

# TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHING

WALDORF-INSPIRED METHODS  
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL



MARY GORAL



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## WALDORF EDUCATION

WE HAVE THE POWER to transform our public schools—not through the latest and greatest educational research, definitely not through government mandates or the newest “teacher proof” text series, or even through what many educators call “best practices.” I firmly believe that our schools can be transformed by applying Waldorf-inspired practices into the public-school setting. This little-known, but well-established form of education can be a source of ideas and strategies to teachers, administrators, and teacher educators. In a 1994 interview, Elliott Eisner noted:

Waldorf education possesses unique educational features that have considerable potential for improving public education in America. The time is ripe for public schools to explore the ways in which ideas in Waldorf education might be explored in their own settings. For too long, in my opinion, Waldorf education has been on the margins of education. It needs to receive the kind of attention it deserves. (Urmacher 1994)

Waldorf education can no longer be one of the “best-kept” secrets in North America. Nor, as Urmacher (1991, x) stated, should Waldorf schools be “marching quietly along, unheard.” Furthermore, it is past time that those involved in the Waldorf movement step to the forefront and begin educating the public. In the words of Betty Staley

(1997), director of the high-school teacher training at Rudolf Steiner College in California, “The Waldorf movement is challenged to educate the public about the essentials of Waldorf education, to speak out for the soul needs of children, and to call attention to the damaging effects that our society is having on children’s lives” (p. 30).

Although educators have called for Waldorf-inspired education to be a viable part of public schools for over fifteen years, only a few forward-thinking programs around the country have implemented some form of Waldorf education into their public schools. As previously mentioned in the introduction, one such program is alive and well in Louisville, Kentucky. The Jefferson County Public Schools have a number of teachers who are members of the Waldorf-inspired Cadre—a group of innovative public educators who integrate Waldorf-inspired methods into their classrooms. Before delving into their story, however, it is helpful to offer a brief history and background of Waldorf education. By looking at the roots and history of Waldorf education as well as the philosophy, curriculum, and pedagogy found in Waldorf schools, I hope to inform the Waldorf novice and offer a foundation for those interested in bringing Waldorf-inspired teaching to the public-school setting. If, however, the reader already possesses a strong background in all things Waldorf, skip this chapter and move on to chapter two.

## THE ROOTS OF WALDORF EDUCATION

Because Waldorf education continues to be one of the best-kept secrets in this country, few know about Waldorf schools and their origin.

Waldorf schools are the second largest nondenominational group of alternative schools in the world, with over 2,000 schools, including between 200 and 300 (closer to 300 if we include charter schools that use methods inspired by Waldorf education) in the United States. Created by Dr. Rudolf Steiner shortly after World War I, the first Waldorf school was intended for the children of the workers of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Factory in Stuttgart, Germany. Emil Molt, the president of the factory, asked Steiner to create the

school because he had studied Steiner's philosophical works. He felt that an educational approach incorporating Steiner's theories of the developing human being would be a practical way to implement Steiner's threefold social ideas and counteract the prevailing mechanistic worldview in Germany. Steiner, a controversial figure in the cultural life of Central Europe and a prolific writer and lecturer on philosophy, medicine, religion, and education, designed the school to meet the ever-changing educational and spiritual needs of children in an industrial society.

Steiner saw Molt's invitation as an opportunity to develop an educational method not only to meet the intellectual needs of children, but also to meet their spiritual needs. Steiner held that education must meet the needs of the whole child—body, spirit, and soul, or “head, hands, and heart” (Koetzsch 1989).

To understand how Steiner intended to meet the needs of the whole child, it is important to take a brief look at his theory of child development. According to Steiner (1995), body, spirit, and soul are profoundly interrelated, and a child develops toward adulthood in roughly seven-year stages, through which the body, soul, and spirit come into tandem with one another (Edmunds 1992; Reinsmith 1989). With each stage, specific spiritual and psychological changes occur simultaneously with physical changes.

From birth to about age seven, children exist entirely in their senses (Steiner 1995). After leaving the womb, a child is exposed to new environments and soaks up each situation like a sponge. Learning permeates a child's entire being through active imitation. Children grow not only outwardly, but also inwardly, forming their individual instrument according to each child's human potential (Edmunds 1992; Urmacher 1991).

The second seven-year stage begins approximately with the loss of the baby teeth. Whereas children learn primarily through imitation during the first stage, they apprehend mainly through feeling and imagination during the second stage. According to Steiner (1995), the child now experiences the world as an artist and learns about the world through story, parable, and myth. Teachers must translate the

intellectual content of the curriculum into age-appropriate methods in order to arouse the feelings that form the basis of the mind's later development (Barnes 1980; Reinsmith 1989; Urmacher 1991).

The third stage of development begins with adolescence. It is characterized by a new level of consciousness: the intellect. Children are now ready to conceptualize the laws that underlie phenomena. Educators must push children to judge, critique, and examine more abstractly and to become more aware of the world. Around the age of twenty-one, the "I" begins to awaken (Steiner 1995), at which point the individual begins to accept moral accountability and to become a responsible, contributing member of society (Barnes 1980; Koetzsch 1989; Reinsmith 1989; Urmacher 1991).

The explicit purpose of Waldorf schools has always been to develop free, independent, moral, and creative human beings. Steiner proposed that this could be accomplished in several ways: teaching a developmentally appropriate curriculum rooted in the humanities; having the teacher remain with the same group of children for at least a few years during elementary school; and valuing equally the arts and crafts and the traditional academic subjects. Because Steiner saw each human being as spiritual and having a divine spark, one purpose of Waldorf education is to protect and feed that inner quality and educate the heart, soul, and mind of each child.

Because Steiner's worldview and orientation toward education was based on his spiritual views, it is rare to find his educational philosophy included in traditional textbooks for teacher training. This is one reason why educators in North America are generally unfamiliar with Waldorf methods. It is nevertheless interesting that many of the ideas undergirding Steiner's educational philosophy can be traced to the theories of several well-known educational philosophers, including Rousseau, Froebel, and Pestalozzi.

As mentioned, Steiner thought that education should be grounded in an understanding of child development, which begins with imitation, proceeds through imagination, and culminates in the intellect. Like Steiner, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) believed that education should promote and encourage qualities such as cheerfulness,

spontaneity, and the inquisitiveness associated with childhood. Rousseau also held that education should be developmentally appropriate and that young children should not be instructed in academic subjects at an early age.

Following Rousseau, was Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827), a Swiss educator who agreed with and built upon Rousseau’s ideas. Both Steiner and Pestalozzi believed that education is based on sensory impressions and that children would reach their natural potential through proper sensory impressions. Pestalozzi referred to this as “object lessons,” which provide children with manipulative experiences that lead naturally to particular concepts. It is interesting that Steiner spoke directly against Pestalozzi’s object lessons, noting that sensory impressions are only one pole of experience and that, therefore, education includes reaching children through all of their intelligences. Both theorists believed, however, that the best teachers are those who teach *children*, not subjects.

According to Gutek, in his informative text *Pestalozzi and Education* (1968), Pestalozzi felt that schools should focus on the harmonious development of the human, the “development of all his human powers and capacities” (p. 30), and that such development should occur in a climate of emotional security. Like Steiner, Pestalozzi believed in a balanced education of head, heart, and hands. Pestalozzi was critical of traditional education that separated thinking and doing (Gutek 1968).

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), another holistic educator who actually attended one of Pestalozzi’s institutes believed that, through education, the human being’s divine essence is brought forth (Froebel 1887). According to Froebel, teachers should learn with the children and learning should be adapted to the children’s needs. He saw nature as a prime source for learning and felt that manual work was ennobling.

Froebel’s concept of children and how they learn was based, in part, on the idea of *unfolding*, a concept also held by Pestalozzi and Steiner. The educator’s role was to observe this natural unfolding of children and provide activities enabling them to learn when they are ready to learn. In addition to school subjects, Froebel, like Steiner, held that children should work in the field and garden, experience woodworking

and weaving, model with clay, and paint. Like Pestalozzi and Steiner, Froebel believed that school was to be an extension of the home with both work and play activities. He believed in establishing an emotionally secure environment and in the importance of early childhood education with a focus on play rather than academics. In Froebel's (1887) words, "Play is the highest phase of child development of this period" (p. 54). Steiner (1996) also stressed the importance of play in the early childhood setting.

To a healthy child, playing is in no way just a pleasurable pastime, but a completely serious activity. Play flows earnestly from a child's entire organism. If your way of teaching can capture the child's seriousness in play, you will not merely teach in a playful way—in the ordinary sense—but you will nurture the earnestness of a child's play. (pp. 61–62)

Consistent with the idea of unfolding, Froebel believed that young children are like flowers blooming from a bud and that with love and care, children will grow and someday produce fruit. Froebel likened the role of educator to that of a gardener, and, like Steiner, Froebel believed young children needed to be cared for and loved. Steiner repeatedly stresses the importance of educator/teacher love for students in many different lectures. In a 1922 lecture, Steiner (2004) states, "In a Waldorf school, who the teachers are is far more important than any technical ability they may have acquired intellectually. It is important that teachers not only love the children, but also love the whole procedure they use" (p. 56).

Many of the theories and philosophies of education mentioned here can be found throughout Waldorf education, from the belief in the importance of children's developmental stages to the idea that children need to be respected as spiritual beings and whose highest potential should always be kept in mind. The following section describes in detail several of the key principles from Waldorf education, principles reflective of these practices that could easily be applied to the public-school setting.

WALDORF ENVIRONMENT, CURRICULUM,  
AND INSTRUCTION

To help the reader gain a better understanding of Waldorf education, it is useful to explore it through three domains; the environment of the school, curriculum, and pedagogy. Several important factors contribute to an understanding of a school's environment, not the least of which are a school's philosophy/vision, the physical environment of a school, and a sense of community.

*Philosophy and Vision.* All schools, whether public or private, need to be grounded in a common theory or philosophy. This philosophy can be used as a lens through which one can reflect and work. A school's philosophy, also known as its *vision*, unites a school with a bond of shared understandings and common language. It involves a commitment from parents and teachers, as well as administrators, and provides an avenue where everyone can come together for reflective conversations based on a common goal.

Steiner initiated Waldorf schools to counteract a trend of the time—the move toward an increasingly mechanistic, analytical, and exclusively intellectual educational environment. He believed that spirituality was a crucial component of every child's education. This spiritual approach is not based on any one religion but refers to the spiritual nature of the human being and the divine spark in each child. Steiner held a particular interest in the education of children and saw schooling as a way to achieve social renewal (Sturbaum 1997). According to formal brochures and literature, the philosophy of the Waldorf school is oriented toward assisting the healthy development of head, hand, and heart in order to create loving, compassionate students who love learning for its own sake.

Steiner's philosophy of education...seeks to address the full and harmonious development of the child's spiritual, emotional, and physical capacities so that he may act in life as a self-disciplined and morally responsible human being. (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America [AWSNA] 1992, 2)

What tends to make Waldorf education unique, is that this philosophy is deeply embedded within the school's environment, as well as in the curriculum and instruction.

***Physical Environment.*** The philosophy inherent in the design of a Waldorf school contends that classrooms should not be over-stimulating, so that children can focus better. Although colors may vary from school to school, many private Waldorf schools in the U.S. paint classrooms using a technique referred to as "lazure" (with various colors for different ages: pastel pink for early childhood, pastel orange for first grade, pastel yellow for second grade). They are furnished and decorated beautifully, yet sparingly. Fresh flowers, candles, plants, and low-level lighting afford students an aesthetically pleasing environment that appeals to their senses. The importance of beauty is also reflected in the classroom "tools." Toys and "manipulatives" in the early childhood and kindergarten classrooms, for example, are made of organic and natural substances (wood, cotton gauze, and beeswax). The children in kindergarten and early childhood education are provided with materials for *constructive* creative play, rather than being given finished, manufactured, or processed toys. Rawson and Richter (2000) stress the importance of the environment in a Waldorf kindergarten classroom:

The kindergarten staff spend hours in their kindergartens both before the children arrive in the morning and after they have gone. There are activities and materials to prepare, of course, but more importantly there has to be the right mood in place. The staff often meets in the morning to say a verse together before going to their rooms to be there when the children arrive. (pp. 33–34)

David Orr (1999) believes that, "more than any other institution in modern society, education has a moral stake in the health, beauty, and integrity of the world our students will inherit" (p. 147). Waldorf schools make a point of offering a beautiful environment for children of all ages. Moreover, the simple, soothing atmosphere of the Waldorf classroom promotes a calm sense of peace in the children. Waldorf

philosophy contends that teachers must be very conscious of the physical environment and the impression it makes on children.

For those educators seriously interested in changing their school's environment, a tour of a Waldorf school is suggested. Not only does the focus on aesthetics provide a beautiful setting for children, it helps students build "sensitivity to subtle relationships, to harmony and balance that will underlie their sense of self, learning, life, and even a society to work toward" (Byers, Dillard, Easton, Manry, McDermott, Oberman, and Urmacher 1996, 40).

***Community through Continuity.*** For years, conventional elementary schools have placed students in graded classrooms and handed them off from one teacher to the next, year after year. After fifth or sixth grade, students are sent to a completely different school, one that is highly departmentalized and possibly tracked. There is no sense of continuity for the children, which is sad because school is often the only stable place in many of today's children's lives. In order to combat this disjointed experience, many Waldorf teachers ideally stay with their classes from first through eighth grade, though Steiner recommended only that teachers stay with their classes for at least a few years. Waldorf early-childhood educators, too, remain with their kindergarten children for two or three years (Waldorf kindergarten is a two- to three-year experience). The children and the teacher establish a community within the first year (first grade) and continue to grow and learn together throughout their Waldorf schooling. Relationships between students and teacher deepen with each passing year. Class teachers are responsible for the progress and academic growth of each student, giving the student in essence, a third parent (Ogletree 1970).

In public schools, to combat the experience of changing teachers every year, many public-school educators are exploring the concept of *looping*, an idea that has been around since the one-room schoolhouse days. A simple concept, it received favorable attention during the 1990s. According to Grant, Johnson, and Richardson (1996), looping occurs when a teacher stays with one class for two consecutive years. Grant and his colleagues believe the looping strategy offers several advantages. First, teachers save time at the beginning of the second

year, when normally several weeks are needed to become familiar with the children and to review. More important than the time factor, however, is the relationship formed between teacher and students. “Our experience indicates that the most important variable in a positive elementary school program is the constant attention of a single teacher/caregiver with whom the child can develop a predictable and meaningful relationship” (Grant et al. 1996, 15).

Looping also allows stronger partnerships with the parents, as a sense of community is instilled with the parents (family), child(ren), and teacher. Relationships deepen as the teacher remains with the class, allowing teachers to grow with and more deeply understand their students. The strong child–teacher–parent bond also helps everyone work through problems instead of handing them on to a different teacher the following year. Some may view the eight-year Waldorf cycle as extreme; however, the benefits teachers experience from the two-year looping arrangements can be extended when teachers remain with their classes for an even longer period of time. Continuity, trust, and meaningful relationships are qualities often lacking in our schools today. One of the greatest benefits of looping is the opportunity for kids to develop a loving, trusting relationship with an adult.

***Curriculum and Instruction.*** Another essential element of any school is the curriculum and instruction used in the classroom. The curriculum and instruction in most of today’s public schools is driven by state and national standards and high-stakes testing created by people who typically have no connection with the school. Knowledge is conceptualized as a product, students are viewed as human capital, and instruction is seen as a problem of management. Reading, mathematics, and writing are often emphasized over reflective thinking, substantive content, and artistic and musical creativity. Teachers in many conventional schools have been stripped of their creativity and limited to managing prepackaged instructional programs; they must “teach to the test” and are then held accountable for their students’ success, measured only by state-mandated achievement tests. According to Steven Wolk’s (2007) scathing article on the current state of public schools:

We are living in a schooling delusion. Do we really believe that our schools inspire our children to live a life of thoughtfulness, imagination, empathy, and social responsibility? . . . We dumb down and sanitize the curriculum in the name of techno-rational efficiency and “American interests.” (p. 649)

He goes on to say that children’s schooling consists mostly of filling in the blanks on worksheets, memorizing and regurgitating facts from textbooks, taking multiple-choice tests, and making the “occasional diorama.” Students learn subjects in an isolated manner, spending short blocks of time on one particular topic.

In his bestselling book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv (2005) compares such segmented, superficial learning to skimming across the ocean while never realizing that there is something under the surface. Because of this kind of instruction, students do not see the connections among topics, nor do those topics seem real to them. Little time is devoted to exploring subjects in depth, which causes children to learn only isolated facts. This way of teaching does not capture students’ attention or speak to their souls.

In Waldorf schools, students do not learn in a fragmentary way, nor is the curriculum prepackaged. Waldorf education employs theme-based instruction through the *main lesson*. The main lesson is taught every morning for approximately two hours and focuses on reading and composition, mathematics, science, history, or geography. If, for example, a fourth-grade class is studying fractions, they will spend two hours each day for three to four weeks on this topic. During the two-hour main lesson, nearly all other areas of the curriculum will be woven into the topic, including music, movement, art, storytelling, drama, and writing. The students thus learn in an integrated, holistic manner (Sturbaum 1997). Steiner was adamant about teaching children a curriculum in which all subjects connect and interweave, with nothing isolated or in a vacuum and every part seen as part of the whole (Reinsmith 1989). “Feeling the whole in every part, children discover how they are knitted right into the fabric of the physical world and its mysteries, right into the world of objects and feelings and doings” (Richards 1980, 76).

In addition to teaching a curriculum that allows students to study a subject deeply, Waldorf schools, from their inception, have offered a curriculum designed to nurture all of the intelligences as defined by Howard Gardner (1983). In a recent television appearance, Gardner noted that Waldorf schools fully embody the notion of multiple intelligences. According to Armstrong (1994), Waldorf education embodies in a truly organic sense all eight of Gardner's intelligences. Eisner (1994, 83) also believes that Waldorf schools "pay... serious attention to the use of multiple aptitudes and the development of diverse forms of knowing." In most main lessons, children sing, recite verses, move rhythmically, draw, and listen. Since the child is an integrated organism, the body, soul, and spirit must be fully developed. Thus, in addition to the academic subjects, Waldorf schools offer lessons in singing, painting, drawing, eurythmy (artistic or therapeutic movement), instrumental music, physical education, handwork, woodworking, and gardening. By working with the hands and moving with the body, children are given a balance between the academic and the more visual and kinesthetic way of learning (Koetzsch 1989; Ogletree 1974).

Not only is the curriculum balanced, but also the activities of the school day are balanced. There is a certain rhythm and flow to the day that takes into consideration the inner rhythm of the children. Because Steiner believed that "head" learning should be followed by "heart" learning (owing to the physiological demands of intellectual learning and the therapeutic role of the arts), the artistic and physically active subjects are taught during the middle and later parts of the day.

Academic subjects are arranged in a sequence to be compatible with the child's cognitive or psychological development. According to Steiner (2000), this sequence follows the evolution of human consciousness, which in turn parallels the awakening of the child's inner consciousness. For example, in first grade, children learn content through fairy tales; second graders learn through fables and legends of saints. Creation stories are taught in third grade, followed in fourth and fifth grades by Norse myths and Greek mythology. Sixth graders learn about the Middle Ages and Roman times; seventh graders study the Renaissance; and eighth graders study history to the present time.

The subjects are taught using a kinesthetic, artistic approach. Generally, textbooks are not used, except perhaps in the upper grades for mathematics. Teachers develop their own materials and teach content through storytelling and biographies. In addition, teachers make every effort to present academic subjects in ways that involve students artistically, as well as rhythmically, or bodily. Pupils write and illustrate their work in “main-lesson books,” which contain examples of their best work and the key concepts learned throughout the main lesson. These books help teachers evaluate student progress and become a valuable resource for showing growth over time. Main-lesson books are actually a “post-Steiner” convention and have no direct link to Steiner’s educational work; they represent the way it’s done now.

Waldorf schools offer a rich curriculum that engages children in the arts and humanities. Moreover, Waldorf philosophy stresses the importance of teaching to the whole child, loving and respecting each child as an individual. Teachers also teach their students to care for and respect nature as well as one another. The curriculum at a Waldorf school is designed to teach social values, which is accomplished in a truly organic way. Every morning, students recite a verse that honors nature and offers thanks for the day. The stories that students hear each day and throughout the year almost always include moral values, brought to the children through the archetypes often found in the traditional folktales, fairy tales, myths, and legends. These simple tales pose the hero or heroine in a difficult life situation, and then show how major obstacles are overcome through perseverance, honesty, and compassion.

Teachers stress the connection between students and nature, and one with another. Steven Wolk’s (2007) article “Why Go to School?” cites what most children today are *not* learning in school: love of learning, caring and empathy, environmental literacy, multicultural community, social responsibility, peace and nonviolent resolution of problems, media literacy, global awareness (not just learning to *compete* in a global economy), the fundamentals of money, family, food, and creativity, and imagination. He calls these topics “schooling for human beings.”

Through my work with Waldorf education, Wolk’s topics seem very similar to what Rudolf Steiner had in mind when he created the

first Waldorf school in 1919. Why not learn from a well-established method of education? Over the years, public education has had a history of jumping on every new bandwagon, rather than exploring what works with children, both past and present. We have found that Waldorf-inspired education does indeed make a difference in the lives of public-school teachers and children. Read on to find out about the history of the Waldorf-inspired Cadre and how they have reaped the benefits of implementing Waldorf-inspired methods in their public-school classrooms.