

Have you heard about Waldorf Education?

by Jeff Tunkey

Or, more to the point, WHAT have you heard about Waldorf Education? My teaching friends and I have grinned or grimaced through so many depictions that are funny, off-base, mystifying, mortifying or exasperating that I want to try to 'set the record straight'. Here are some of the top misconceptions you also may have heard about Waldorf schools and Steiner Education:

1. "It's artistic" or "for artistic children."
2. "It's unstructured."
3. "It's for children with learning challenges."
4. "It's non-academic" (especially the perceived image of our kindergartens).
5. "They don't start reading until third grade."
6. "It's way behind the times" because we're still following the 1919 ideas of Rudolf Steiner.

And then, we have to deal with the 2015 season finale of *The Simpsons* television series, in which Homer rebels against Lisa's desire to attend the fictional Springfield Waldorf School because "everyone at a Waldorf school has to wear a hat."*

Well... there definitely is at least a superficial grain of truth to all of the above *except number 6*: thanks to the development of functional magnetic resonance imaging and other tools of modern science, we can now substantiate the claim that Rudolf Steiner's approach to education was – if anything – at least 100 years ahead of its time. So let's go through the list of things people say, and then dig a little deeper, saving the newest information for last.

1. Artsy school? Yes, students create their own Main Lesson Books; an artistic individual recording of lesson content is part of the pedagogical approach. Yes, student life is also enriched every day with artistic efforts – painting, drawing, acting, singing, dance, eurythmy, and more. But really: no. First, we subscribe to the "multiple intelligences" viewpoint developed during recent decades by Harvard's Howard Gardner. At a Waldorf school

students can develop their language, math/logic and science intelligences - but have equal opportunity to work on interpersonal skills, introspection, and spatial, musical and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences. Secondly, adding an artistic experience of academic material promotes wonder, love of learning, and a deeper personal investment in the subject matter. Third, we offer an experiential classroom environment that gives equal learning opportunity to all learning styles: visual,

auditory, read/write, and kinesthetic. Finally, it takes willpower to be artistic. It builds muscles you can't see!

2. Unstructured? Yes, the walls are painted in beautiful colors and the early childhood rooms are awash in gauze. But: no. Don't judge our book by the covers. The promotion of student self-discipline through a very structured curriculum spiral has always been one of the cardinal aims of the Waldorf educational journey since its beginnings in 1919 Germany.

3. Who goes there? As the Educational Support Coordinator at my Waldorf school, I've had the opportunity to talk about our 8th-grade graduates with many high-school educators, and to watch hundreds of our students progress from Waldorf kindergarten, through the grades, and then depart for all types of public and independent schools around the region. Yes, it's true that many students who have struggled in a common-core, sit-all-day, drill-'til-it-hurts environment have blossomed in our school, if they have the will to work at it. A thriving Waldorf classroom can serve a few students with learning challenges, perhaps in ways that serve them much better than a mainstream alternative. But that is only part of our mission – our classic academics have also been just right for students with very high capacities for rigorous school work, and everything in between.

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*See <http://blog.sgws.org/waldorf-education-featured-on-the-simpsons-season-finale/>



4. Non-academic? Yes, for those seeking a methodical and rigorous educational path for their student, the absence of computers, textbooks and whiteboards in the Waldorf early childhood and elementary classrooms can feel odd or disconcerting at first. But, look a little longer and you will see educators who are themselves striving to exemplify the essence of lifelong learning, by standing each day in front of students to deliver content that they (the teachers) have worked to make their own and to be ready to express with conviction and warmth.

5. Language arts delayed? Yes, many first-time visitors to a Waldorf school begin with questions about the language arts approach. Perhaps they have heard that there is a “writing before reading” approach in the lower grades. Or they wonder why there seems to be no writing or books in early childhood classrooms. It feels like Waldorf’s writing-before-reading thing ‘doesn’t compute’ now that nobody else practices handwriting or writes more than a tweet at a time. But the approach we take is not unique to Waldorf and for the most part mirrors the more-recent “Whole Language” method used today as a component in many schools of all kinds.

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An emphasis on building vocabulary, seeking meaning, and nurturing love of literature

The philosophy of Whole Language* is complex and draws from education, linguistics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Teachers emphasize that students create their own knowledge from what they encounter. Using a holistic approach to teaching, whole-language teachers do not believe students learn effectively by early emphasis on analyzing small chunks of a system; rather they see learning as a cognitive experience unique to each learner’s perspective and prior knowledge, which forms the framework for new knowledge.

The important thing for parents of elementary students to know is that whole language reading instruction focuses on helping children to “make meaning” of what they read

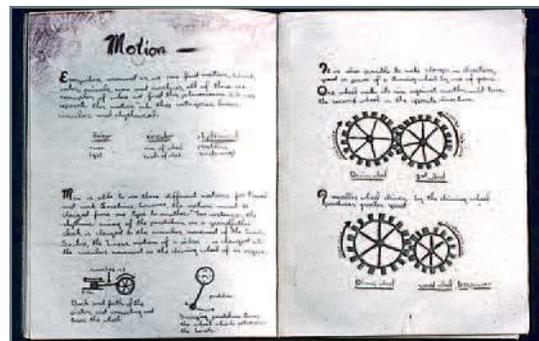
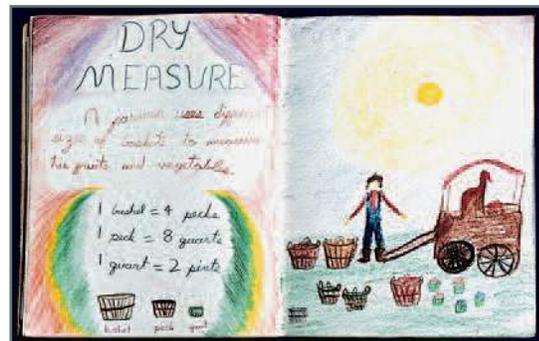
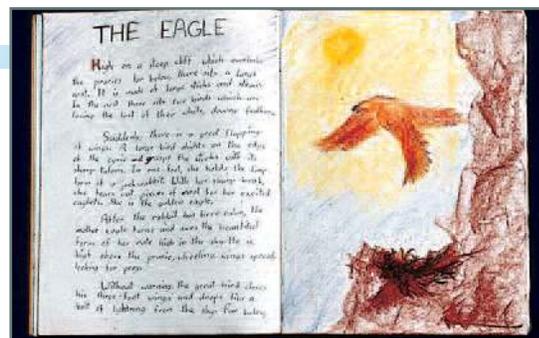
and to express meaning in what they write. Some important aspects of the whole language philosophy include an emphasis on high quality literature, a focus on cultural diversity, and integration of literacy instruction across the subject areas. Whole Language reading instruction creates many opportunities for children to read independently, with other children in small guided reading groups, and/or being read aloud to by the teacher.



Each student writes and illustrates a daily record of academic content in his or her Main Lesson Books. This Waldorf approach has many similarities to the modern “Whole Language” method.

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*Description of the whole language approach excerpted from readinghorizons.com



Like a truly modern scientist, Rudolf Steiner wanted every Waldorf teacher to question his research and methods

Teachers applying Whole Language methods also believe that children learn to read by writing, and vice versa. They encourage children to read and write for “real purposes,” with nonfiction texts and interpretation of what they read forming much of the basis of their assignments. The Whole Language approach to reading

also stresses love of literature and the use of engaging texts to help children develop that love. Teachers who use this approach exclusively do not place heavy emphasis in the early grades on spelling and grammar, which can make some parents uncomfortable. The Whole Language philosophy emphasizes children’s efforts to make meaning and seek meaning in language; therefore, correcting errors places the focus on technical correctness, which is not where Whole Language teachers believe it should be.

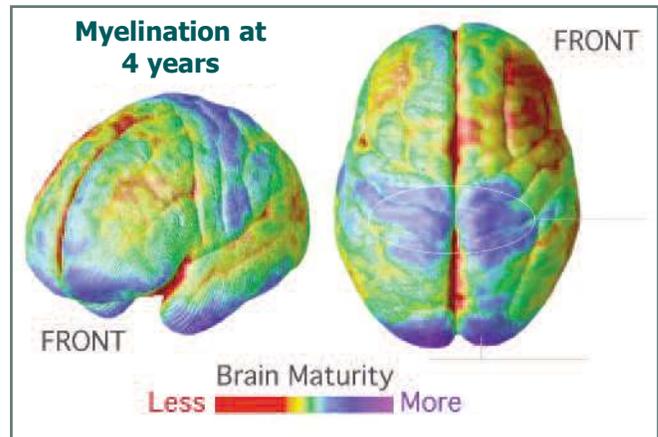
Thus, just as in the mainstream Whole Language approach, the Waldorf early childhood classroom emphasizes the spoken word in order to rapidly expand all students’ vocabularies and love of language, and our younger-grades elementary classrooms are a beehive of reading-through-writing experiences.

6. Just using 1919 ideas? Behind the times? Yes, to be a Waldorf educator means maintaining a career-long study of the developing human being, carefully considering the ideas about teaching that founder Rudolf Steiner advanced during his career of some six thousand lectures and scores of books, and using these as a starting point whenever they make sense in today’s context. However, Dr. Steiner was very clear that he wanted his listeners and readers to continue to research for themselves, and to come to their own conclusions. Perhaps this founding principle of continuing personal development and examination is one of the reasons that Waldorf Education continues to thrive around the world, and to transform itself into schools of all shapes and sizes – including over fifty charter/public Waldorf schools in North America as of this writing.

Modern scientific research is bringing to light some astounding facts about human development in the first three decades of life – discoveries that are highly consistent with the academic progressions recommended a century ago by Steiner. The images on this page and the next show the development of brain myelination from early years to maturity in young adulthood. Myelin is a fatty substance that wraps around nerve fibers and serves to increase the speed of electrical communication between neurons. While the development and function of myelin remained elusive for many years, today scientists have

been able to use magnetic imaging to learn more. Myelination begins early in the 3rd trimester, although little myelin exists in the brain at the time of birth. During infancy, myelination begins quickly, leading to a child’s fast development, including crawling and walking in the first year. Myelination continues through the adolescent stage of life.

Let’s look at parallels between the Waldorf progressive curriculum and this modern research into brain maturity.

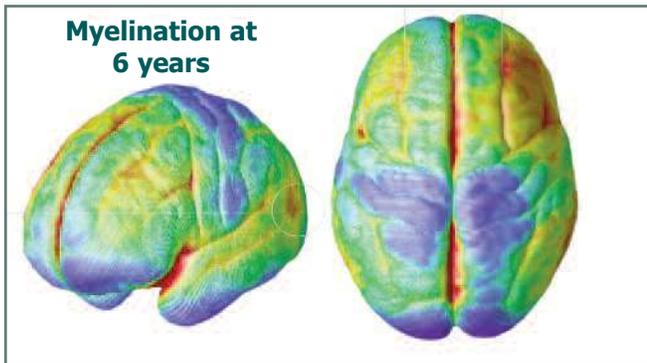


Brain development by 4 years: Areas responsible for sensations like touch are almost as developed as they ever will be. The part of the brain governing vision has already matured. The area of the brain governing language is immature, as indicated in orange, but continues to develop rapidly in children through age 10. The dappled yellow and red areas of the prefrontal cortex indicate that this part of the brain, which affects abstract thinking, reasoning skills and emotional maturity, has yet to develop. This lack of maturity is one reason young children can’t juggle a lot of information and may throw tantrums when presented with too many choices.

Waldorf curriculum: The essential element in early childhood education is actually the educator, who shapes and influences the children’s environment, not only through the furnishings, activities, and rhythms of the day, but most importantly, through the qualities of her own being and relationships: to the children and other adults in the kindergarten, to the parents, to daily life in school, and to living on earth. These qualities, which include attitudes and gestures both outer and inner, permeate the early childhood setting and deeply influence the children, who take them up through a process of imitation.

Brain development by 6 years: The brain has already begun its ‘pruning’ process, eliminating redundant neural links. This will accelerate in later years - one reason why learning a new language is easy for children and much more difficult for most adults.

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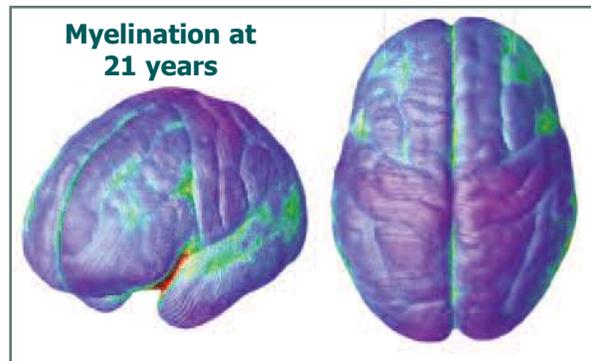
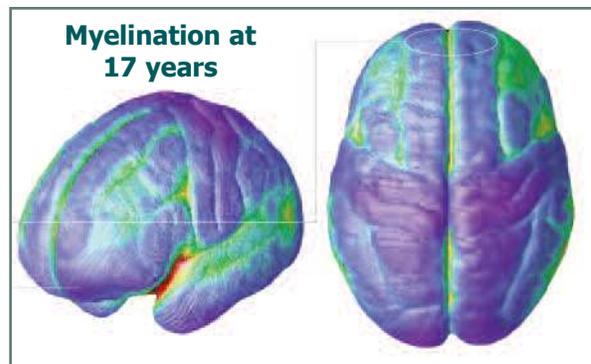
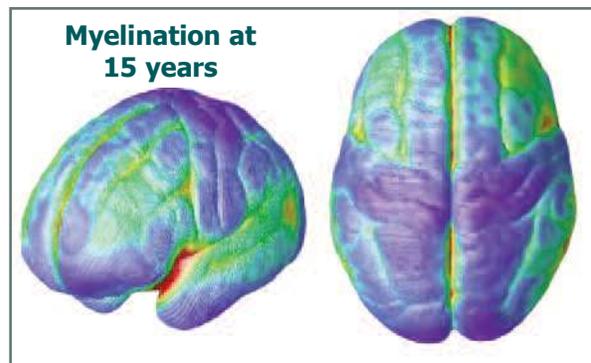
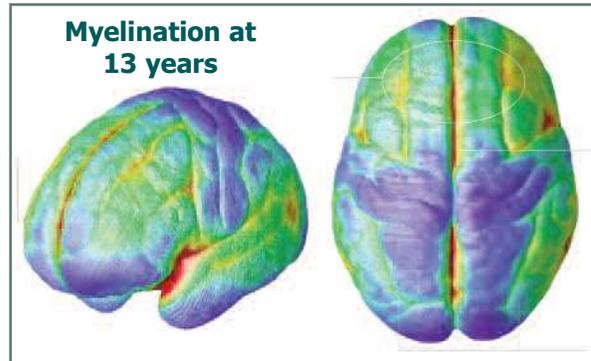
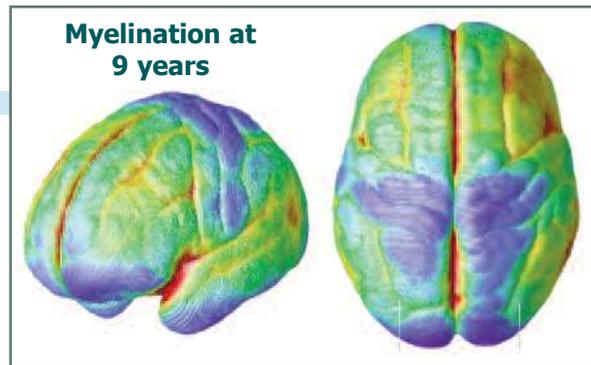


Waldorf curriculum: In Grade 1, Main Lessons include phonics, writing, speech through recitation and retelling stories, simple numbers with the four processes of arithmetic, beginnings of science through nature stories, and the literature of Fairy Tales. Grade 2: – Reading and writing, mental arithmetic and arithmetic using larger numbers, legends of many cultures, and fables.

Brain development by 9 years: While basic motor skills are well developed by age 5, children experience a burst of fine motor-skill development between ages 8 and 9, helping to explain gains in the ability to use scissors, write neatly or in cursive, and manipulate models and craft projects. For math, by the age of 9, the parietal lobes are beginning to mature. Development here allows children to acquire math and geometry skills. The pace of learning at this age is fast and can be enhanced with flashcards and math drills.

Waldorf curriculum: In Grade 3 – Grammar, speech, weights and measures, housebuilding, farming, introduction to music notation, Old Testament stories, and much more. Grade 4 – Grammatical tenses, fractions, local geography, human and animal, Norse mythology. Grade 5 – Letter writing, decimals and the metric system, freehand geometry, U.S. geography, botany, Egyptian and Greek mythology, ancient history through Alexander the Great.

Brain development by 13 years: Judgment, emotion and logic. The prefrontal cortex is among the last areas to mature. Until it does, children lack the ability to adequately judge risk or make long-term plans. Ask kids at this age what they want to be when they grow up, and the answer is likely to change often. Deep in the limbic system, a capacity for creating emotion increases. As yet, this capacity is unrestrained by the prefrontal cortex, which lags behind. That's why some teens can seem emotionally out of control. The parietal lobes are developing rapidly at this age, as shown here in blue. The child's intelligence and analytical abilities are expanding.



Waldorf curriculum: Grade 6 – Writing and speech style development, gardening as a special subject, simple interest and percentages, astronomy, world climatic conditions, mineralogy, physics, geometry, perspective drawing, Roman and medieval history.

Grade 7 – Composition, poetry, positive and negative numbers, squaring, cubing, and equations, economics, cultural geography, physics, mechanics, chemistry, charcoal drawing, Renaissance history, and physiology of nutrition, digestion, circulation, respiration and reproduction.

Brain development by 15 years: In the teen years, an abundance of neural links continue to be discarded. Underused connections will die to help more active connections thrive. As a result, the child's brain will become more specialized and efficient.

Waldorf curriculum: Grade 8 – Prose, drama, algebra, world geography, meteorology, practical physics, organic chemistry, geometric calculation, physiology and anatomy, epic prose and poetry up through modern times, European and U.S. history.

Brain development by 17 years: The deep blue and purple of the maturing prefrontal cortex shows why the brains of older teenagers are capable of dealing with far more complexity than younger children. This development leads to a burst of social interactions and emotions among older teens. Planning, risk-taking and the beginnings of young-adult self-control become possible.

Brain development by 21 years: Executive functions and maturation. Although the brain appeared to be almost fully developed by the teen years, the deepening blue and purple areas here show that tremendous gains in emotional maturity, impulse control and decision-making continue to occur into early adulthood. The 21-year-old brain is mostly mature, but the areas of green show that even at the threshold of legal adulthood, there is still room for increases in emotional maturity and decision-making skills, which will come in the next few years.

In summary...

I hope this article and the brain development images help you to see beyond the surface of Waldorf Education.

1. "It's artistic" but it's not just for artistic students. The art enhances all aspects of deeper learning.
2. "It's unstructured" around the edges but very structured in core academics and in the expectations of the teachers (and hopefully the parents).
3. "It's for children with learning challenges" – yes, one or two in a given class of differentiated learners where each student can contribute particular gifts and be carried along by classmates in other subjects.
4. "It's non-academic" (especially the perceived image of our kindergartens). No. Not at all.
5. "They don't start reading until third grade." Reading is much more than the sum of its parts, so we use a holistic approach similar to today's Whole Language teaching style.
6. "It's way behind the times" because we're still following the 1919 ideas of Rudolf Steiner. Waldorf Education has proven to be remarkably resilient; maybe that's because we had a very advanced beginning and have stayed attuned to the times.

And finally, Homer Simpson was wrong: you don't have to wear a hat. Thanks for reading!