Waldorf Education: Four Successes and Four Failures

If you're considering a Waldorf education for your child, it's important to weigh all the pros and cons to make sure it's a right fit. Here's a little background: the Waldorf education model began in 1919, when Rudolph Steiner was asked by the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Germany to start a school for the children of the factory workers. The school constructed by Steiner quickly grew to encompass other children, and a new pedagogy was quickly born. Today, there are more than 1,000 Waldorf schools globally, with around 160 located in the United States.

While many parents and teachers are enthralled with the unique approach to education Waldorf offers, others are significantly concerned about some of Steiner's philosophies. Not sure if this is the right academic choice for your child? Read on to explore both the successes and failures of a Waldorf education.

Success #1: A Worldly, Humanitarian Education

Waldorf views education as a far greater responsibility than simply reading, writing, and arithmetic. In a Waldorf school, children are taught the importance of social responsibility, peace, respect, and compassion.

The success of this education philosophy can be seen in various Waldorf campuses around the world, and most poignantly, in areas where tremendous racial tensions exist. During the South African apartheid regime, the local Waldorf school was one of the rare examples where Caucasian and African students attended classes together. Today, at the Harduf Kibbutz Waldorf school in Israel, Jewish and Arab students and faculty learn from each other.

In an Australian qualitative and quantitative research study conducted by Jennifer Gidley and published in 2005 in the Futures Journal, about 75% of the students surveyed could envision "positive changes in both the environment and human development," as well as socio-economically.

Success #2: "Looping" Builds Relationships

The Waldorf model encourages children to remain with the same teacher all the way through the primary grades of school until they head to high school. Theoretically, by spending eight grade years with a single adult mentor, children build long-term relationships and feelings of security. When students or parents have a conflict with the teacher, they are encouraged to work out their differences, building conflict-resolution skills in the process. In addition, the teacher theoretically should truly understand how each child learns and can personalize the lessons to specific learning styles.

With that said, some may argue that looping is a disadvantage, as there are certain drawbacks inherent in looping, and a growing number of Waldorf campuses are decreasing the amount of time looped.

Success #3: Learning through Art

The Waldorf model infuses the arts with academics all the way through the primary grades and into high school. The arts are part of nearly every lesson, using drama, music, dance (specifically called eurythm, which a form of dance that all children and teachers participate in for the purpose of expressing the "art of the soul"), crafts, and visual arts to illustrate what the children are learning. For example, typical textbooks are not found in the Waldorf classroom. Rather, each student draws and creates a personal book that exemplifies the lessons.

The artistic emphasis certainly shines through in the Waldorf students. According to research conducted by Earl Ogletree that analyzed students in both Waldorf and traditional schools, those in Waldorf schools scored higher on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking Ability. While not all children may thrive in this type of learning environment, this philosophy is a perfect fit for students who have an artistic and creative inclination.

Success #4: Children Begin Learning without Technology

Technology, including television and computers, are frowned upon in Waldorf schools during the early years of education, and parents are encouraged to ban these digital devices at home as well. Instead, children are encouraged to indulge in free play that nurtures the imagination and interactions with other students. The lack of media exposure may also reduce attitudes of consumerism in younger kids.

Failure #1: Children Not Taught to Read Until Permanent Teeth Sprout

According to Waldorf methodology, children are not taught to read in these schools until around ages seven or eight, or specifically, when their permanent teeth sprout. Instead, in the early primary years, oral storytelling and play time are emphasized.

Some parents and educators have voiced concern that the delay in teaching basic reading skills could put children behind in their studies, especially if they were to transfer to a non-Waldorf institution. Test scores for second-grade students in Waldorf schools do tend to lag behind scores of children in the same grade in public schools.

However, A New Zealand study conducted in 2009 found that Waldorf children do catch up in their reading skills by age 10. Sebastian Suggate of the Department of Psychology of the University of Otago compared public school and Waldorf students and found that by age 10, there was "no difference in reading achievement between children who had been given early instruction in reading and those who had not.

The delay in teaching reading can also mean that children with reading disabilities, such as dyslexia, are not diagnosed until a later age.

Failure #2: Steiner's Spiritual Worldview Passed to Teachers, Students

Steiner developed his educational model based on his spiritual philosophy known as anthroposophy. This philosophy subscribes to reincarnation, spirits on the earth and utilizing the inner self to serve community. While anthroposophy is not taught as a religious course in any American Waldorf school, it is a core part of teacher training.

Some parents believe their children are infused with New Age ideas at Waldorf that may run contrary to their own spiritual beliefs. Other parents believe that the prevalence of anthroposophy in the classroom is hidden from them. Still others believe that anthroposophy interwoven into the education makes Waldorf religious schools based on occult theory, as expressed by The People for Legal and Non-Sectarian Schools (PLANS), which was formed by former Waldorf parents, students, teachers, and administrators.

Failure # 3: Bullying Issues Not Addressed

Bullying is a tragedy that occurs at too many schools, and Waldorf schools are not immune to bullying. While no quantitative study has been conducted to compare the prevalence of bullying at Waldorf vs. traditional schools, there are a handful of "Waldorf survivor" groups, where former Waldorf students and

parents come together to heal from their traumatizing Waldorf experiences.

Failure #4: Lack of Student Population Diversity

In a study conducted by Freda Easton of the Columbia University Teachers College, students, parents, and faculty of surveyed American Waldorf colleges all affirmed that the student population could be more diverse, specifically including more minority groups. According to Vernon Dewey at Antiochne University, there is a "present lack of racial diversity in Waldorf Schools."

Most Waldorf schools are private, which may be a contributing factor to the lack of socioeconomic diversity. Waldorf education is typically a rather expensive undertaking for parents, which is why many schools have financial aid available.

The choice of schools is a personal one that parents have to make for each of their children. Many factors go into this decision, including the quality of the school and education and the temperament of the child. When it comes to Waldorf education, it is important to look at both the pros and cons before choosing this model for your child.

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