

5-2018

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### Recommended Citation

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Academic and Social Effects of Waldorf Education on Elementary School Students

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### Abstract

As society becomes more critical of public education, alternative education systems are becoming more popular. The Waldorf education system, based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, has increased in popularity and commonality each decade. Currently, 23 Waldorf institutions exist in California. With this increase in popularity, it is important to analyze and examine the effectiveness of this education philosophy. An examination of Waldorf education, through research and interviews of Waldorf teachers and administration, will provide parents and teachers with an understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, Waldorf education provides a positive environment for students, yielding positive effects but this alternative education system still harbors criticism from society and former students.

## Academic and Social Effects of Waldorf Education on Elementary School Students

### **Introduction and Background**

Awareness and popularity of alternative education is increasing as society questions our education system. Parents are more critical of the United States education system and are looking for alternatives. With 1,000 schools worldwide, 150 schools in North America, and 26 programs in California, Waldorf is becoming one of the most prominent alternative education programs (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2018). With this increase in popularity, it is important to gauge the effects that Waldorf education is having on students who attend their schools.

Waldorf education is a unique experience for students that focuses on educating the head, hands, and heart. The approach to education is holistic, meaning children are educated as a “whole” human and not an academic subject. Early education focuses on preparing students for a future of creative and inquisitive thinking by improving their development. The foundation for facilitating critical thinking in students are laid in the early stages of child development. If Waldorf education has a positive effect on students, the prominence of Waldorf education schools should be increased and/or utilized in general education.

It seems that Waldorf education tends to have a positive effect on students. Completed literature focused on Waldorf highlights a trend in creating thoughtful and artistic students with heightened ethical and moral awareness. Waldorf provides a positive education system and can be utilized in non-Waldorf classrooms. Current literature argues that Waldorf ideals can be implemented in non-primary education systems like university, graduate school, and law school.

Ultimately Waldorf education provides a positive experience for students, but still harbors criticism from students based on experiences and society based on misconceptions.

Through research, a review of published literature, and the synthesizing of data, the following primary research question will be answered: *How does Waldorf education affect elementary school students academically and socially?* The answers to the following secondary research questions will establish a clear answer for the primary research question: What does research say about the effects of Waldorf education on elementary school students? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Waldorf education? Are there any Waldorf education programs currently implemented in the Tri-County area? What academic and social obstacles do students face when transitioning from Waldorf to public education? Why has Waldorf education not been adopted on a larger scale? Answering these questions will establish a more comprehensive answer to my primary research question.

### **Literature Review**

Published research on Waldorf education can be categorized into two unique focuses. One focus of completed research is on the history of Waldorf education and the founder of Waldorf, Rudolf Steiner. The other focus of completed research is on the Waldorf experience and what Waldorf education means. The work of scholars and researchers creates a consensus of the founding of Waldorf education and what ideals the alternative education system is based on.

### **A Brief History of Waldorf Education**

Waldorf education was founded by Rudolf Steiner based on anthroposophy. Anthroposophy derived from a religious movement, theosophy, which focused on human development and mental health as a basis for educating children (Foster, 1984). The first

Waldorf school was founded in Germany in 1919 by Steiner, with a curriculum based in art, developmental growth, and a sense of community (Uhrmacher, 1995). This first school was established after Steiner gave a series of lectures to factory workers in Germany. After these lectures, Steiner was asked to establish a school based on his philosophy. Steiner agreed on four conditions: “the school should be open to all children, it should be coeducational, it should be a unified twelve-year school, and the teachers should run the school without interference from governmental or economic concerns” (Uhrmacher, 1995, p. 382). By the time Steiner died in 1925, four Waldorf schools had been established (Paull, 2011). Each decade the number of worldwide Waldorf schools has increased exponentially with the first United States Waldorf institution being established in New York in 1928. Today, there are 1,000 Waldorf institutions worldwide and 150 in the U.S. (Uhrmacher, 1995).

Both Foster (1984) and Uhrmacher’s (1995) articles are similar in their description of the founding of Waldorf Education. The histories of Waldorf and Rudolf Steiner are linear without much room for differing interpretations. This makes prior research on the history of Waldorf consistent with few weaknesses. The strength of Waldorf’s history is the consistency of information across sources. These sources are important for providing the foundation of my issue. Without Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf education would not exist as an alternative option for parents. Understanding Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy establishes a heightened understanding of Waldorf education.

### **What is Waldorf Education?**

The founding philosophy of Waldorf education is to educate the whole human or the head, heart, and hands. Easton (1997) summarizes the main elements of Waldorf education in her

article “Educating the Whole Child, ‘Head, Heart, and Hands’: Learning from the Waldorf Experience”:

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. (Easton, 1997, p. 88)

Easton goes into more detail on each element of Waldorf education. Most interesting and relevant to the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner is the description of the stages of child development. According to Steiner there are three distinct developmental stages for children. The first stage, child age of birth to seven years old, children learn through imitation and story-telling. In this stage, students/children would benefit more from hearing fables and stories about math rather than textbooks or worksheets. This stage would establish a mental capacity that would allow for increases in imagination and creativity in later developmental stages.

The next stage of development is children age seven through fourteen years old, or the elementary stage. Learning in this stage is based on experiences. Steiner believed that children need to develop their conscience through experiences and opportunities to become responsible and imaginative thinkers. Students need to gain the ability to consider long-term effects of their choices and decisions before given the power to make these impactful decisions. Waldorf education uses artistic activities to develop and hone the development of student consciousness.

The final stage of child development is children age fourteen through twenty-one, or the high school stage. After students have developed their mental capacity and gained experiences in stage one and two, they can begin to think abstractly about their surroundings and the relationships between ideas. In this stage, students can begin to understand what information

they are interested in or what information they find relevant to their own experiences. Waldorf education aims to develop a deepened understanding of ethical and moral responsibility and an appreciation for their surroundings.

### **Trend of Literature**

The trend with published literature that is focused on Waldorf education proposes situations or education systems that might benefit from Waldorf practices. Two articles, “Waldorf Education in an Inner-City Public School” by McDermott et al (n.d.), and “Going Back to Kindergarten: Considering the Application of Waldorf Education Principles to Legal Education” by Christensen (2006), each focuses on how the application of Waldorf education could benefit different education systems. Christensen’s (2006) article argues that Waldorf education would benefit law education by “integrating ethics, personal values, and professionalism into the classroom” (p. 324). As mentioned in the description for the third developmental stage, students are taught to understand ethical and moral obligations to their surrounds. Learning these skills would benefit law school students who operate in the trenches of ethics, morality, and law. McDermott et al (n.d.) focus on how Waldorf education has benefited Inner-City students and whether Waldorf can continue to succeed in the “inner-city” environment. The authors of this work determine that the school they researched seem to be performing well in the inner-city environment, but one schools success is not a predictor of future school performance (McDermott et al, n.d.).

### **Gaps in Literature**

The glaring weaknesses of published literature focused on Waldorf are the low number of works and a near complete lack of current research. Most peer-reviewed and published research



is dated back to the late 1990's or earlier. While the literature focused on Waldorf education is detailed and consistent, the education system would benefit from a wider variety of literature. This paper will serve to improve the state of Waldorf education literature by filling the gap that is a lack of variety and recentness. The research gathered in this paper will be a more recent analysis of Waldorf education and provide more variety to published literature.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This paper will use teacher and parent testimony, empirical data, and published literature to establish a concrete argument for the effectiveness of Waldorf education. This paper will be a resource for parents who are choosing an education system that suits their child and educators who may want to utilize Waldorf philosophies into their own schools or classrooms. The findings of this paper will be important in determining if Waldorf education availability and prevalence should be increased.

### **Participants**

There are two participants in my data collection. The participants are an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at a Waldorf institution in the Tri-County area, Teacher A (See Appendix 1). The other participant is a parent of a Waldorf student and their response was gauged by the parent questionnaire (See Appendix 2). Contact was made with the teacher through institutional contacts. An interview was scheduled through email. An interview was scheduled with an administrator at a Waldorf school, but the administrator canceled the interview and was unavailable for interview in a timeframe for completing this paper. Contact was attempted with four administrators at two high schools in the Tri-County, but responses were not received. Parents were asked to participate in a questionnaire, but only one response was received.

## **Materials**

The questions and responses from the interview with Teacher A is documented in Appendix 1. The interview was recorded and transcribed into this document. A questionnaire was created for parents of Waldorf students through google forms, as shown in Appendix 2. The questionnaire consists of five questions. Four questions were free response with one five-point scale question. Responses to the five-point scale question are recorded on a percentage-based pie chart.

## **Procedures**

First, contact was made with Teacher A through email. An interview was scheduled and completed within two weeks of contact, on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018. After the interview, Teacher A referred me to several parents who may be willing to participate in a parent questionnaire. The parent questionnaire was designed to help answer some of my secondary research questions. The parent questionnaire was sent out to several parents but only one response was received. After the parent questionnaire was created, focus was shifted to obtaining input from public high schools that Waldorf alumni often attend. An email was sent to two high school Principals and their secretaries asking for input or guidance on who to contact for information relevant to my topic. Response was received but was not helpful. They referred me to the Waldorf institutions I was already in contact with and said their counselors would not be able to speak for their students who had attended Waldorf institutions because they did not know which students attended a Waldorf elementary or middle school. Teacher A also referred me to an administrator at a Waldorf institution. Contact was made with this administrator and an interview was scheduled for April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Unfortunately, this administrator had to cancel the scheduled interview and time restraints did not allow for this interview to be rescheduled.

## **Results and Findings**

The previously discussed methods and procedures were used to develop coherent answers to the secondary research questions raised by this research paper. Each question is answered using the interview with Teacher A and the survey of Parent A. The evidence provided by both Teacher A and Parent A are reinforced and supported by previously conducted research and published papers on Waldorf education. While the questions garner coherent and definite answers, there are relevant limitations to this study. These limitations will be outlined in a later section and these limitations will help produce a recommendation for future studies conducted on Waldorf education.

### **What does research say about the effects of Waldorf education on elementary school students?**

There are clear and defined academic and professional effects of Waldorf education on the elementary students that attend these institutions. Social effects are more difficult to research because they are often left to interpretation and provide less empirical data as support. The academic effects of Waldorf education can be supported by two distinct categories that characterize “success”. Based on academic performance and the career choices of Waldorf alumni, it becomes clear how these students are affected.

#### **Academics.**

The academic benefits of Waldorf education are clearly highlighted by the increased likelihood that Waldorf alumni pursue college degrees. Over 60% of 550 surveyed Waldorf alumni graduated with a bachelor’s degree. This is nearly 30% higher than the national average of individuals who obtain bachelor’s degrees (Mitchell and Gerwin, 2007). This type of

statistical difference is also evident when analyzing the rate at which Waldorf alumni are pursuing post-baccalaureate studies. Of the 550 Waldorf alumni who were surveyed, 51% pursued post-grad studies. This is not reflective of graduation rates, but of how many students at least enrolled in postgraduate studies. The national average for postgraduate studies is only 12%, another significant contrast that shows Waldorf students are better prepared for success in post-high school studies (Mitchell and Gerwin, 2007). Waldorf students are also performing better on the SAT than the national average. While SAT scores are a debatable determiner or characterization for future success, it still shows a higher level of performance. This notion is interesting considering Waldorf students are often unprepared for State Standardized testing considering their Waldorf experience is void of any sort of state mandated assessment (Oppenheimer, 1999).

Analyzing and characterizing academic success is difficult because there are few widely accepted determiners of academic performance. Even the few determiners that are generally agreed upon are debatable because they are usually based on assessment or assign a number to student performance. Regardless, it is clear Waldorf students are performing at a higher level academically than their peers. The more gradual approach to education causes academic performance to be lower than general education students in early grades. Once to secondary education, Waldorf students outperform general education students on the SATS and other state tests. Waldorf makes early childhood education an investment into a future of more critical thinking. This leads to a greater likelihood that Waldorf students graduate with a bachelor's degree and pursue postgraduate education. Waldorf students far exceed the national average in both of these determining factors, making the case that Waldorf students are better set up to succeed in secondary and higher education.

**Careers.**

In addition to academics, career and higher education choices provide relevant evidence for the academic effects of Waldorf. As previously mentioned, Waldorf students are more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree and pursue postgraduate education. There are also trends in their choices of which major to pursue. Waldorf alumni are much more likely to pursue the Arts & Humanities and Social & Behavioral sciences as majors and are less likely to pursue Business & Management. Ironically, Business & Management is one of the most popular majors pursued by non-Waldorf students but the least popular Waldorf major (Oppenheimer, 1999). According to that same study, Waldorf alumni are more likely to pursue education and the fine arts as a career. This is understandable considering the Waldorf focus on fine arts. The pursuit of education as careers is also understandable because Waldorf alumni are more likely to be passionate about Waldorf education because they experienced an alternative approach. If this approach resonated with them, they will likely want to spread and utilize that approach as a future educator.

One of the main effects of education is that it instills ethics, morals, and personal values. Of the surveyed Waldorf alumni over 80% rated their Waldorf education experience as the most important influencer in developing their responsibility for others, sense for the environment, and the ability to step into other's minds (Oppenheimer, 1999). This evidence makes it clear why Waldorf alumni would pursue the Humanities and education and careers. Waldorf education is important in developing their moral compass and the ability to "step into other's minds". This would be an important skill in social and behavioral science. The responsibility for others shows why they would likely pursue education as a career. Education is a very empathetic and selfless profession. If Waldorf education is instilling these values onto their students, it is clear why they

are more likely to pursue these professions. These values are exactly why Christensen (2006), argues that Waldorf methodology would benefit Law school students.

### **What are the advantages and disadvantages of Waldorf education?**

This research process has shown that Waldorf education has many advantages. The interview of Teacher A and survey of Parent A show that Waldorf facilitates a genuine love for learning and produces students who are creative and inquisitive. The holistic approach to education is responsible for producing these types of characteristics in students. There are other aspects of Waldorf education that are clear advantages, supported by Teacher A, Parent A, and conducted research. Despite these clear advantages, disadvantages also exist. These are evident by the interview with Teacher A and supported by empirical research based on criticisms made by former students.

#### **Advantages.**

The first clear advantage to Waldorf education is the holistic approach they take to education. Holistic means they focus on educating the entire child as a human being rather than a subject of education (Barnes, 1990). This approach to education starts with the child rather than starting with the institution. Steiner believed that the way to produce the most effective society is to produce educated and enlightened human beings. This belief is reflected in the Waldorf experience. This approach to education reaps benefits in later stages of development, producing students who are inquisitive and creative. “Waldorf creates really thoughtful and inquisitive students who are capable of advocating for themselves and thinking in a really unique way” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018). The use of inquiry and project-based learning contributes to this type of growth in students. The focus of public education has

attempted to shift towards project-based curriculum but has yet to gain a complete commitment across schools. Waldorf education has been utilizing this type of learning since its founding. “If you look at traditional schools, now everything is transitioning to project and inquiry-based learning. Even though I do not use those words in my classroom, those are two things that Waldorf education is really great at” Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018).

In addition to the holistic, project-based approach to education, there is a level of comfort that comes with the Waldorf experience. Teachers often stay with children as they transition from grade level to grade level. Students will often be educated by the same teacher from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Barnes, 1990). This creates a considerable level of comfort between students and teachers. Teachers become flexible and accustomed to the needs of their students, and students develop a nurturing relationship with their teacher where expectations are clearly understood. “They get to survive and make it through that awkward middle school phase in a safe place. All the weird and quirky things you need to try out or get through can happen in a safe and loving environment. They are very supported here” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018). It is clear that Waldorf provides a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment for students. Despite this notion, the approach to education still has certain disadvantages and harbors some criticisms.

### **Disadvantages.**

The main disadvantage, according to Teacher A, is that Waldorf education is very teacher reliant. “Waldorf is very dependent on the teacher. In Waldorf you can have the same teacher up to 8 years, so the teacher is very important. The standards are there, the common core is there, we have to meet those requirements but using Waldorf philosophy so it’s a lot of pressure on the teacher” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018). Waldorf education has very

specified and explicit methods and philosophies. This puts pressure on the educator to ensure they are sticking to those guidelines and molding those methods to fit the needs of their students. The disadvantage is that if children are stuck with a bad or ineffective teacher, it may impact them over an eight-year period, rather than the one year of traditional school. The next disadvantage of Waldorf education is its lack of availability and accessibility. As discussed in the next section, is only accessible to students in specific areas in California. All Waldorf schools in California exist in the Bay Area, Sacramento area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. This leaves a void of Waldorf schools in the central valley or non-major areas in California. In addition to geographic inaccessibility, all Waldorf schools in California are private or charter. Private schools require a considerable tuition cost that is often too much for non-upper-class families. Charter schools often operate on a lottery system so entrance into the school is often based on luck. This makes the Waldorf experience inaccessible to most families in California.

In addition to the disadvantages that the education system is more teacher dependent than traditional schooling and inaccessible to most, Waldorf alumni have several criticisms of the Waldorf experience. While they view the experience as generally positive, they still provide negatives. The first negative is that Waldorf education has a lack of performance requirements and assessment (Rawson, 2016). Assessment is usually teacher based, and students rarely receive feedback on their performances in class. Former students criticize that classroom procedures usually focus on academically weak or underperforming students, leaving a lack of stimulation for higher achieving students (Randoll and Peters, 2015). This disadvantage might not be unique to the Waldorf experience, as traditional schools often struggle to find stimulating activities for students who are above grade level but is still a relevant criticism of the Waldorf experience. The final criticism of the Waldorf experience by Waldorf alumni is the lack of references to relevant



social topics like politics (Randoll and Peters, 2015). Waldorf education focuses on student created content and likes to avoid any material or societal things that send any sort of interpretable message. This is evident by the usage of faceless dolls in classrooms. Waldorf does not want any material in their classrooms that is not student created or inspired. This leaves a significant void of relevant political topics in the classroom (Barnes, 1990).

### **Neutral.**

The Waldorf experience is very often void of technology until high school. This means elementary and middle school classrooms hardly ever allow or have computers, tablets, or other technological devices at the disposal of students (Richtel, 2011). The lack of technology in classrooms can be viewed as an advantage or disadvantage depending on the person you ask or the student in question. Some students may benefit greatly from the use of technology in the classroom, allowing them to reach an academic or social peak that would otherwise be unobtainable. Other students may get too distracted by technology, using it for reasons other than academia, creating distractions for themselves and classmates. The argument for or against technology in the classrooms is another research paper in itself. This idea should still be acknowledged when discussing Waldorf education because it is such a crucial part of the Waldorf experience.

### **Are there any Waldorf education programs currently implemented in the Tri-County area?**

In the Tri-County area there are two Waldorf education programs. Santa Cruz Waldorf School is an official Waldorf institution in Santa Cruz County. The school consists of grades K-8 and has a preschool. Santa Cruz Waldorf School is the only official Waldorf institution in the

Tri-County area. The next closest official Waldorf institution is Waldorf School of the Peninsula in Los Altos, California in Santa Clara county. In addition to these official Waldorf institutions, there are Waldorf inspired schools. Monterey Bay Charter school in Pacific Grove, California is a Waldorf inspired school in the Tri-County area. This school is not recognized as an official Waldorf school, but still provides a Waldorf experience for Tri-County residence. The Pacific Grove campus goes up to Eighth grade and there is also a kindergarten campus in Seaside, California.

### **What academic and social obstacles do students face when transitioning from Waldorf to public education?**

The transition to public education from Waldorf education can be daunting for students especially when this transition usually occurs during formative years. Most Waldorf institutions in California only provide an education up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2018). This creates a large population of Waldorf students who are not only transitioning to high school, but also transitioning from Waldorf to public education. This creates academic and social obstacles that Waldorf students must overcome to find success in public education.

#### **Academic obstacles.**

The most obvious obstacle for Waldorf students when transitioning to public education is the differences in curriculum. Waldorf education procedures are much different than public education methods. Waldorf students often perform many projects and participate in hands-on activities like sewing, woodworking, and knitting. In public high schools, there is a much greater focus on academic performance that shifts away from project-based learning and any sort of

craftsmanship experience would come from taking courses like woodshop or welding. Waldorf education utilizes these types of activities by incorporating them into curriculum.

Another major obstacle for Waldorf students is the multi-teacher approach of public high schools. Waldorf education often utilizes the same teacher for a classroom of students from grades K-8. Waldorf teachers transition from grade to grade with the students, creating a high level of comfort between students and teachers. High schools often take a multi-teacher approach with subject specialized teachers. A high school student may have anywhere from 5-7 teachers in a single day or 20-28 unique teachers across their high school experience. This transition may be daunting, especially when transitioning from the single teacher approach that Waldorf utilizes.

Parent A presents her own concern for her child's transition to public education. Her answer to question five: "What were/are you most worried about for your child's transition to High School?" shows her concern for their child's coming experience with state/standardized testing (see Appendix 2). It is clear that state and standardized testing is a major concern for the transitioning Waldorf students. Public education has become results based and state and standardized testing reflects that culture. Based on Parent A's response, Waldorf education does not focus or emphasize state testing as much as public schools. In public education, students are subject to state testing as early as kindergarten. Waldorf education takes a much different approach to education that is more sequential and gradual. Waldorf students miss out on the years of practice taking the state/standardized tests that public education students receive in elementary school.

**Social obstacles.**

The social obstacles that Waldorf students face when transitioning to public school, especially high school, are generally similar to most students completing an academic transition. The obstacles that are unique to Waldorf students include school and class size. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001), the average high school in California has around 1,000 students. Waldorf schools in California average about 200 students per institution, depending on grade levels (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2018). These students are transitioning to a campus that could have five times as many students than their previous school. Public middle schools often have populations that are more comparable to the public high school experience, but Waldorf is a much more intimate campus experience. This could lead to students feeling small or insignificant because they are one of 1,000 rather than one of 200. This can cause social anxiety and an overwhelming feeling of insecurity. Waldorf education focuses heavily on providing a nurturing experience and this experience might be lost with the high number of students in classrooms and on public high school campuses. This experience is common for most private school students as private school populations rarely compare to public high schools. The difference is in the community and nurture-based experience that Waldorf provides is harshly countered by the public high school experience.

Teacher A reiterated the notion that the social transition from Waldorf schools to public high schools is not much different from the transition most students face. High school can be a culture shock even for students that attend a public middle school. Public middle school students may be more prepared than Waldorf students for the large campus and class sizes, but Waldorf students are not at a significant disadvantage. Teacher A recalls her own transition to private school and remembers being scared. Eventually things work out because you start to make

friends (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018). Teacher A argues that Waldorf students are better prepared for the High school experience because the focus on the arts creates avenues for making friends. Waldorf students are often involved in the arts in some capacity, meaning they will likely join art-based clubs or programs like orchestra and band. This creates opportunities for Waldorf students to form relationships and friendships with peers who have similar interests (Personal communication, 2018).

### **Why has Waldorf education not been adopted on a larger scale in California?**

Arguments against Waldorf education are often filled with misconceptions and preconceived notions that are generally exaggerated or untrue. Emily Chertoff's article, "Is This Grade School a 'Cult'? (And Do Parents Care?)", highlights the ignorant perception of Waldorf education as sensitively as the title is worded. "Would you send your kid to a school where faceless dolls and pine-cones are the toys of choice? A school where kids don't read proficiently until age 9 or 10—and where time spared goes to knitting and playing the recorder? A school where students sing hymns to "spirit" every day (Chertoff, 2012)?" There are clear misconceptions in this summary of the Waldorf experience. These misconceptions are clearly combatted in the rest of this paper, but this quote provides insight to why Waldorf education may not be as widely adopted as it maybe deserves. There is a very negative perception of Waldorf education as a "hippy" movement that is reserved for the children of rich parents and the lack of technology is alarming to many 21<sup>st</sup> century parents (Richtel, 2011). These types of widely adopted perceptions leaves Waldorf institutions to only be established in very progressive and liberal areas. Of the 23 Waldorf elementary schools in California, only one single institution exists outside of the major areas of California (San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San

Diego). The single Waldorf institution away from these major areas exists in Tuolumne county. All the major areas of California are consistent liberal voters, showing their progressive nature.

The lack of Waldorf popularity in California can be summarized by a lack of knowledge or awareness. The concentration of Waldorf institutions is very high in the major areas of California but almost nonexistent in major counties like Fresno, Kern, and San Bernadino. For Waldorf and other alternative education systems to come into existence, there must be a questioning of the status quo of public education. If residents of these counties are happy with their public education systems, it is unlikely alternative education systems will gain traction. Waldorf education is not widespread but is highly concentrated and popular in certain areas.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this paper support the trend of previously published research—Waldorf education has a positive effect on elementary students. This alternative education system benefits students academically and socially and is a considerable determiner of future education/career choices. There are clear advantages to Waldorf education that are highlighted by research and conducted interviews and disadvantages are minimal. The most surprising finding was how Waldorf education is evolving to meet the needs of students and society.

### **Big Picture**

This study, and other research related to this study, is important because it analyzes alternative education. Public education is responsible for educating a significant portion of our student population. The methods and procedures of public schools have remained relatively stagnant over time and the structure of public schools remains consistent across and between states. This leaves some parents uninspired by the public-school experience which causes them

to look for alternative methods of educating their child. It is important that alternative education systems exist to ensure that each child is educated in an environment that best fits their needs.

Waldorf education provides an experience that is unique and refreshing compared to public education. This experience has and will continue to benefit students who fit the Waldorf system. Analyzation of these alternative education methods is important to gauge the effectiveness of these systems and to find what aspects of these systems could be utilized in public education.

### **Recommendation**

Future research on this topic would be improved with more interviews and parent response. To increase the number of interviews and parent input, the study would have to be conducted as a longitudinal study. With more time to conduct the study, it would be more likely that interviews would be scheduled, and parents would respond to questionnaires. The non-responders would remain non-responders, but those who did not have time to participate in an interview during the weeks of this study, may have been available at a different time. Future studies would benefit from a larger zone of research. The study was limited to the Tri-County area but would benefit from expanding to the Bay area and the Sacramento area. In the Bay area and Sacramento area there are over ten Waldorf institutions. This would broaden the study and provide a more narrowed focus if the findings aligned. There are over five Waldorf schools or training facilities in the Sacramento and Davis area alone. This would provide a higher number of subjects for interviews and parent input.

This paper recommends society improves their understanding of alternative education methods like Waldorf. Knowledge of alternative education methods is important for providing students with a learning experience that suits them. If more parents were aware of the Waldorf education experience, they may want to place their child in that system because it suits their

needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Future and current teachers should also increase their understanding of alternative education methods to utilize aspects of their philosophies in their own classrooms. Teachers may find aspects of Waldorf education useful, especially the focus on project-based and experience-based learning. If society increases their understanding of alternative education methods like Waldorf, the awareness of such methods would increase. This increase in awareness would likely increase the accessibility of programs like Waldorf, combatting one of the main disadvantages to alternative education. This increase in accessibility would provide more students with the capability of choosing the education system that best fits their needs.

### **Problems and Limitations**

The most considerable limitations of this study were the lack of responses from potential subjects. Only one interview was conducted, and another scheduled interview was canceled without enough time allotted to reschedule. Five interview requests were denied or did not receive a response despite follow-up emails. Parent questionnaires were sent to multiple parents but only one response was received. Emails were sent to high schools that Waldorf education students generally transition to after their Waldorf experience. None of the contacted high schools were able to speak to the performance of their Waldorf alumni. Input from the contacted high schools would have been instrumental in answering the secondary research question: “What academic and social obstacles do students face when transitioning from Waldorf to public education?” This leaves the findings of this paper possibly biased. The only subjects that provided data for the study were teachers at a Waldorf institution or parents of Waldorf students. These subjects may be biased towards Waldorf education and input from non-Waldorf institutions would have limited bias. If this paper was based solely on found data, the study



would be insufficient in answering the primary research question. Thankfully, already published research can legitimize the findings of conducted interviews and questionnaires.

### **Conclusion**

The Waldorf education system provides students with a unique learning environment that is holistic and tentative to the developmental process of students. Rudolf Steiner's clearly defined and distinct stages of child development provide the guidelines for educating the whole child. The Waldorf approach to education is much more gradual and thoughtful than public education. It is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of alternative education systems like Waldorf because they are increasing in popularity and prominence. Furthering societal awareness and understanding of alternative education methods improves the state of education in California. Alternative education systems help ensure students find the learning environment that best fits their needs. This is done, not only through opening alternative education schools, but from utilizing aspects of alternative education philosophies into the general education classroom. This is why gauging the effectiveness of alternative education methods is so important. A review of published literature, an interview of a Waldorf teacher, and a survey of a Waldorf parent provide a coherent answer to the primary research question: *How does Waldorf education affect students academically and socially?*

It is clear that students benefit from the more gradual approach to education in later stages of development, evident by the increased likelihood Waldorf alumni graduate with a bachelor's degree and pursue post-grad studies (Mitchell and Gerwin, 2007). Waldorf education creates students that are creative and inquisitive through project and inquiry-based learning. Teachers create opportunities for students to think critically and effectively through lessons that provide a holistic experience. Socially, Waldorf students are provided an avenue for developing

friendships through art and music. They often pursue band, orchestra, or the fine arts as clubs/hobbies in school, providing extra-curricular opportunities for friendships. Teacher A highlights that she receives positive feedback from high school teachers who have her students in their classroom. These teachers often say her students interact with adults with an increased level of respect than public school students (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 27 March 2018). It is also clear that Waldorf education raises social and moral awareness and responsibility (Easton, 1997). To answer the primary research question: *How does Waldorf education affect students academically and socially*—Waldorf affects students in a positive way, producing children who are inquisitive, creative, socially aware, morally conscious, and unique.

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## Appendix 1

Teacher Interview: Teacher A; 8<sup>th</sup> grade Waldorf Teacher

1. Q: How long have you been teaching Waldorf? What Grades?

A: I have taught Waldorf for 10 years and I've taught all grades.

2. Q: How many of your 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are transitioning to a Public High School next year?

A: Most of my students will attend public high schools. Maybe 3 out of 26 of my students are attending a private high school. Most of my students go to High School X with some going to High School Y.

3. Q: What do you find effective and ineffective about Waldorf?

A: Waldorf creates really thoughtful and inquisitive students who are capable of advocating for themselves and thinking in a really unique way. In other words, really outside the box thinkers. If you look at traditional schools, now everything is transitioning to project and inquiry-based learning. Even though I do not use those words in my classroom, those are two things that Waldorf education is really great at. If we're teaching metamorphosis, it's not "here's your cutout and here's your worksheet", no let's go look for examples, let's learn about the cycles and make our own out of beeswax. We teach in an exploratory way, so it allows them to create it for themselves. When you get into 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they take a phenomenological approach to science. So instead of "here's your lab report, here's the steps you need to follow, today we're learning about pH and when this happens this happens", we do an experiment and ask students "why do you think that happens?". If they respond, "I don't know" we push everyone to come up with some sort of explanation, from there we say, "well let's look into those

explanations”. So then they further their explanations and begin to understand that things are acidic and basic. This science experience is the same with performance tests. On these tests that I give them, they have to answer an essay question and I can show you one I just gave them. They gave really thoughtful and amazing answers. One of the questions was “what are the lasting impacts of imperialism on Africa?”. That’s a college level question and they gave thoughtful answers and looked at it from so many different perspectives. They are really humanistic and find the perspective of people involved. They can really easily imagine what different time periods were like, they can take themselves to the Renaissance and transport themselves to people living during these times. I would say it does these things really well. What we don’t do so well or things I would improve: Waldorf is very dependent on the teacher. In Waldorf you can have the same teacher up to 8 years, so the teacher is very important. The standards are there, the common core is there, we have to meet those requirements but using Waldorf philosophy so it’s a lot of pressure on the teacher.

4. Q: Is Waldorf dynamic despite being based on a firmly established belief system?

A: Waldorf is definitely dynamic and changing each year. For example, last time I taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade we weren’t using computers but this year we are. It’s changing with the times, I’m finding places to appropriately incorporate technology into different things.

5. Q: How are your students transitioning to Public High Schools (academically)?

A: When they get to high school, they are really capable of interacting with adults in a thoughtful and different way. This is based on feedback I get from high school teachers: “Wow their line of inquiry and ability to approach and ask for assistance is so different than the relationships they’ve had with other students”. My last class all did well. There

are students who had struggling grades in my class and they probably still have struggling grades in high school. The students that did well in my class will continue to do well in high school. It's not like there's some miracle at work. There's some who are doing really well. They are all successful. My last class had a wide range and my last class is graduating college.

6. Q: How about socially?

A: They all have specific interests. It is shocking and new at first because it is so different, but you are able to make friends. Often a lot of my students are into the arts so there's an arts collective they can join or meet with likeminded people. A large part of my class was into string instruments, so they are in the Monterey Youth Orchestra and make friends that way. They still keep friendships from Waldorf, but they are given opportunities to make new friends. They get really nervous about the transition and yet they all do just fine. I transitioned from a small private school to a public high school and I remember being worried and scared but then I made friends.

7. Q: Do you think students benefit from the k-8<sup>th</sup> grade system experience at Waldorf?

A: They get to survive and make it through that awkward middle school phase in a safe place. All the weird and quirky things you need to try out or get through can happen in a safe and loving environment. They are very supported here.

8. Q: Do you take any extra steps to prepare them for high school?

A: I feel like everything I do is preparing them for high school. I am a stickler for all sorts of things. I don't think there's any one thing I do because everything I do is preparation. I take students on a field trip to a high school, they wanted me to teach them how to use a combination lock and I told them their parents could help them. I can't think of anything

that is my step by step preparation for high school lesson. I always tell them you have to do this to be prepared, you have to be organized, no one is going to hold your hand. I think high school prep is imbedded in everything I do.

9. Q: Do you think you'll stick with Waldorf? Do you ever see yourself switching to a different type of education?

A: I think you can be Waldorf teacher anywhere. So, I think I can bring my Waldorf experience to a traditional classroom. I may not be able to do all the same things I can do here but I think I could bring some ideas to the classroom. Lets say I move somewhere and they do not have a Waldorf school there, I would still stay an educator but I just wouldn't get to work in a Waldorf inspired school.

10. Q: What kind of Careers are your students pursuing?

A: We had a student here last week and he's a perfect example. Our students aren't only in the arts, they're all over the place. A student was here and he's the youngest of three children that went k-12 in a Waldorf school at one of the oldest Waldorf schools. His mom is a kindergarten teacher and his dad has written all these books and is a guru. All three of those kids never had technology in the household, none of them had a T.V. The oldest is at Google, the next is at Pixar, and he does web development. They all have amazing jobs. It's all art based but they are super money makers.



## Appendix 2

## Parent Questionnaire: Parent A, Parent of Waldorf Student

1. What do you find most effective about Waldorf education?

A: It teaches students how to love learning.

2. Why did you switch to or choose Waldorf education for your child?

A: Same answer as the first question, it teaches a love of learning and there is a better sense of community at the school.

3. If you could change or add an aspect of/to Waldorf education, what would it be?

A: Improve the implementation of Eurythmics into curriculum.

4. How would you rate your child's preparedness for High school when leaving Waldorf education? One being unprepared, five being completely prepared.

A: 4, prepared.

5. What were/are you most worried about for your child's transition to high school?

A: Handling of state/standardized testing and skills related to taking those tests.