



## ON THE UNIQUE PLACE OF ART IN WALDORF EDUCATION

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines the unique educational approach of the Waldorf (Steiner) school, which is based upon integrating the arts in educational processes. The article first presents the theoretical and practical aspects of the fundamental approach of Rudolf Steiner, founder of this educational movement. The article then describes the practical implementation of this approach together with different aspects of integrating the arts in the Waldorf school pedagogy. Lastly, the field of music is brought as a case example for artistic educational work across the first through twelfth grades. The question of reciprocal relations between art and education is examined in light of this unique educational perspective. Questions pertaining to the influence of these relations upon Waldorf school graduates are raised in the article's conclusion.

**Keywords:** Waldorf School, Waldorf pedagogy, Steiner School, art in education

### **Introduction**

*"...you make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the science of the mind's laws, is something from which you can deduce definite programmes and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom use. Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves."*

(William James)

*"Education must not be a science it must be an art"*

(Steiner, 1966, p. 159)

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In his 1909 lectures on education, Rudolf Steiner (Hemleben, 1984), founder of Waldorf Education (anthroposophical education), spoke about the term “The art of education” and sought to discern in education and teaching much more of the discipline of art activity than of science (Steiner, 1965). A decade later, with the establishment of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Steiner spoke again about the tremendous importance he ascribed to art in education and teaching (Steiner, 1966). From that time and until his death in 1925, Steiner mentored the teachers at the school, gave speeches to parents and interested individuals, lectured to different audiences, and wrote a great number of articles on the importance and meaning of art in educational processes and on its implementation in the educational theory known as “Waldorf education.”

What was Steiner’s intention? Why did he consider art so important in education and in teaching? How has this ideal of the founder of Waldorf education been implemented in kindergartens and Waldorf schools over time? This article offers a number of answers to these questions. I first outline Steiner’s fundamental approach to the topic of art in education and teaching and his practical guidance in this context. I then offer a number of examples for the integration of art in the educational endeavor and in the daily life of Waldorf schools.

### **Steiner’s Fundamental Approach to Art in Education**

In a March 1923 lecture dedicated in its entirety to the topic of art in education, Steiner (1979) explained from a variety of aspects why the arts and art activity are so important to education and teaching. He first posed the question: how can we, as educators, deeply understand the inner nature of a child? With which of the senses can we accomplish this? Steiner (1979) answered his question in this way:

*“The sense with which we comprehend art, the artistic sense, the sense that can transfer the radiance of the spirit in the material, that reveals beauty, that which we encounter in art. This artistic sense is, at the same time, the sense that enables us to know a person candidly in the present, such that this knowledge becomes useful in life itself.”*

(p. 18)

Steiner continued and claimed that only by means of the artistic sense are we able, as educators, to turn our educational ideas and principles into action:

*“Only when we comprehend the inner nature of the person through the artistic sense, only then can we realize our ideas and abstract terms in the educational act.”*

(Steiner, 1979, p. 19)

The understanding of the child's soul, of his or her development and individual needs, stands at the center of Steiner's educational world view. In his very first book, dedicated to education, he wrote:

*"We shall not set up demands nor programmers, but simply describe the child-nature. From the nature of the growing and evolving human being, the proper point of view for Education will, as it were, spontaneously result."*

(Steiner, 1965, p. 5)

According to Steiner (1956), Waldorf education came to answer the deep needs, not always entirely conscious, of each girl and boy:

*"On the art of education about which is being spoken here, the most important thing is to nurture the concealed in the child and in his development. From this, it is incumbent upon teaching to stand totally in service of education. In fact, we educate, and the lessons, the teaching, we exploit in order to educate."*

(p. 96)

The curriculum, teaching methods, the attitude toward the child, the dialogue with him or her, and all school characteristics come to respond to the child's needs, to the child's deep seeking and development he or she is undergoing (Easton, 1997; Edmunds, 2004; Richter, 2006). In this way, Steiner's approach was child-centered. From this approach is derived the tremendous importance for educators working in Waldorf schools to be equipped with the tools "to grasp the inner nature of the person" and to have "the sense that enables us to know a person candidly in the present, such that this knowledge becomes useful in life itself" (see also Martzog, Kuttner, & Pollack, 2016).

From here, Steiner (1979) continued and addressed the question of the training of educators in this context:

*"This is the most important foundation for education in our day, that education will go forth from the perspective and internal stance of the educators and teachers, we should not simply teach, we should not turn to the intellectual understanding of the child...from here it is clear that the advancement of education must begin with the educators, that in the teacher, himself, not only intellectual forces will be at work...we must begin with the teachers themselves and this through understanding the person, to the didactic-pedagogic-artistic approach..."*

(p. 21)

From these words, it is clear that in the training of teachers for Waldorf education there also must be a central place for the arts (Gabert, 1961; Martzog et al., 2016). Steiner, who himself established the initial teacher training for the first Waldorf school (Hofrichter, 2002), spoke on different occasions about the importance of artistic training. In addition to the general emphasis stated above, Steiner (1989) detailed the special importance of the different arts using two examples:

*“Have students in teacher training mold clay, practice the art of sculpture, instead of the rest of the things they do there...one must know the following principle: a teacher who never learned to mold clay cannot understand the development of the child.”*

(p. 140-141)

*“The one who understands this, knows that teacher training must deepen internalization of a built-in musical world view, this in order to understand the human being.”*

(p. 143)

Gabert described this aspect of art and creativity in training teachers and in their work in Waldorf schools and education with these words: *“They must be artists in education and teaching”* (Gabert, 1961, p. 167). This element of the teacher as artist is manifested throughout the entire Waldorf education teacher training in intensive artistic work in a wide range of arts. The artistic fields occupy at least one-third of all teacher training hours (Barz, 2013; Gabert, 1961) and include music, poetry, sculpture, drawing and painting, drama, eurythmy (an expressive movement art originated by Steiner), and their combinations.

These arts serve to develop and nurture the artistic senses, sensitivity, a sense of balance and harmony, contemplation ability, self-knowledge, and many additional gifts that artistic endeavor can bestow (Eisner, 2002). It is important to note that this is not about professional artistic training to become a painter, a musician, or a sculptor, but rather development of the inner senses upon which teachers build their capacity for working in a Waldorf School (Gabert, 1961).

An entirely different direction regarding the integration of art into educational processes was developed by Steiner when he spoke about the necessary transition from the free play, full of imagination of the young child to the work life of the adult, work that is connected to responsibility, commitment, and seriousness (Steiner, 1979, Lecture on March 25, 1963). Steiner raised the question regarding the proper way to make the transition from free play to everything that is connected to the obligations of work life and toil. Here, as well, Steiner (1979) noted the importance of art:

*“When you work with art properly in school, art leads appropriately from happiness filled with the freedom of play to work, making it possible to see work as a necessity of life itself. Thus, work, when the bridge is designed appropriately, does not have to be viewed any more as an oppressive obligation.”*

(p. 23)

In this way, during the school years, art creates a sort of bridge from the world of childhood to the world of adults. Between play full of imagination, in which everything is possible, open, and creative, and obligation in the adult world of work, Steiner placed art. Art gives expression to creativity, imagination, openness, and the internal world, on the one hand, while always dealing with materials from reality and in coping with them, on the other. Thus, Steiner (1979) stated, art creates a bridge from the life of the child to the world of adults:

*“When a child enters school, it is essential to shift the capability, the talent, and the ability that are associated with play, in every way possible, to artistic activity, in which is preserved the freedom of internal activity; and with this, and at the same time, we must cope with the outer material, similar to labor. Then we will see how with artistry that we bring to the child, it is entirely possible to maneuver education, such that the happiness and release of artistic activity coalesce into the seriousness of labor.”*

(p. 25)

In order to understand the role of being a sort of bridge between free play and work, or between the world of the young child and the adult world, one must understand the developmental approach that stands at the foundation of Waldorf education. Steiner saw the foundation of educational processes and studies in developmental psychology as strikingly similar in its major principles to the theories of development of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg (Easton, 1997; Ginsburg, 1982; Richter, 2006). Stemming from his anthropological and psychological perspective, Steiner divided childhood into three major stages, during which the child develops and grows with different emotional and physical emphases: from birth to age six or seven the emphasis is on physical, sensory, and motor development, so that the young child first shapes his or her body through physical activity, movement, and exposure to impressions and interpersonal connections; from the age of six or seven until 13-14, the emphasis is on shaping one’s emotional experience, habits, social connections, and personality; from the age of 13-14 to 20-21, the developmental emphasis is on shaping one’s world view, nurturing thinking, ability to work, and personal identity (Edmunds, 2004; Rawson & Avison, 2014; Steiner, 1965). Steiner spoke of the different quality in the

emotional and physical atmosphere amidst children in each stage and of the qualitative leap in the transition between stages. In essence, he spoke of “births” in these transitions. From here one can see, as well, his perspective that each stage builds upon and grows out of the prior one, and that only stable and harmonious building in a specific stage can serve as a basis for the next stage (Easton, 1997; Steiner, 1965).

Art has importance throughout childhood according to Steiner’s approach, but particularly during the seven year period between ages six and seven and 13-14. This period, characterized as we have seen by the building of the personality, shaping of character, habits, and everything that is associated with the emotional experience, is particularly suited to working in the realm of art. In his first book on education, written many years before the founding of the first school in the spirit of Waldorf education, Steiner (1965) wrote:

*“Last but not least, there is the cultivation of the sense of beauty and the awakening of the artistic feeling... A child who is denied the blessing of having his musical sense cultivated during these years, will be the poorer for it the whole of his later life. If this sense were entirely lacking in him, whole aspects of the world’s existence would of necessity remain hidden from him. Nor are the other arts to be neglected. The awakening of the feeling for architectural forms, for molding and sculpture, for lines and for design, for color harmonies – none of these should be left out of the plan of education... Joy and happiness in living, a love of all existence, a power and energy for work – such are among the lifelong results of a right cultivation of the feeling for beauty and for art.”*

(p. 55)

In one of his lecture series on education, Steiner (1956) again emphasized the importance of art and of educating for aesthetics and beauty, particularly during this period in a child’s development:

*“In elementary school, children are of the age between losing their baby teeth and adolescence... If we stand fittingly with the child as educators and teachers, we should know that for this period in a child’s life one must bring all learning materials in an artistic form. This is the most essential thing for the elementary school period.”*

(p. 66)

The question of education infused with artistic activity, particularly during the period of elementary school, also appears in Steiner’s writings in the context of nurturing children’s determination and will to achieve. In one of his lectures, Steiner

(1980) raised this question: How is it possible, if at all, to develop the will of children, and his answer:

*“No one can desire, if he has not developed his will. And will is possible to develop through meaningful artistic education. This secret of the link between the arts and life, or more precisely with the element of a person’s will, to know this secret, is the beginning of every future demand for the psychology of education. “*

(p. 68)

Steiner emphasized the development of the aesthetic sense, the imagination, and the creativity, and the appeal to children using the medium of emotion and experience, as the appropriate mode up until adolescence. This emphasis is given expression in Steiner’s sharp criticism of the rationalistic education that is the norm in schools. In his lectures and in his conversations with teachers Steiner critiqued the tendency to direct the educational system first to the prowess of thinking and the intellect (Steiner, 1965, 1966, 1979). A good example are his words at one of the teachers’ meetings (Steiner was the principal of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart for five years and took part in many teachers’ meetings), at which he spoke critically of rationalistic education and on the importance of the artistic dimension in education in this context:

*“Today, students in the earliest school grades are already poisoned in that they receive only intellectual material...now, if our teachers will make use of textbooks, even if they do not give them to their students to use, but only use them to prepare themselves, then rationalism will flow to the teachers themselves. And we will also turn into a picture of intellectualism.”*

(Leherkonferenz, s. 13)

After a short conversation on the desirable preparation of the teacher, Steiner continued:

*“Thus it is upon us to see how against the dominance of intellectualism in our day we must position our pedagogy as an activity infused entirely with art.”*

(Leherkonferenz, s. 13)

Steiner’s training was in the field of natural sciences (Hemleben, 1984) but he nonetheless desired to see the activity of teaching as an artistic activity. The view of education as art in and of itself, in contrast to the approach that teaching and education should be governed by scientific principles appears many times in Steiner’s writings

(Steiner, 1966, 1980, 1989). Steiner emphasized the emotional world of the student and teacher and saw in it an educational field. Artistic feeling can fill teaching and education with meaning, in contrast to instruction that is scientific, technical, and lacking in inspiration. Steiner (1947) wrote:

*“...that our conception of the build of a human being, of man’s inner configuration must be that of an artist. And the teacher must be in a position to experience the child artistically, to see him as an artist would. Everything within the child must be inwardly mobile to him...we must accept such an inward artistic apprehension.”*

(p. 115-116)

### **Practical Aspects**

The first section outlined the basic approach of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education. How do Waldorf schools apply this fundamental approach? Is there, indeed, a special place for art and the artistic approach in their broad meaning in Waldorf schools? Which practical methods give expression to this educational essence? I see three different, yet related aspects to the practical implementation of Steiner’s ideological approach to integrating art into education and teaching as laid out above (Edmunds, 2004; Junemann & Weitmann, 2017; Neider, 2008; Nobel, 1996).

First, different arts are learned as a significant portion of the school curriculum from 1<sup>st</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Nearly every day, children studying in Waldorf schools engage in significant artistic experimentation in one of the many art media offered: painting, drawing, music, singing, eurythmy, drama, sculpture, design, and photography, as well as practical arts such as metalworking, basket weaving, pottery making (wheel), carpentry, wood sculpture and more. These art media are obligatory in the class schedule for all students, and the pedagogical attention given them is exactly the same as that given to theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, language or science (Rawson & Avison, 2014; Richter, 2006). Thus, for example, the place of arts in the schedule throughout the school day is identical in importance to the theoretical disciplines; they make up at least one-third of the curriculum and their importance in evaluation processes is the same as for the other disciplines (Edmunds, 2004; Junemann & Weitmann, 2017; Neider, 2008; Nobel, 1996).

Second, the various arts are not only studied separately and learned for their own sake, but they infuse and enrich all other areas of learning. This occurs in all grades, especially, as noted above, in elementary school. In this way, all subjects are learned through the different arts: the letters of the alphabet are learned in first grade through movement, drawing, and painting; the foundations of mathematics through poetry, music, and recitation; geometry is learned through drawing, sketching of the



various geometric shapes, beginning with colored pencils and then using a ruler and compass; drama and short plays assist in learning literature content; sculpture, modeling with clay, and painting are inseparable from history and geography lessons; a historical period will also be studied through the paintings of the events and personalities of the period, sculpture of the tools and objects used, recitation and dramatization of the historical texts and the like (Edmunds, 2004; Nobel, 1996).

Standard textbooks are exchanged for large, unlined notebooks in which the students create their own textbooks in a creative process: they write texts, paint, draw, and illustrate each subject personally and imaginatively. The emphasis in the learning process is not on intellectual achievements, knowledge, or based on standardized tests of any form (no standardized tests are given during the entire elementary school education), rather on aesthetics, creativity, beauty, and harmony (Edmunds, 2004; Nobel, 1996).

At this point, it is appropriate to note the different organization of a Waldorf school in terms of timetable and class schedule. All grades study the theoretical subjects cyclically: language, mathematics, foreign language, history, geography and the like. Each topic is studied for three or four weeks in long lessons of one and half to two hours. Beginning with the establishment of the first school, Steiner (1997) recommended concentrated, continuous learning in which topics are repeated daily, instead of a weekly lesson schedule in which five to eight different subjects are studied each day. Beyond the opportunity to focus, to deepen, and to create an integrated learning process, the cyclical study schedule also enables integration of the different arts during the lesson.

The third aspect in implementation of Steiner's ideological approach is the artistic and aesthetic design of the learning processes and everything connected to the school environment. Over and over, including in his lectures and his conversations with teachers, Steiner (1979) raised the principle that art must infuse every subject and every learning process in the school:

*"We should not withhold artistic activity from any of the various subjects, on the contrary, art must infuse the organism of all teaching and of every educational process, such that artistic processes do not stand, as it were, to the side: here are the contents of the learning itself, they are intended to educate, they are obligatory, and here, isolated in the curriculum, seemingly half obligatory, is everything that a child needs to acquire in art. No and no, art is in its proper place in the school, if all the other subjects are directed thusly, so that at the right moment the soul of the child from amidst the subject of learning desires the artistic...let us say, it is upon art to infuse the entire organism of*

*teaching and education, it should warm and light up from within all of the being of pedagogy and didactics."*

(p. 28)

The lesson itself, for example, should turn into an artistic experience. Again and again, Steiner requested that the teachers see in the learning process the occurrence of art (Steiner, 1997, Lecture 2). In his opinion, this is how one should relate to every educational process that students undergo in school: from the isolated lesson, through the design of the school day, design of the school week, school year, and through the broad and, of course, artistic perspective of the long path from first grade until the conclusion of twelfth grade. The starting point, according to Steiner, must always be artistic, developmental, and appropriate for the place in which the children are at every stage. Never mechanical, quantitative or knowledge-directed (Steiner, 1997, Lecture 2; see also Edmunds, 2004; Neider, 2008).

An excellent example of this third aspect is the aesthetic attention given to the learning space of Waldorf kindergartens and schools, from the design of school buildings, to interior classroom design, including wall color, lighting, and every other design element found in the children's school environment (Biørnholt, 2014; Klinborg, 1982; Rittelmeyer, 2012):

*"Please take what I say as the ideal: that stemming from our pedagogy we will design classrooms artistically. And then it will be possible to expand, such that what decorates the classroom walls will continue beyond the walls of the classroom and will decorate the walls of the entire school in the same way."*

(Leherkonferenz, s. 9)

*"Steiner followed with suggestions of which style and motifs to use in decorating the different classroom walls."*

(Leherkonferenz, s. 11-12)

### **Music Education as a Case Study**

I chose the field of music to demonstrate more specifically how an artistic field is integrated into the curriculum and life of a Waldorf school. Music can be seen as an example for the integration of the other arts. Initially, we will examine the questions of the importance of music education and its importance for every child. Steiner (1997) saw in every child an inner musicality as a basic, innate quality:

*"We shall then notice that it is man's nature, up to a point, to be born a "musician." If people had the right and necessary agility they would dance with all little children, they would somehow join in the movements of all children... The separate senses, the musically attuned ear, the plastically skilled eye, arise first from this musical disposition...it is a specification of the whole musical individual."*

(Lecture 1, p. 13)

From this flows Steiner's (1997) opinion that music education should be given to all children, with no consideration, whatsoever, for what is known as special, musical talent:

*"We should not insist too much: This is a musical child; this one is not musical. Certainly the fact is there, but to draw from it the conclusion that the unmusical child must be kept apart from all music and only the musical children must be given a musical education, is thoroughly false; even the most "unmusical children" should be included in any musical activity...That is a very fundamental truth. Nothing should therefore be left undone to bring in touch with music the children considered at first to be unmusical."*

(Lecture 3, p. 42)

According to Steiner (1997), musicality has a positive social and communal influence; music builds community:

*"For it should not be forgotten that the art of music and poetry, on the other hand, furthers social intercourse. People come together and unite in music and poetry...social life is better maintained in common enjoyment and experience of music and poetry."*

(Lecture 3, p. 43)

In addition, Steiner (1956) wrote, music education has the power to strengthen both the desire and ability to perform:

*"For us (at the Waldorf School) there is importance in infusing the musical element as early as possible into the lessons themselves. This is because the musical element, not so much the musical content but more the rhythm, the tempo, the feeling of the rhythms and the beat, are a good foundation for the power and energy of the will, especially when one brings this element in the appropriate way at the beginning of elementary school."*

(p. 101)

For these and other reasons, Steiner saw in music the most significant foundation for every age and for every girl and boy. In Waldorf schools, this approach is implemented in the following ways (Barnes, 2017; Ronner, 2000):

- In all elementary school classes, and sometimes in high school classes as well, the school day begins with singing. In first grade, singing begins with simple songs sung together in one voice and develops over the coming years to singing canons, songs with two, three, and four voices, singing in groups, solo singing, singing accompanied by different musical instruments and more.
- In school events, plays, performances of different types, music – vocal and instrumental – has a very important role. Individual classes, grade levels or mixed groups of different grades, put on choir performances, musicals, concerts and more.
- Beginning in first grade, all children learn to play the recorder. Playing the recorder develops over the years to playing individual musical instruments. Many classes have a “class orchestra” that performs in different ensembles at class and school events.
- The school has a choir, musical ensembles, and orchestra, which practice regularly and appear at different school and community events.

## **Conclusion**

The special place of the arts in Waldorf schools was surveyed in this article from the point of view of the principles of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education, who saw in the arts one of the most important foundations for every instructional and educational process. In the second stage, the educational work in Waldorf schools was discussed from the point of view of the integration of art in instructional and learning processes. The final section presented music as an example of the integration of an artistic field into the educational system and curriculum of the Waldorf School.

Further directions could include examination of the influence of the integration of the arts in Waldorf schools on their graduates. Are the graduates endowed with the very qualities that Steiner expected would be nurtured by art-filled instruction? Do they have a special relationship to art and aesthetics? How do the graduates view, in retrospect, the aspect of the integration of the arts in their education?

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