, and disharmony. These influences are absorbed by the still-malleable physical organism and affect the body for a lifetime.

Those concerned with the young child—parents, caregivers, nursery and kindergarten teachers—have a responsibility to create an environment that is worthy of the child's unquestioning imitation. The environment should offer the child plenty of opportunity for meaningful imitation and for creative play. This supports the child in the central activity of these early years: the development of the physical organism. Drawing the child's energies away from this fundamental task to meet premature intellectual demands robs the child of the health and vitality he or she will need for later life. In the end, it weakens the very powers of judgment and practical intelligence the teacher wants to encourage.

Middle Childhood

When children are ready to leave kindergarten and enter 1st grade, they are eager to explore the whole world of experience for the second time. Before, they identified with it and imitated it; now, at a more conscious level, they are ready to know it again, by means of the imagination—that extraordinary power of human cognition that allows us to "see" a picture, "hear" a story, and "divine" meanings within appearances.

During the elementary school years, the educator's task is to transform all that the child needs to know about the world into the language of the imagination—a language that is as accurate and as responsible to reality as intellectual analysis is in the adult. The wealth of an earlier, less intellectual age—folk tales, legends, and mythologies, which

About the Waldorf Schools

The Waldorf schools began in 1919, when Emil Molt, owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, asked Rudolf Steiner to establish a school for the children of his workers. Steiner agreed, under the condition that the school be a unified 12-year school open to all children, independent of political and economic control, with educational responsibility in the hands of the teaching faculty.

Today, 552 schools in 32 countries work with the Waldorf principles and methods. There are 134 schools in Germany, 259 in other European countries, 120 in the United States and Canada, and 17 in Australia. Each school is administratively independent.

Thirty-three full-time teacher training institutes operate in seventeen countries; five are in North America. The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) sponsors an annual conference and regional conferences. The association also sponsors conferences and workshops for schools, parents, and the public. Twice a year, an informal international circle meets in Stuttgart and the Hague.

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The Ascending Spiral of Knowledge

The curriculum at a Waldorf school can be seen as an ascending spiral: the long lessons that begin each day; the concentrated blocks of study that focus on one subject for several weeks. Physics, for example, is introduced in the 6th grade and continued each year as a main lesson block until graduation.

As the students mature, they engage themselves at new levels of experience with each subject. It is as though, each year, they come to a window on the ascending spiral that looks out into the world through the lens of a particular subject. Through the main-lesson spiral curriculum, teachers lay the ground for a gradual vertical integration that deepens and widens each subject experience and, at the same time, keeps it moving with the other aspects of knowledge.

All students participate in all basic subjects regardless of their special aptitudes. The purpose of studying a subject is not to make a student into a profes-
sional mathematician, historian, or biologist, but to awaken and educate capacities that every human being needs. Naturally, one student is more gifted in math and another in science or history, but the mathematician needs the humanities, and the historian needs math and science. The choice of a vocation is left to the free decision of the adult, but one’s early education should give one a palette of experience from which to choose the particular colors that one’s interests, capacities, and life circumstances allow. In a Waldorf high school, older students pursue special projects and elective subjects and activities, but, nevertheless, the goal remains: each subject studied should contribute to the development of a well-balanced individual.

If the ascending spiral of the curriculum offers a “vertical integration” from year to year, an equally important “horizontal integration” enables students to engage the full range of their faculties at every stage of development. The arts and practical skills play an essential part in the educational process throughout the grades. They are not considered luxuries, but fundamental to human growth and development.

The Arts and Practical Skills

Waldorf teachers believe that the human being is not just a brain, but a being with heart and limbs—a being of will and feeling, as well as of intellect. To ensure that education does not produce one-sided individuals, crippled in emotional health and volition, these less-conscious aspects of our human nature must constantly be exercised, nourished, and guided. Here the arts and practical skills make their essential contribution, educating not only heart and hand but, in very real ways, the brain as well.

The 6th grader who, as part of the class study of Roman history, has acted Cassius or Calpurnia, or even Caesar himself, has not only absorbed Shakespeare’s immortal language but has learned courage, presence of mind, and what it means to work as a member of a team for a goal greater than the sum of its parts. The 9th grader who has learned to handle red-hot iron at the forge, or the senior who caps years of modeling exercises by sculpting a full human figure, in addition to a specific skill, gained self-discipline and the knowledge of artistic form.

Students who have worked throughout their education with color and form; with tone, drama, and speech; with eurythmy as an art of bodily movement; with clay, wood, fiber, metal, charcoal and ink, (and, ideally, with soil and plant in a school gardening program), have not only worked creatively to activate, clarify, and strengthen their emotions, but have carried thought and feeling down into the practical exercise of the will.

When the Waldorf curriculum is carried through successfully, the whole human being—head, heart, and hands—has truly been educated. D

Author’s note: For more information about Waldorf Schools, write Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 3911 Bannister Road, Fair Oaks, CA 95628.

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