

How the Waldorf Approach Changed a Difficult Class

A beleaguered teacher with a tough 4th grade class learns a Waldorf technique that delights and surprises the class into learning fractions.

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A few years ago, during a visit to the United States, I talked with a teacher—I'll call her Joan—who taught in one of the toughest and most difficult schools in Los Angeles.

Joan was upset, she told me, because the children in her 4th grade class didn't want to learn; they were uncooperative, rude, noisy, and disobedient. Joan seemed to have a gentle and sensitive disposition and had spent a lifetime teaching and caring for children, but she was obviously disillusioned. I wondered if I should do anything more than express my sympathy.

I decided to take the risk of mentioning the Waldorf approach. I began by describing my own background. I told Joan that several of my teaching posts had been in difficult situations. I began my teaching career in the dock area of the East End of London. My first class was 44 eight-year-olds, many of whom showed little interest in learning.

My training, which had emphasized the cognitive approach to teaching, did not work with these children. Each day became more and more of a battle, but I didn't know what else I could do.

Then I came across Waldorf methodology—an approach that advocates learning as a cooperative venture and that emphasizes the nurturing of the creative and the artistic. When I began using the approach, my children responded positively, and teaching became a lot easier.

I explained to Joan that Waldorf

teachers use pictorial, creative, and imaginative techniques even when teaching academic subjects such as mathematics. Because she was in the process of trying once more to teach the multiplication tables and was having the greatest difficulty, she was very interested. I was teaching courses on

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the approach at a nearby university, so we agreed that I should go to her school to teach some mathematics lessons to her class.

The "Right Time" for Fractions

When I began preparing the lessons, I decided not to continue with the multiplication tables for the time being, but instead to introduce the subject of fractions. Waldorf methodology stresses the importance of introducing fractions to 9- to 10-year-old children, because at

this age they are beginning to lose their holistic and integrated perception of the world.

Up until this time children think globally: they perceive and feel themselves to be part of the world, and they see the world as a unity. Between the ages of 9 and 10 the perceptions become fragmented. The teaching of fractions (taught from the whole to the parts) relates to the fragmentation of these perceptions.

According to the Waldorf approach, there is a "right time" to introduce much of the content of different subject areas. This is usually determined by the child's stage of development, which includes emotional, social, psychological, and physical, as well as cognitive growth.

The children loved their lessons on fractions; their response was immediate and positive. I do not have space to describe the entire series, but I will explain the plan for the lesson on reduction of fractions—not an easy concept to teach, especially to children who were having difficulty learning the two times table!

Bringing the Imagination to Life

As with the introduction of all new concepts with the Waldorf method, my first task was to bring to life each child's power of imagination. This is best done through the art of storytelling, so I created for the children a story that would arouse their interest and spark within them a pictorial image we could work with.

The story involved a young man who traveled to a new country and acquired some land to start farming. I embellished the story until a picture emerged of a farm with various fields and pastures; some divided naturally by streams

and hedges, others divided by fences. There was a store of fodder for the variety of animals that lived on the farm.

With my sketches on the chalkboard for guidance, the children began working on colorful pictures of this farm with its land divided into distinct areas. Much of the value of this part of the lesson lay in the children's active creation of their own pictures—had the picture been presented to the children as a page of a textbook or a diagram on a ditto sheet, it would have lost much of its vitality.

When each child had completed, or nearly completed, a picture of the farm, we were ready to proceed to the next stage. Using their illustrations and the ones on the chalkboard, we discussed the various tasks facing this young farmer. We first talked about the pastures and the horses that were kept there. The pastures were of different sizes and consequently each held a different number of horses.

I had already described how it was winter and how the young farmer drove his trailer, laden with bales of hay, across to the pastures. But how was he to divide the hay so that each horse would receive a fair share?

We talked about the total number of horses and the fraction of the total housed in each pasture (earlier lessons on fractions had been taught through a similar approach, so the children already possessed a grasp of basic concepts). Soon we were able to record our findings in sentences, after which we began

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to use the shorthand of numbers instead of words to record the information.

We found that one pasture housed $8/16$ of the horses, another $4/16$, and a third $4/16$. This gave us the basis for dividing up the trailer of hay. We did this pictorially, and then discussed how time-consuming it would be for the young farmer to divide his hay into 16 parts before distributing it. We selected three colors and shaded the hay for each pasture a different color. We discovered visually that the hay was divided into fractions that we had come across before in our lessons: $1/2$, $1/4$, and $1/4$.

From Pictures to Numbers

My next step was to show the children the mathematical process involved in reducing $8/16$ to $1/2$. This was not difficult as they had already perceived it in pictorial form and it already had meaning for them. Thus we had achieved an understanding of the "reduction of fractions." In subsequent practice lessons, we gradually dispensed with the pictorial and worked only with the number symbols. Later we used the same pictorial imagery to understand the addition of fractions and the concept of "lowest common denominator." We expanded the story to include other animals and their need for grazing land, and how the farmland could be divided to accommodate this.

By the end of the block of lessons on fractions, each child had created what we refer to in Waldorf Education as a "main lesson book." This was a beautifully presented book with quite large pages to accommodate all the drawings that had been produced in the series of lessons. Each new concept was recorded in rich color in a way that was meaningful to each child. There were practice pages where the children had gained experience in calculation; even in these pages color brought the whole activity to life. Textbooks became superfluous when these children had their own artistically presented books to refer back to.

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A Dramatic Transformation

The children remained involved and attentive during all these lessons. For much of the time, when they were working on their main lesson book, there was hardly a murmur in the classroom. Here was a class that, when it was time for recess, usually rushed out to play to escape from their lessons. Now, hardly any of the children moved when the bell rang; they were so engrossed in their drawing, coloring, writing, and calculating that most of them did not even hear it.

Some educators may find it hard to believe that such a transformation is possible. But it comes as no surprise for those who know the Waldorf methods—it's just further proof that the methods work in even difficult situations.

Newly learned content must become a part of a child's experience, or a large part of the teaching process is wasted time and effort. Discovery, creativity, and imagination are the keys that unlock the child's mind. □

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