

The Development of Literacy in the Waldorf School: An Alternative Model

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Waldorf education is the largest and fastest growing form of independent nonsectarian education in the world. The first Waldorf school was founded in Germany 75 years ago; there are now over 650 schools in 46 countries worldwide.

In the context of the current debate over how children best learn to read, Waldorf education may offer a valuable alternative model of a "balanced and comprehensive" approach to literacy, one with a 75-year history of success. For example, the Waldorf approach to reading has always incorporated intensive and detailed instruction in phonics—that is, in the correspondences of sounds and letters. At the same time, particular skills (like phonics) are always developed within a larger context of meaningful language experience: words—even letters—are brought to life through stories, poetry, movement, drama, and an, so that children approach reading and writing through a variety of meaningful, familiar, and enjoyable experiences.

KINDERGARTEN

For the young child, the most familiar and natural experience of language is that of sounds, stories, and conversations shared with parents, siblings, and friends. The Waldorf kindergarten, conceived as a bridge between home life and the new life of school, builds on this foundation, immersing children in an environment of vivid and imaginative oral speech and literature: daily storytelling, drama, rhythmic poetry are accompanied by movement, nursery rhymes, chants, songs, and word play of all kinds. Reading and writing are not introduced in the kindergarten; according to the model of child development which underlies the entire Waldorf curriculum, the transition from orality to literacy is best delayed until the seventh year. This delay, however, allows for the fuller growth of the capacities developed through a rich and varied experience of oral language. Listening, comprehending, dramatizing, reciting and retelling, the internalization of oral rhythms and inflections, as well as a strongly nurtured pleasure in language and literature—all lay the groundwork for a confident and successful transition to reading and writing in the first grade.

THE PRIMARY GRADES

The connection between orality and literacy is developed in the first grade as children are introduced to letters and words through stories, poetry, movement and an. As in the kindergarten the children hear, retell or dramatize stories and recite simple poems, tongue twisters and rhymes, but now the written words begin to appear. As James Moffett has observed, learning to read and write involves a shift from an "oral-aural medium to a visual medium; the learner is matching vocal sounds he already knows with something new—the sights of language." (Coming on Center, p.31). This is exactly the process which takes place in the Waldorf classroom, when children hear a story, then see words or sentences from the story on the blackboard, accompanied by a picture the teacher has drawn to illustrate the story. The familiarity of the words and their context (story, picture) helps children make the connection between sound and sight and meaning all at once.

What happens next is a departure from the conventional sequence in many traditional classrooms: Waldorf students begin in the first grade to create their own books (individually composed and illustrated records of their learning in every subject), a practice which continues

throughout the grades. At first, the children copy poems or alliterative verses the teacher has written on the blackboard; gradually they begin composing their own sentences, typically summarizing an exciting moment from a story, which they may also illustrate. Thus their first experience of reading is of their own writing, their own commemoration of familiar material. In this way, reading and writing really develop simultaneously, as reciprocal activities, allowing the child to be active from the beginning, to discover 'I can put these words on my paper and then read them back to myself or to others.' (And in doing so, the child is also reliving, remembering the story). It's a distinctively continuous process which unfolds, from hearing a story, to seeing the words, to writing them (copying at first), to reading them. And at all stages, it is connected with stories, images, and experiences the children know and take pleasure in--fairy tales, fables, poems about animals, etc.

In addition to developing literacy out of oral language experience, Waldorf teachers also introduce children to the letters of the alphabet in a quite distinctive way, one that links their phonetic and visual qualities to the world of meaning. Throughout the first year, individual letters (all the vowels and a selection of consonants by year's end) are introduced through stories, sound, and pictures. To present the letter 'S', for example, the teacher might tell a fairy tale about a snake. The following day, the children find a colorful chalk drawing on the blackboard, with a sinuous snake in the grass forming the shape of the letter S. As the children discover the letter in the picture the teacher voices its sound with them, and invites them to think of other words which start with that sound (perhaps individual children volunteer to come up and write a word they know on the board). The sound/symbol correspondence is further reinforced through the recitation of alliterative verses (often linked to the story as well). In addition to writing the letter S themselves, the children may also walk its form, trace it in sand, or sculpt it out of clay or wax (many Waldorf students make a whole alphabet of letters out of modeling wax). Finally, in their own books, the children will create a page dedicated to the letter S, carefully drawing the letter, writing a few sentences from the story or verse, and illustrating these with a picture.

This connection--of letter, sound, and picture--of course recapitulates the actual evolution of letters out of pictographs and hieroglyphs into the modern alphabetic system. For the young child, it is a way of experiencing the letters as part of a constellation of meaningful, interesting and pleasurable experiences; it overcomes the abstractness of letters as black and white marks on a page, and places them in a context that is intimately familiar and accessible. There is something almost ceremonial about this introduction of the letters in a Waldorf classroom; although many 1st graders already know their alphabet when they come to school, they are typically enthralled by this imaginative presentation, which conveys a sense of the creative potency of the alphabet--of language--to open up worlds of meaning.

A great deal of phonetic work goes on in the initial process in which students meet the letters of the alphabet, connect them with familiar words and sentences, and generate their own examples. Teacher and class also do "sounding out" together with stories or verses on the board, so that the children are gradually familiarized with additional letters and spelling patterns. By the end of the first grade, Waldorf students have composed and illustrated their own "first readers" with "letter pages," word families, stories and favorite poems that they can then read to their families. In recognition of their entry into the world of literacy, the teacher may also present the children with a reader he or she has compiled of stories, poems, or perhaps a play the students have acted out during the year.

In the second grade, students continue to develop their reading and writing skills with more exposure to a variety of printed texts (class library), both individual and group reading, and practice with narrative, descriptive and expository writing in their "lesson books." Speech,

drama, the telling and re-telling of stories, and class discussion continue to develop the students' oral language skills; the connection between orality and literacy is strongly maintained and emphasized throughout the grades.

The initial development of literacy is slower in a Waldorf school than currently advocated for America's public schools. (The Waldorf school curriculum is paralleled in a number of European school systems, particularly in Denmark, in which students enter the first grade and are introduced to literacy at the age of seven-with an outcome of essentially 100% literacy.) The detailed and imaginative unfolding of the alphabet takes time, as does oral practice and the integration of artistic activities (painting, drawing, modeling, rhythmic movement) which help children experience language as a rich field of meaning.

By 4th grade, however, Waldorf students have attained a level of literacy comparable to their peers in public schools. By 5th grade, the average Waldorf student scores well above average on standardized tests for reading and writing. Waldorf graduates who transition to public high schools have no difficulty in the academic programs they encounter there; they bring with them a solid set of reading and writing skills and experiences as well as a set of capacities in oral language beyond that developed in all but the most exceptional program.

For those students who continue in a Waldorf high school, where such a program is available, the integration of oral language skills with the development of advanced literacy-built on the rich foundation of the curriculum in the grades-prepares the students fully, for higher education and their future careers. Waldorf high school graduating classes have impressively high verbal SAT scores, and the students are regularly admitted to outstanding colleges throughout the nation.

To summarize, Waldorf students begin their education with a slowly and carefully nurtured experience of and participation in oral language in its full breadth and richness-and the continued maintenance and development of oral language skills is emphasized throughout the program. Students transition deliberately in the first and second grades through carefully modulated introductions to literacy-beginning with an extended introduction to the alphabet and sound and symbol correspondences and working with their own first attempts at writing. Only then is reading introduced -reading first what they themselves have written, moving towards experiences with texts previously presented orally, and then to unfamiliar materials. Reading skills (such as phonics, word attack skills, decoding) are developed explicitly, but always in the context of meaningful reading experiences. This slowly introduced and carefully modulated introduction to literacy provides all student with a full opportunity for success and provides them with the full spectrum of language skills they will need in their future lives.

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