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Benefits of the Waldorf Educational Model on Students' Academic Success

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Abstract

As traditionally ran public schools have focused more on testing in the past few decades, alternative methods of education have been rising in relevance. One model of alternative education, the Waldorf method, has an emphasis on developmental stages and the arts in a way that has been shown to increase test scores and reduce behavioral problems in their students. This capstone project examines the academic benefits of the Waldorf model of education and whether their curriculum is equitable for all students in one of the schools in the Monterey Bay area.

Benefits of the Waldorf Educational Model on Students' Academic Success

Introduction and Background

The increasing emphasis on standardized testing in public schools has come at the cost of a decreased quality of life inside of schools. It is not an uncommon sentiment for recent graduates to question why they had to learn some of the content that they learned, such as mitochondria or the Pythagorean theorem when it has little to no relevance to their everyday life. This increasing focus on standards rather than on development puts pressure on students to perform well on tests, forgoing actual in-depth learning in favor of pithy lines to help remember facts. Because, after all, “life requires us to use a variety of our capabilities, not just theoretical or abstract concepts” (Foster, 1984, p. 229). These issues are not modern ones either, as progressives during the early 19th century sought to change and amend the way that students are taught, ameliorating the issues that are still prevalent in traditionally run classrooms.

The progressive educational movement aimed to have students learn through doing, thinking critically, understanding units instead of memorizing, and social collaboration. Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher, created the Waldorf model in the early 1900s based on his philosophy of anthroposophy, which suggests that there is a spiritual world that can be reached through physical experiences. His model had familiar accents of other progressive educational models at the time such as an emphasis on art, hand labor and gardening, but was unique in that he believed that education should be organized from the child itself (Dhondt et al, 2015, p. 644). This results in Waldorf education to appear more “fun,” with a stronger emphasis on art, music, dance, theater, and cooperation than what is typically found in a traditional school. Waldorf education is meant to be more holistic, meeting the children’s physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual developmental needs in their respective stage by having knowledge

necessitated through use of the entire body (Nordlund, 2013, p.14). This fundamentally changes how learning is approached in the classroom, as teachers can no longer introduce an overarching unit and then show how lessons, quotes, formulas, readings, and so on fit into the unit. Learning has a much different pattern in the Waldorf method, going from “simple concepts and ideas to those which are more complex and involved” (Foster, 1984, p. 229). Since Waldorf schools are still beholden to state testing, this provides ample data for comparisons to other traditional public schools for the academic benefits of alternative education.

I became interested in peoples’ dissatisfaction towards public schooling when I realized that school is not easy for many people. Learning about educational theory made me realize that my perspective on education is vastly different than what many other people have, and I could not in good conscience subject hundreds of children to an experience they will probably not like. Thus, I turned my focus to alternative educational styles and decided to study the Waldorf method because there is a local school that follows that model, making collecting data from their teachers much easier. I wanted to know what they were doing differently, if their methods are enhancing learning, and how I could incorporate their techniques and philosophies into my own teaching to make my lessons more engaging and memorable.

As a prospective teacher who wants to be as effective as possible, my primary research question is: What are the educational benefits of the Waldorf model of education? Secondary research questions surrounding this topic include: What does literature say about the benefits of the Waldorf educational model on students’ academic success? Are there Waldorf schools in operation in the Monterey Bay area, and if there are, how does their curriculum look like as compared to those in the public schools? To what extent does the Waldorf educational model benefit students’ academic success according to teachers and in comparison, to those students in

public schools? Does this education model meet the needs of high-risk students in the program? Are there any advantages and disadvantages for students attending Waldorf programs as compared to students in public schools? Finally, what lessons could teachers learn from the Waldorf educational model of education? In order to analyze these questions, we will have to examine what the prevailing academic literature has to say about the Waldorf model.

Literature Review

The Waldorf method has been a prevailing model of education for several decades prior to the burgeoning charter school movement in America. This model was developed by an Austrian man named Rudolf Steiner in the early 1900s during the progressive educational movement alongside other influential educational figureheads like Maria Montessori. Steiner developed this system according to his own personal philosophy of anthroposophy, an ideology that believes that a spiritual world can be attained through human experiences. Thus, this model advocates for a holistic education that incorporates and develops physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual spheres. This is typically done by teaching through the use of art and collaboration because of the incorporation of several of these spheres of development in practical instruction. Lessons are created according to the children's developmental stages, maximizing their potential to learn based on critical development periods that they may be going through in a certain grade. These aspects of the Waldorf model are the primary characteristics of the method that draw people to this alternative model as compared to a traditional schooling model.

What separated the Waldorf method historically from other progressive educational movements founded during the Pre-War era was that the education was more structured, and student centered. The Montessori model, for example, focuses primarily on student discovery and their progress in developmental planes to construct a learning environment. The Waldorf

method is more structured, utilizing a central teacher figurehead but emphasizing collaboration, community, and expression as a central part of their curriculum. This positioning as a ‘middle path’ appealed to many families during the time period, elevating the Waldorf method’s credibility as “a kind of cure for all the educational wrongs that were brought about in the previous decades” (Dhondt et al, 2015, p. 644). The question still stands, however, as to whether this educational model is effective for students as compared to traditional schooling methods. The prevailing literature on the Waldorf method’s effectiveness suggests that this model is for the most part highly beneficial for their students, however, there have been major ideological backlashes from American communities against Steiner’s philosophies.

Educational Benefits of the Waldorf Model. Many of the lessons and assignments that are students are given in Waldorf schools are taught through the lens of artistic expression, eurythmics, and socioemotional communication. The emphasis on making learning enjoyable and sharable leads to many more students wanting to discuss their academic life. Compared to students in traditional classrooms, they are more apt to study, have more control over what they do in the classroom, are less aggressive, and on average have higher levels of discipline and self-organization (Ionova, 2013, p. 35). Instilling these virtues and habits into students makes them much more effective lifelong learners and gives them a more positive view of education as a whole. A longitudinal study of Waldorf students revealed that “92% of former Waldorf pupils stressed that they liked their school years. [...] Waldorf school leavers are sure that school gave to them the opportunity to receive good basic education and obtain key competences – such as a positive attitude towards life, trust in their own forces, independence, and an ability to adapt to life conditions” (Ionova, 2013, p. 36). Furthermore, former Waldorf students have been found to believe that they have a deeper retention of material when they are able to use artistic processes

to learn and present knowledge (Nordlund, 2013, p. 18). The Waldorf method's greatest strength is the incorporation of artistic expression to teach curricula, leading to higher satisfaction rates among students and engendering positive traits in them that promotes higher level thinking and gives them the means to learn and understand even in non-academic settings.

While student appreciation for the Waldorf model is high, test results are much more mixed. Comparative studies of different Waldorf schools to traditionally run schools frequently reveals that Waldorf students underperform up until the second grade. From then on, they meet or exceed their peer-comparable sites in English Language Arts and in Mathematics (Oberman, 2007, p. 14). However, the consistency of these reports suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the Waldorf method of early childhood development versus traditional schools. Many students who enter a Waldorf school from the third-grade or higher score much better on standardized tests than their peers in the Waldorf school who have been enrolled for longer. Their scores, however, on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking Ability are statistically very similar, which "may indicate that later entrants were more test sophisticated, having been exposed to a more intellectual, academic, and test-oriented program in the state or private schools from which they transferred" (Ogletree, 1996, p. 8). State and private schools are more likely to emphasize testing early on in a students' educational career in order to obtain funding or to boost their school's performance numbers. Waldorf schools, as charter schools in America, are not as beholden to state testing for their funding. They are often funded on a per-student basis, so there is no need to instill the testing mindset into their students from an early age as there is with public or private schools. This is not to say that their test scores make student uncompetitive, however, as "leavers of Waldorf schools who successfully passed state entrance exams [for universities in Germany] is 20-30% high on average. That is, among pupils who

studied for 12 years in Waldorf schools on non-selective base, the percentage of those who can enter higher schools is much bigger than in schools which carry out selection of pupils” (Ionova, 2013, p. 36). Even though Waldorf students are not being taught content with the intent of passing exams, they still consistently do better than their peers in public schools across cultures.

There is perhaps a correlation between the emphasis placed on creativity and the higher test scores. Researchers administered the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking Ability to several schools, Waldorf schools included. The data revealed that Waldorf test scores were generally unaffected by grade level and age, but rather by gender and socioeconomic status on all creativity tasks. Waldorf boys and girls performed statistically significantly higher on creativity tasks compared to their state school peers, and lower socioeconomic Waldorf students performed worse on verbal originality compared to their state school peers, but insignificantly so. (Ogletree, 1996, p.8). This data accentuates two facets of Waldorf education: its difficulty with standardized testing and its effectiveness at providing an equal education for all students. There are several reasons why Waldorf students underperform on their first few years. To begin, literacy programs do not rely on phonemic awareness until later in their educational careers. Literacy and language development are encouraged through stories and interpersonal communication, which while effective in teaching a language over time, does not meet state standards within a certain timeframe. Waldorf schools tend to not use any technology in the classroom. Computer skills and typing are not taught until middle school under a Waldorf curriculum, meaning that schools like Kona Pacific in Hawaii had to “borrow computers, and some students had never used a mouse before” (Education Reforms, 2011, p. 60). The lower test scores in the earlier years of education could be explained through an unfamiliarity with the format, both in content and testing method. As previously mentioned, students who transfer into

a Waldorf school from a traditional school will perform better on standardized tests than their peers in the Waldorf classroom. Students are not prepared for state testing in the same way that students in traditional schools are, and while these students may not perform as well on tests as their school peers, they enjoy the activities and subjects they learned because “it is the engendered emotional and physical participation and energy that allows Waldorf students to experience material that they otherwise may not be able to learn conceptually” (Ogletree, 1996, p. 6). The Waldorf method could be viewed an investment into education. While the early years may be on average underperforming compared to traditional schools, their performance begins to increase past the third grade and beyond with greater levels of satisfaction and achievement.

Addressing the Needs of High-Risk Students under the Waldorf Model. If we are to examine the efficacy of the Waldorf model with the intent of incorporating their methods into traditional classrooms, we must also examine how high-risk students such as English language learners, special needs, or low-income students also benefit from the Waldorf method. This model has shown to be decently effective on addressing the needs of their students, regardless of their classifications, every student will be able to receive a quality education. The reduced emphasis on following state standards allows for freer learning, and “forced learning can affect not only the child’s learning potential but his emotional and social stability” (Ogletree, 1996, p. 6). Because of the Waldorf model’s inherent focus on social and emotional development, this stands to suggest that high needs students will be able to flourish more so than in a traditional classroom.

Language development under the Waldorf method is approached differently than most other language acquisition classes. A Slovenian Waldorf school, for example, emphasizes “the acquisition of a sense of language and the fact that foreign language teaching should be based on

processes that take place in learning the mother tongue,” that is to say, language learning should be done through natural acquisition rather than through regimented exercise (Monika, 2013, p.81). Students are frequently exposed to a new language through singing, miming, games, chanting, pictures and so on. The use of stories such as fairy tales and poems are also frequently used to impart knowledge of language onto students because stories help to foster concentration and memory, while stimulating their imagination and contextualizing language into terms of relationships and experiences (Shank, 2016, p.4-5). The exposure to meaningful language is more important than the actual content of the stories themselves, allowing for more culturally relevant content for students to take home to practice with their parents. This practice simultaneously involves the student more in the learning process and strengthens the community of the classroom. However, this has the effect of lowering test scores for students in the first few years of Waldorf instruction, as has been discussed previously.

The artistic practices that are a focal point in Waldorf curricula can be very therapeutic for students with special needs. Form drawing, for example, is a task that requires students to create drawings based on a parent form, such as a sine wave or a loop. This activity has been shown to be effective in stimulating both underperforming and overperforming students, as many “find the angular form easy and to their liking and can benefit from the passive rhythms of the repetitive forms. On the other hand, the child who loves to draw and is active or hyperkinetic should not be allowed to run amok; instead his movements should be controlled and stimulated in a certain direction” (Ogletree, 1975, p. 241). The teacher’s job, in the case of form drawing, is to bring the child’s attention away from their instincts and towards consciousness, to be aware of their actions and consequences. Activities within a Waldorf school are very easily adaptable to each individual student’s needs because of the deemphasis on teaching for standards. State

standards tend to describe outcomes, while Waldorf standards describe the expected activities (Watterson, 2006, p.22). Ionoava's research on the Waldorf model also suggests that their students have better health compared to their peers in traditional classrooms, both physical and mental. In fact, Waldorf schools have been found to have their levels of mental illnesses dropping while the rate is increasing in traditional schools. This remains true when discussing other physical ailments such as headaches, stomachaches, and allergies, where 20-30% less Waldorf students are afflicted with such ailments (Ionova, 2013, p. 35-36). There could be several reasons for this: the Waldorf method encourages working with others and with ones hands which consequently strengthens the immune system, the type of parent who would enroll in a Waldorf school rather than a traditional school may be more likely to use holistic methods rather than medication, or the positive mental state that students have as a result of Waldorf instruction consequently strengthens their body.

The Waldorf model has been shown to be very effective in providing quality education for low-income students. An urban public school in Milwaukee in the mid-1990s, for example, transitioned from traditional classrooms to Waldorf based instruction and found that classroom management and academic performance jumped dramatically. Ethnographers studying the school found that the students had a drop in suspensions to 0% and increase in attendance to 92%, had a 37% increase over 3 years of students performing above grade level, and students were more cooperative with each other and with their teachers (McDermot et al, 1996, p. 130-135). The elementary school was majority African American families and majority low income students, proving that the Waldorf method can be an effective way to provide a more equal education than what is currently being provided in traditional methods. It is believed that the increase in responsible and responsive learning comes from the increased trust and responsibility

placed on the students. The flexibility of assignments defuses frustration and resentment because it allows students to negotiate with each other and with their teachers to create learning environments that are best suited to their needs (McDermot et al, 1996, p. 130). All of these behavioral and academic improvements occurred during the transitional period between a traditional classroom and a Waldorf one, meaning that improvements will be seen almost immediately instead of over a period of several years.

Opposition Against the Waldorf Method. While the Waldorf method has shown itself to be an effective educational model, it has been met with mixed responses in America due to its perception as being a religious or spiritual school. Steiner's philosophy, anthroposophy, believes that "everyone could come into contact with the supernatural world, with sufficient physical and moral efforts. This democratic viewpoint was already visible in theosophy, meaning that Steiner was not exceptionally unique or creative. Steiner clearly incorporated this existing theosophical principle into anthroposophy" (Dhondt et al, 2015, p. 642). The fundamental aspects of Steiner's ideologies come very close legally to crossing the line between separation of church and state in American schools, prompting legal battles and controversy over public Waldorf schools.

The primary issue surrounding the Waldorf controversy is that anthroposophy is not a straightforward philosophy. The foreignness and misunderstanding about anthroposophy naturally leads people to suspicion, with their objections fueled even further by the Waldorf school's attention to many different spiritual holidays and traditions (Oberman, 2007, p. 29). A legal group named the People for Legal and Nonsectarian Schools, from here referred to as PLANS, argue that anthroposophy is inherently religious in nature and violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. They argue that Steiner had historically had his teachers act as missionaries to promote anthroposophy to their

students, and that Steiner himself has referred to the philosophy as religious (Rhea, 2012, p. 1101-2). Implementing more Waldorf schools or practices may be difficult to gather support for in America because of the country's established legislative rulings that permit religious public schools. Even though Waldorf schools are not explicitly religious, there is certainly enough legal standing for courts to object to creating public Waldorf schools, especially in regions of the country that are more Christian.

PLANS also believes that the Waldorf method is authoritarian, a belief that has been found to have veracity according to an ethnographer studying teacher hierarchy in a Waldorf daycare. Wilson finds that Waldorf education is fundamentally "situated within the dominant paradigm of understanding child development and, like dominant theories, positions itself as universally applicable to all children" and that the Waldorf model relies "on a banking, transmission-based pedagogy that privileges adults as knowledge 'experts' and ignores the vast and diverse knowledges that children bring to the learning context" (Wilson, 2014, p. 214). Essentially, Wilson argues that while education in the Waldorf model is student focused, teachers still have to adapt their lessons based on a child's developmental stage instead of their academic performance. This is a small distinction, but most noticeable in classrooms with students who are performing well above or well under the average. Thus, the teacher is the source of learning and consolidating knowledge rather than student self-discovery and independent inquiry. However, this case study only focused on one Waldorf daycare run out of someone's house and could be an outlier as compared to how other Waldorf schools are run.

Overall, the data suggests that the Waldorf model of education can be effective in improving students' academic success. Schools and students alike have improved their testing scores for third graders and above, while incidences of aggression and apathy have dropped.

Waldorf students are overall healthier, happier, more likely to enter higher education, and feel more positively about their time in school. High needs students like English language learners, low-income students, or special needs students have been found to perform well under the Waldorf method among different cultures. The primary issues surrounding this model of education appears to be a lack of direct education in the first few years of instruction, and a lack of technological integration until late in a student's academic career that can cause issues with state standardized testing. Integrating Waldorf methods into public schools could also stand to be an ideological battle in America, as many citizens are committed to the idea of separation of church and state. The literature surrounding Waldorf schools tends to remain decently positive overall.

Possible areas for future inquiry could surround high-needs students. While there is some data on the topic, there could still be more that could be done. Encouraging teachers to gain a Waldorf credential could be another area of focus, as many Waldorf schools require or heavily encourage having spent time under a Steiner methodology focused college before teaching in a Waldorf school. This could be a future issue if schools were to incorporate Waldorf methods into everyday classrooms and would create interesting data to see how traditional teachers would handle a transition.

Methods and Procedures

While researching my primary research question, I was realizing that there were very few examples of how the average day in a Waldorf classroom was run. Most articles would give a brief description of what the Waldorf method is, but then would move on to their theoretical analyses of the schools they were observing. I knew that I needed to get perspectives from those who work in a Waldorf classroom, so I decided to interview teachers from different grades at a

local Waldorf charter school to get an idea of how the curriculum changes and grows as the students do as well as their own opinions on the Waldorf method, as they are seasoned insiders.

I wrote my interview questions (See Appendix) with the intent on asking the research questions that I had proposed. This was very useful on gathering a perspective outside of academic literature, as I was able to see how Steiner's ideology is enacted in modern schools. The teachers were more than happy to let me tour their campus and observe the children play during lunch time, which gave a greater idea of the aesthetic and social cultures that permeate Waldorf education.

Results and Discussion

After examining the relevant literature on Waldorf education, I decided to go out and interview current Waldorf teachers. Being able to physically visit their school and see how the campus looks and feels helped to instill a greater idea of how the Waldorf method affects their students.

What does literature say about the benefits of the Waldorf educational model on students' academic success? The prevailing academic literature, as discussed previously, appears to suggest that there is indeed an academic benefit to using the Waldorf model. Students are happier and healthier, perform better on creative tasks, and generally score higher on tests than their traditional school peers. Waldorf students tend to feel more positively about school and are more independent and optimistic about their future and skills. Schools that have transitioned into the Waldorf method have seen drops in suspension rates and increases in attendance. The focus on using art in instruction lends itself well to language development and students who require special education, and this form of education has been described as almost therapeutic for the students.

However, there are some prevailing detriments to the Waldorf model. Formal instruction doesn't begin until the first or second grade, meaning that their test scores will lag behind their traditional school counterparts up until about the third grade where they are more comfortable with testing environments. The Waldorf model does not use technology in their instruction, so many students do not understand how to properly use a computer for state testing when the season begins. Many people are wary of Steiner's advocacy for development of spiritualism and believe that he is trying to indoctrinate children. This has led to lawsuits against Waldorf charter schools, claiming that they violate the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution. These are potential issues that would need to be ameliorated before further integration of Waldorfian ideologies into traditional school curricula.

Are there Waldorf schools in operation in the Monterey Bay area, and if there are, how does their curriculum look like as compared to those in the public schools? Teacher A provided a wealth of aspects of the Waldorf method that are particularly unique. Most notably, they discuss how it is “a very holistic model that looks at the whole child in developmental stages” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). Schools that follow Steiner's ideas focus on children in terms of where they're at developmentally, and plan experiences and activities for students accordingly. They give the example of how 4th graders learn about Norse mythology and the Vikings because they're at a developmental period where they're realizing their place in the world and become more combatant with each other at that age. The students are more likely to be engaged with the lessons when the content is matched to their developmental stage. Teacher B's description of Waldorf education echoes Teacher A's, saying that they use “age appropriate activities and instructions that works with and stimulates [...] multiple intelligences” (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 9 March 2020). Students are taught holistically, using the

whole body and through different modes of incorporating knowledge like art or gardening. The Waldorf method is overall more holistic than a traditional curriculum.

There are a few other notable differences between a Waldorf curriculum and a traditional one. Explicit instruction is not given until first grade, so kindergarten is more about learning and gaining knowledge through guided experiences. The arts are a very integral part of Waldorf; students make their own textbooks, early grades learn through listening to fairy tales, and guided drawings are aspects of how Waldorf approaches education in a way that's different from a traditional curriculum (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). Teachers can see aspects of their students' personality and where they are developmentally by studying the art that they produce. Even in guided drawings, where the students follow along with the teacher, each painting turns out differently because of a student's personality or hinderances developmentally. Waldorf teachers believe this contributes to the more interconnected relationships that they have with their students, in addition to being able to have the same cohort of students for several years.

To what extent does the Waldorf educational model benefit students' academic success according to teachers and in comparison, to those students in public schools? Both Teacher A and Teacher B believed that the lack of focus on testing is one of the Waldorf method's greatest assets. It allows teachers to focus on skill building and lets students be more relaxed in the classroom. The Waldorf method emphasizes "capacity building over skill building," as Teacher A puts it, where the main goal of teaching students different skills is to increase their capacity to use those skills on their own (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). They are more likely to want to discover solutions on their own when they can use skills instead of being shown shortcuts to the answer. Teacher B believes that a major academic benefit is that "classes

and teachers go up in the grades together, [so] children are very well know by the teacher, [making] assessments more accurate” (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 9 March 2020).

Students and teachers have a closer bond than in traditional schools because they often follow the same cohort of students in a Waldorf school. Thus, they can see where each child is struggling and anticipate giving them support in future lessons and activities. Both teachers stressed how letting the kids have fun is an important aspect of their job, too.

Does this educational model meet the needs of high-risk students in the program? The Waldorf charter school that I interviewed teachers at is still a public school, so they are still legally obligated to have a special education department available to help any students that may have special needs. There is a sizeable amount of special needs students, nearly 4.5%, so there is some appeal to Waldorf for students with special needs (California Department of Education, 2020). Teacher A believes that this is because Waldorf schools ideologically try to “see the individual child and recognize what they need. It’s a therapeutic education in that sense” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). Teacher B makes note that they have aides in the classroom that are available to use, however the social aspect of Waldorf education could make education for special needs children difficult (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 9 March 2020). Conversely, the more subjective activities that are given in Waldorf classes means that it is harder for special needs students to fail an activity, if they get the help they need from their aides. The data surrounding meeting the needs of special education students is mixed, however, as their SARC shows that 50% of special education students pass the English Language Arts California state test yet only 15.6% pass the Mathematics California state test (California Department of Education, 2020). Waldorf education has a special niche for students who require special education due to the model’s explicit focus on art.

English language learners are about 4% of the student population at Monterey Bay Charter School, making them a smaller population than the special education students. Over 47% pass the English Language Arts California state test, while 55% of them pass the Mathematics California state test (California Department of Education, 2020). They appear to be doing well academically, perhaps because expression through art is easier to discern than through written or oral communication. Neither teacher made explicit mention about English language learners in their interviews, but Teacher A mentioned that they wanted more linguistic diversity on their campus, showing a confidence that the Waldorf school would be able to handle a larger English language learner population (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). If the school is wanting to take on more English language learning students, they may need to develop an explicit English language learner program.

Nearly a quarter of all students are low-income, with 23.7% of the student population being socioeconomically disadvantaged. 49.3% of them pass the English Language Arts California state test, but only 24% pass the Mathematics California state test (California Department of Education, 2020). Like English language learning students, neither Teacher A nor B made explicit mention about low-income students. There was discussion about military families, however, and how that population of students is very fluid and often needs educational support. To remedy this, Teacher A describes a program they have called Responded Intervention that helps students as they're struggling so that they won't need an Individualized Education Plan (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). There is a conscious effort at the school to catch their students as they're falling behind, a program that would be especially useful for all high needs students.

Are there any advantages and disadvantages for students attending Waldorf programs as compared to students in public schools? Both teachers, unsurprisingly, did not have any hard-

hitting critiques of the Waldorf method. Teacher A expressed a desire for increased diversity on their campus and a more frequent reexamination of their curricula to “appeal to a broader range of people and making sure we’re doing our best to the students we’ve already attracted” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). The Waldorf model focuses a lot on communication and community, so this is a reasonable criticism of their own school. A more diverse population and curriculum would allow students to learn more about the people that live in their community. Teacher B believed that special needs students need more specialized staff on campus to help them out (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 9 March 2020). If the school continues to grow and attract more people like they want to do, this will be an important issue for them to focus on, especially if the Waldorf method is appealing as it is to special needs children.

What lessons could teachers learn from the Waldorf educational model of education? Teacher A and Teacher B touched on the need for greater socioemotional analysis in terms of what traditional teachers could learn from the Waldorf model. Teacher A focused primarily on the teacher, about how “in teaching you’re so alone often and it’s so easy to get frustrated and think it’s because the school is bad, or testing is bad” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 March 2020). They also express gratitude towards the Waldorf model for not having a set academic timeline that teachers need to follow, meaning that they can adapt their lessons if one isn’t working out. That flexibility allows teachers to take students outside on a break, for example, to shake up the social energies in the room. Waldorf’s greater focus on social intelligence impacts their students too, as Teacher B has had traditional teachers complement their students for their confidence and kindness. They also stressed the need to include art and movement into the

traditional curricula (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 9 March 2020). Overall, the emphasis on expression appears to be considered one of the Waldorf model's greatest assets with regards to educational quality.

Problems and Limitations

There is surprisingly very little academic literature surrounding the Waldorf model that is more than just a critique or support of the model. While there were still articles and journals that supported my research, several of them were written in Eastern European languages or were basic explanations on what Waldorf is. I had to determine the bias of each article to determine if they had veracity, instead of being a pro-Waldorf article written by a Waldorf administrator, for example. Concerningly more so, there was almost no literature on how the Waldorf method helps their high-needs students, especially for special needs students. This would be an excellent topic for future researchers to collect data in, as there is almost none that exists. There were several articles that were written longer than 10 years ago, but the relevance of their information has not changed, so I do not think that would have impacted my analyses in any way.

The biggest issue that I encountered while collecting data was the prevalence of cases of COVID-19. The virus became a pandemic as I was administering interviews in March 2020, meaning that my correspondences with several Waldorf teachers were cut short. Resultingly, I only have two interviews to base my field research off. If I were to continue this project, I would certainly have had more interviews with Waldorf teachers to further verify the claims that I make in my analysis. However, I think that the statistics in the academic literature and the content of the existing interviews already provide ample evidence to support an opinion about the academic benefits of the Waldorf model of education.

Recommendation

Traditionally run schools should incorporate more Waldorf philosophies into their teaching. Schooling up until 2nd or 3rd grade could remain similar to how they are now in traditional schools because many people would be concerned with the drop-in test scores and literacy rates in the early years. However, the sharp uptick in test scores, attendance, and student satisfaction that has been seen in several Waldorf students and schools that transitioned to Waldorf is ample evidence enough that the methods and governing philosophies are positively affecting their students. Teaching for a developmental stage has great socioemotional benefits for students, reducing stress, frustration, and apathy that can arise when a student is not ready to learn in a certain capacity. Incorporating art into all aspects of learning helps students to consolidate information in a way that is meaningful to them, while movement can help them to regain focus in a therapeutic way. Waldorf has a greater focus on a larger community, more so than just within one classroom. There is cooperation between entire grades, the whole school, and the community at large in a Waldorf school. Learning is not a solitary action to be done to pass tests, it should be relevant to one's life and one's community.

Conclusion

This research project aims to examine the research question, "What are the educational benefits of the Waldorf model of education?" From the research that is available, there is a strong implication that the Waldorf method does indeed positively impact their students' academic success. Public urban schools that have transitioned to Waldorf style classrooms have seen massive jumps in test scores and considerable drops in suspensions and aggression. Waldorf students have been found to have better physical and mental health than their peers in traditional schools, often resulting from their curricula's focus on recognizing the individual child and artistic expression. Deemphasizing tests leads to more confident and happier students

and gives instructors more freedom in how they want to run their lessons. Their education has been shown to be equitable, however current Waldorf teachers have expressed desires for more specialized aides and programs to help high needs students. This is not to say that they are performing worse than their peers in public school. On the contrary, the Waldorf method is an appealing alternative form of education for high-needs students because of the emphasis on recognizing the student.

Traditional schools could adopt several aspects of Waldorf education to enhance the learning experience that they provide. To begin, lessons should be taught with the intent of imparting the capacity to use skills, rather than teaching standards. Knowledge and learning is more nebulous than what is on a state exam. When knowledge is consolidated through more holistic methods such as art or movement, students are more likely to remember and enjoy the lessons than if they must complete worksheets. Standards should also be set in accordance to the developmental stages that children are going through, rather than what they should know. This is not something that schools can change on their own, but activities could still be tailored to these stages. Finally, more emphasis should be placed on knowing the child. This is easier to accomplish in Waldorf schools because they follow the same cohort of students, meaning that they will know the same class for over several years. This is more difficult in traditional schools where the teacher stays in the same grade and especially so in traditional secondary schools where a teacher may have over one hundred students per year. Analyzing and encouraging social intelligence will create deeper relationships between students and their teachers. The Waldorf model's academic benefits do not come from one particular aspect of their ideology, but rather from an amalgamation of student-focused educational policies.

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Appendix

Transcript of Teacher A Interview Questions/Answers: March 2, 2020

1. Have you worked in a traditional classroom before? If so, what drew you to teach in a Waldorf school? If not, what made you choose a Waldorf classroom over a traditional one?

I started teaching in mainstream education in 1997, I believe. I spent the first part of my career in mainstream public education as a kindergarten and first grade teacher. I dabbled in a 1-2 combo in a private school and then just was pretty frustrated with what we were expected to teach young children. It didn't align with my values about child development in what I saw and knew in working with children when I saw that they were getting very stressed by the pressure to read in kindergarten and I made the decision to walk away. I was recruited by a Waldorf charter school. At the same time, on a personal side, my daughter was going through mainstream education and mimicking that experience, so by second grade she was having headaches and stomachaches and not wanting to go to school anymore, which was a big shift for her even though she was top of her class. I thought, no, this is just too much evidence from my personal experience as an educator and then as a parent. I found Waldorf while looking for an alternative for her first, and then my growth as an educator realized that I do not want to do that to children, I don't agree with it, and then got recruited by a Waldorf charter school to take first grade, and just went from there.

2. What, in your words, is the Waldorf method?

It's a fantastic model of education. It's an alternative way of educating kids, as is Montessori, although they are not the same at all. Waldorf is very unique in that the curriculum we work with comes directly from the work of Rudolph Steiner and his teachings around child development, so it's a very holistic model that looks at the whole child in developmental stages. So early childhood is a particular period in a child's life that we have a certain way we go about educating young children up to the age of 6 or 7. Then they get into the heart of childhood from 7 to 14, and that's a different focus. So, at the beginning we really focus on the development of their will and their physical body and giving them meaningful experiences in the world. We know that young children learn through imitation, and if you look at how children learn to speak, they learn just by mimicking and it just happens.

We believe strongly in that and we reserve the explicit academic instruction for first grade on up, not to say kindergarten is not academic, there's a lot happening in kindergarten that's laying strong foundations for academic learning, certainly there's a lot of phonemic awareness happening and it's very language and story rich. They're learning to comprehend and imagine and infer and vocabulary, all these important things, they're learning patterning, they're learning to count, but it's done in a way that's very real and based in a home-like setting. The kindergarten classroom is specifically set up to mimic a home. It's beautiful and very nurturing and nourishing for the child, they learn to cook, they learn to do chores, they learn to play which is super important these days, they learn to work out social emotional issues. They really get a strong foundation that way and by taking that extra time, they hit first grade and they're just wide open for learning. And then first grade has this slow ramp up, we think that first grade is the

bridge between kindergarten and the grades, so we move pretty slowly compared to mainstream in first grade. It's all about the whole.

We teach in Waldorf education from the whole concept to the parts, in mainstream education it's pretty much the opposite. They tend to give bits and pieces and answers and go from the part to the whole. For us it's quite the opposite. We want to give an experience and help children develop wonder and inquiry, and we give them the space and the time, we give them really great experiences and then encourage them to think about what they're learning and think about what they're observing and ask questions and come up with their own conclusions.

We don't use textbooks mostly, we have a math adopted program for middle school and they use a textbook there, but in general we don't use textbooks. The children in 1st through 8th are creating their own books called Main Lesson Plan books, so we teach in blocks of subjects for a block of time, it's usually about 19 school days which is about 3 weeks, ideally it would be longer but with school calendars it generally doesn't happen. So, we have Main Lesson which is deep into a topic like 7th grade Renaissance History. They'll learn through biographies, through story, and in 5th on up it's more about biography, so they're connecting what they're feeling like to the subject, and they can go deep with that. Throughout all that experience of talking about Michelangelo, they hear his biography, the teacher's telling it rather than reading it, so it's very rich in life and is very engaging, and then they have experience based on that. They're using all these skills around reading and writing to write their own Main Lesson Book and illustrate it, and so on or they might be doing a hands-on experience of a physics block with a fun

project about a Rubes Goldberg machine where you're working with partners and you're creating.

In the younger grades, say first grade, they hear fairy tales often, which again have a different quality to it that really speaks to the heart of the young child. There are lots of moral dilemmas that comes up in fairy tales and folk tales from different cultures, and through that they're really engaged in the feeling of it. The stories are chosen given the developmental stage of the child, so say kindergarten and first grade is fairy tales, second grade they're getting more into Aesop's fables where there's really this duality of higher self/lower self like the Tortoise and the Hare of learning how to be and they get to write through that. We teach reading generally through writing. We start with the whole, modeling, and then we go to the parts. There's explicit teaching of reading but it's done in a softer way than in mainstream education. We just try to keep everything rich and alive and meaningful. 4th grade has a very different feel than 3rd grade because of what we know about child development and what 3rd grade children are grappling with as they're becoming more aware of the world around them. They have very different needs than a 4th grader who's already had that experience and now they're ready to do something serious, so we do the Norse myths and Vikings and they just want to hear those stories that feeds their soul because that's where they are, ready to bump into each other literally. We'll use alliteration as a tool as they're knocking sticks and memorizing these poems that are all about alliteration, and they have a lot of feeling in them. So, it's just a super-rich experience.

The arts are woven throughout, so there's a lot of drawing that happens in Waldorf education. It starts as guided drawing in first grade, and it progresses to become

more and more independent drawing. Sometimes that's misunderstood by people from the outside, they think it's too guided, but when you stop and you look at a guided drawing like the Golden Goose as they're learning about the letter G and the sound "guh" in the first grade. Doing that lesson, from the outside lesson, you would ask, "why not let them experience it and do their own thing?" and there are many reasons behind that. One is just the discipline to follow, there's spatial awareness on the paper, there's learning about color choice, shapes, right and left, and in the end when you take all those pictures and put them on the wall, they all express something about the child's personality even though they're guided you just see so much. We do wet-on-wet watercolor painting throughout, same thing, they start really slowly and have all these color experiences and learn about the quality of colors, and yet when you put them up they're all so full of personality even though it's the same guided painting. We have something called form drawing which leads into handwriting and then into geometric drawing later. It's really phenomenal to see how different the children's work is based on their personality and their experiences. Form drawing is something very unique to Waldorf education and you really get a window into the kids.

We emphasize movement too; we want to make sure that children from kindergarten on up are getting movement breaks and are doing movement that helps them integrate their midlines and prepare them to learn. Even in mainstream education, they know that if there's not an integration of the midlines or senses that it can hinder learning, so we really emphasize that. In kindergarten and first they do movement circles where they're skipping and jump roping and doing cross lateral movement, clapping games which are social and therapeutic because they're crossing those midlines. If they

can't cross them, then it's pretty obvious to the teacher and the teacher knows what he or she may need to work on.

3. What would you consider to be the academic benefit of your curriculum over a traditional public-school curriculum?

It's super rich and engaging. One thing to note is that in mainstream education it's really about skill building, in the Waldorf world you'll hear this comparison between capacity building and skill building. So, skills are certainly important, but we have an emphasis on building the capacity to use those skills and to think in a way that's clear and free. We want kids that can grow up and express their opinions and think freely. We don't want to give them all the answers, so it's a balance between capacity building and skill building. In my opinion as an educator, I think that capacity building is super important. When I first made the transition from mainstream though, that was a hiccup for me. If they can't use the skills to problem solve, then what's the point?

4. What sort of high needs students (English language learners, special education, low income) do you have in your classroom? To what extent, how do you think the Waldorf educational program benefits the academic success of high-risk students?

Charter schools are publicly funded, so we have a special education department, we have higher numbers of special ed than in the local district, a few percentage points more. We tend to attract children that have learning differences for various reasons. I'd like to think that one of the reasons is that we work really well with seeing the individual child and recognizing what they need. It's a therapeutic education in that sense.

5. How are the needs of high needs students being met? In other words, are their needs being met differently from how they would in a public school?

My hope as an educator here is that we are really creating an equitable experience for all children, so that our children who have learning differences feel a part of everything and feel just as important and valued and recognized and seen as everybody else. I think we do a really good job at that. Something else about Waldorf education is that even though we're double tracked, the classes stay pretty much together in the same cohort from 1st through 8th. Often in Waldorf, the hope and goal is that the teacher will stay with those kids for a series of years, if not the whole 8 years. That creates an added beauty to the experience for all children where they become like a family and see each other for their strengths, their weaknesses, their struggles, their triumphs, and so on. That's part of their building a capacity to just see and appreciate other people and develop empathy and understanding. You recognize things in yourself when you're struggling with one another or with your teacher, so that's another hidden gem to this type of education.

6. How does the Waldorf method affect the success of students with high needs compared to those in a public school?

I don't know the numbers off the top of my head, but enough that we have a coordinator who tests kids and works with them. About 20% of our student population is fluid, they're military family so that means we're turning over about 20% of the spots in our classes all year long. So we have an intervention program as well, there's the tiered system of support so we do reading and math intervention, it's called Responded Intervention, and we work trying to shore things up and see if we can't meet children's

needs and hopefully they won't end up needing an IEP. Certainly, if they have a learning difference where they need that, then by all means we'll go there.

7. What would you consider to be a weakness of the Waldorf model, and what do you think could be done to address these issues?

Our task right now is to really get the word out there so we can become more diverse, ethnically, racially, culturally, linguistically. In the past, before the charter movement took off, Waldorf was a more private school thing, and that in itself makes it more difficult to reach beyond people of means, so now we have this wonderful opportunity with the charter movement that is growing and deepening to really hone in on that and make this available to everybody. People need to know about it and we need to do a better job at updating our curriculum so it's appealing to a broader range of people and making sure we're doing our best to the students we've already attracted, opening their minds through the curriculum of the other. The curriculum tends to be Western European based because Waldorf came out of Western Europe, it was founded in Austria. That's a goal I have for our school is that we can be forerunners in that and really update what we're using and question what we're using and find other resources as well.

8. What could public school teachers and aspiring teachers learn from the Waldorf model?

The biggest one is really observing the children, really get to know them and imagine who they're becoming and "what is their potential?" and always ask that question. Nothing is set in stone with life, but especially with children. If they're having a rough day or a rough year, just recognize that's part of their journey. Remember when working with parents that this is their joy and their love, because working with parents is

a big part of the job as a teacher too. That is part of Waldorf education, is working with the parent body and educating them and having parent evenings, which takes some extra work but is so worth it because we're creating a community. Always reflect and ask, "what can I change in myself?" because in teaching you're so alone often and it's so easy to get frustrated and think it's because the school is bad, or testing is bad. Those are our opportunities to reflect on what's important, what can I see, what do I know, what can I change about myself so I can have a better ability to keep my feet under me. One of the things that gave me the greatest joy as a Waldorf teacher was getting to be able to make my plan, and I knew the standards very well of what was expected of each grade by the state and the Waldorf curriculum, but to know that if my lesson wasn't going over well then I have to be able to be flexible enough to mix it up and change my approach, and sometimes that just means taking a movement break or taking them outside. That freedom to not be locked into a timeline according to the teacher textbook is great. That creative part of it is what gives me joy, is that noticing and working with it. It's like when you're cooking, and you need to know when to turn the heat up or down.

Transcript of Teacher B Interview Questions/Answers: March 9, 2020

1. Have you worked in a traditional classroom before? If so, what drew you to teach in a Waldorf school? If not, what made you choose a Waldorf classroom over a traditional one?

I had no desire to be a teacher because traditional school did not feed my soul. I came across Waldorf education while touring a Waldorf school and I felt cheated that I didn't go through such a system, so I enrolled in a teacher training program.

2. What, in your words, is the Waldorf method?

It's age appropriate activities and instructions that works with and stimulates the multi-faceted human being--multiple intelligences. The three pillars of the education are Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. It's fun for both teachers and students!

3. What would you consider to be the academic benefit of your curriculum over a traditional public-school curriculum?

The Waldorf model is much more relaxed as testing is not as focused on. As classes and teachers go up in the grades together, children are very well known by the teacher, so assessments are more accurate. If children are having fun, they will learn more.

4. What sort of high needs students (English language learners, special education, low income) do you have in your classroom? To what extent, how do you think the Waldorf educational program benefits the academic success of high-risk students?

I have 3 high-risk learners. Without aides it would be very hard to meet their needs. Waldorf relies on a lot of group activities, and if children have a hard time with that, then that is a huge challenge.

5. How are the needs of high needs students being met? In other words, are their needs being met differently from how they would in a public school?

They get a lot of individual time with aides. Additionally, there are various levels of achievement for many activities so it's harder for them to "fail" an activity.

6. How does the Waldorf method affect the success of students with high needs compared to those in a public school?

If there are not resources specifically for such students, Waldorf education will most likely fail them.

7. What would you consider to be a weakness of the Waldorf model, and what do you think could be done to address these issues?

I think that our special needs students do not have enough specialized teachers to help them with what they need.

8. What could public school teachers and aspiring teachers learn from the Waldorf model?

The need and efficiency of using the arts, or movement, or games, or music to teach all the subjects. Teaching in blocks to focus on a particular subject. Also, social intelligence is worked on a lot in Waldorf schools. Those who work in traditional schools usually remark how different children are in their confidence and their kindness. The same for the teachers--there is a lot of collegueship amongst Waldorf teachers, and that

trickles down to the students. If you go into a Waldorf classroom it is usually not cluttered with posters and paper, but the room is artfully created by the teacher which feeds the children with the sense of beauty.