

# The Moral Reasoning of High School Seniors from Diverse Educational Settings

*Christine Hether*

## Introduction

The impetus for my topic arose from personal observations made while my two daughters attended the Haleakala Waldorf School on Maui, Hawaii. During that time I was employed as a school psychologist and had daily contact with students from a number of diverse educational settings. The differences I observed between my daughters (and their Waldorf school classmates) and students in other settings puzzled and intrigued me.

*M*y daughters were happy and loved going to school, to the point of, for example, feigning wellness when legitimately they needed a day at home, resting. Like many parents who choose Waldorf schools for their children, I was only vaguely aware at the time of the pedagogical underpinnings of the Waldorf school movement, and knew little about Rudolf Steiner. I conceptualized the differences I noticed in my daughters as relating to better self-esteem. Later, however, as my understanding of Waldorf education was refined and deepened, a suspicion developed that my observations might be more accurately described as a recognition of differences in moral development. I suspected that such development was “higher” or “more mature” in Waldorf school-educated students. When it was time to formulate a research proposal<sup>1</sup> for my PhD dissertation, it was an easy decision to use this opportunity to attempt to tease out what made the Waldorf school experience different from that of students attending school elsewhere, and to explore whether those differences could be conceptualized within a framework of moral development.

## Methodology

My research was designed to explore whether or not Waldorf education affects the moral devel-

opment of its students, and, if it does, which procedures affect that development. Deciding on the best methodology to answer such questions presented one of the major difficulties of the research. While Waldorf schools have an anecdotal reputation for achieving many positive outcomes, including that of promoting morality, there is a dearth of research substantiating such effectiveness. This presented a difficulty because it meant a lack of previous research to build upon and a lack of reliably successful methods from which to choose. This first difficulty is closely related to a second one, namely the de-emphasis in Waldorf education on standardized testing and statistical procedures. Though it was important to begin to establish some hard data showing if and how a Waldorf education might contribute to higher moral development, it was crucial to do so in a manner that would be acceptable to the Waldorf school movement.

These difficulties were further compounded by the fact that Waldorf teachers do not often talk about their teaching as a means to enhance moral development. Unlike most religiously-affiliated schools and the “character education” that became popular in the 1990s under the auspices of politicians such as William Bennett,<sup>2</sup> Waldorf schools do not proselytize. The enhancement of moral development is not an explicitly stated goal of Waldorf school pedagogy, and I assumed, correctly, that practices contributing to such development would not be explicitly articulated either.

A final difficulty, perhaps the most problematic one during the interview required to justify and defend my research proposal, was my personal association with and bias in favor of Waldorf schools. My research would be credible only to the degree that the methodology was sufficiently rigorous and objective to withstand the criticism of experimenter bias.

1. Hether, Christine A. *The Moral Reasoning of High School Seniors from Diverse Educational Settings*, Saybrook Graduate School and Research Institute, California, 2001.

2. Bennett, William J. *The Moral Compass*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

My solution to the conundrum of finding appropriate methodology was to employ two distinctly different but complementary methods. The first was classically quantitative, involving a survey and statistical analyses that, despite the great expansion of knowledge over the years that has resulted from extending our epistemological base, remain the most acceptable means to substantiate findings in mainstream academic research. The second method was qualitative, incorporating techniques designed to explore qualities of a situation by asking questions, observing, and immersing oneself in an experience.

### The Quantitative Phase

The quantitative portion of my research employed a measurement survey called the Defining Issues Test (DIT), developed in the 1970s by James Rest and his associates at the Center for Ethical Development at the University of Minnesota as a way to objectify information about moral development.<sup>3</sup> It, in turn, was based on the extensive work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Rest's teacher at Harvard University, which ultimately resulted in Kohlberg's celebrated cognitive developmental theory of moral development.<sup>4</sup> Rest's concern for facilitating empirical research led him to propose a four-component model to answer the criterion problem of what exactly is supposed to be "improved" when we have success in moral education; i.e., what are the functional units for producing moral behavior? He differentiated four aspects of the psychological process that must be involved when someone acts "morally."

3. Rest, James. *Developments in Judging Moral Issues*, University of Minnesota Press, 1979.

4. Kohlberg's well-known theory of moral development posits progression through three levels incorporating six hierarchical stages of increasingly "higher" or "more mature" moral development. The first level, pre-conventional, includes the stages of "obedience" and "simple exchange." The second level, conventional, includes "interpersonal concordance" and "law and duty to the social order." Finally, at the third post-conventional level, are the stages of "social consensus" and "nonarbitrary social cooperation." For detailed descriptions of Kohlberg's levels, stages, and associated research, see Kohlberg, Lawrence, *Essays in Moral Development: The Philosophy of Moral Development*, Harper and Row, 1981.

1. *Moral sensitivity*. The person makes an interpretive analysis, determining that there is a problem, what actions are possible, who will be affected, and how the actions will be perceived.
2. *Moral judgment*. The person makes a judgment about which course of action is fair (or just, or good) and chooses a line of action.
3. *Moral motivation*. The person gives priority to that course of action above all other personal values and has the intention to do what is morally right.
4. *Ego strength*. The person has sufficient perseverance and implementation skills to follow through on the chosen intention.<sup>5</sup>

The Waldorf-educated students ... displayed moral sensitivity ... they exercised moral judgment ... and, finally, they showed moral motivation and ego strength.

The Defining Issues Test focuses on the second of these four components, that of moral judgment, or, as it is also referred to in the research literature, moral reasoning. The DIT has been used thousands of times in research contexts, so that its database constitutes the largest and most diverse body of available quantitative information on moral judgment. A further advantage of the DIT is that studies in the database lend themselves to comparison and summarization

because they all involve the same method.

The DIT consists of six moral dilemma stories followed by multiple-choice questions about what the protagonist ought to do to resolve the dilemmas. Subjects are asked to choose one course of action or to choose "can't decide." They are then asked to rate the importance of twelve issues that are relevant in deciding on the course of action, and, finally, to rank the four most important of those issues.<sup>6</sup>

I am aware that many Waldorf educators might challenge my choice of a standardized mul-

5. Rest, James and R. Bennett, M.J. Deemer, et al., *Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory*, Praeger, 1986.

6. The complete dilemma stories that students were asked to resolve, along with the multiple choice solutions on the survey, can be found in Appendix G of my dissertation.

tiple-choice test as a tool to measure something as complex as moral development. I concur with those who say that such tools have the potential to mislead via their inherent reductionism; that is, they do not provide a comprehensive picture. In this situation, however, it was my explicit intention to use statistical instrumentation that had a history of use in the traditional academic literature so that I could make comparisons between Waldorf-educated students and public school students; I could see how Waldorf school students fared on a standardized measurement tool of a type that is ubiquitous in contemporary society; and I could minimize potential criticism of researcher bias.

My hypothesis for the quantitative phase of the research states that “high school students who have experienced Waldorf education for at least six years will score significantly higher on the Defining Issues Test (DIT) than will high school students who have not experienced such a Waldorf education.” A six-year minimum was chosen as the definition for a student to be considered “Waldorf school educated” after discussion with experienced Waldorf educators who responded to a direct question regarding how to create such a definition. All of these teachers agreed that at least three years was necessary, and that six years would “most probably” give a student a substantial grounding in a Waldorf education.

Results from four groups of students were compared. The first group consisted of students attending several Waldorf high schools who met the six year definition; the second group was composed of students attending a religiously-affiliated high school; a third group attended a nonsectarian, non-Waldorf private high school.

Subsequently, a fourth group of students was factored out of the nonsectarian non-Waldorf group because it was discovered that some of those students had in their past a six-year-long Waldorf school background. In addition to comparing each individual group with each of the others, the groups were also compared to the database of scores gathered from seniors in public high schools since about 1975.

### Results of the Quantitative Phase

It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to go into the details of all the various statistical

analyses that were performed on the results of the DIT survey.<sup>7</sup> What is relevant here is that both groups of students who met the definition of a Waldorf education scored significantly higher than students in the religiously-affiliated setting and significantly higher than the norm for students from public school settings. The Waldorf school-educated group also scored higher than the nonsectarian, non-Waldorf school group, but the difference did not meet statistical significance. The results indicated that the religiously-affiliated group scored close to traditional public high school seniors’ scores, while students from the other three groups earned scores that were equivalent to those one might expect from college level students. An interesting note is that the small group of students who attended the nonsectarian, non-Waldorf school, who happened also to have a Waldorf school background, scored the highest of all, earning a mean score that would be equivalent to what one would associate with graduate level philosophy students.

Another interesting and unanticipated result was that both groups with a Waldorf school background, though given the same instructions for completing the DIT as the other two groups, were forthright in expressing their opinions about the survey and the research in general. None of the groups were asked explicitly for comments, but approximately a third of the Waldorf school students took time to spontaneously write comments on their personal information sheets. Several students volunteered ways in which the DIT could be improved and criticized the fact that not all possibilities for resolution to the dilemmas had been listed. For example, one Waldorf school student attached this note concerning a dilemma about whether a man, Heinz, should steal a drug to save his wife’s life: “I’m sure Heinz could find some way to raise an extra \$1000. By robbing the store, he is participating in the breakdown of community. Without an honorable community, the individual (including his wife) will suffer.”

In research that is less bound by the strictures of statistics, these student comments, reported here anecdotally, would be more appropriately and productively included as a major descriptive

7. Details of all analyses and comparisons conducted during the quantitative phase of the research can be found in Chapter IV of my dissertation.

which in and of itself can be interpreted as indicating higher moral development. The Waldorf-educated students, to use the model developed by James Rest, displayed moral sensitivity by perceiving that there was a problem with the survey instrument; they exercised moral judgment in how to address the problem by choosing to tell me about it; and, finally, they showed moral motivation and ego strength by writing down their thoughts without being instructed to do so.

### The Qualitative Phase

It was to specifically address just the kind of forced omissions exemplified in the students comments—omissions that are inevitable when using quantitative methods—that other research tools began to be employed and accepted over the years. In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research explores non-numerical qualities of a person or situation, usually by asking questions or observing. Its methods are not concerned only with variables and statistics, thus allowing for more generous inclusion of anomalies and unexpected events.

The qualitative phase of this study utilized a method developed by Elliot Eisner called “connoisseurship and criticism”<sup>8</sup> and focused on the part of my research that attempted to discover which practices in Waldorf schools might contribute to the moral development of its students. According to Eisner, connoisseurship refers to the act of appreciating what one encounters, not in the sense of always liking it, but in the sense of awareness and understanding of the experience such that it can be used as a basis for a judgment. Criticism, on the other hand, refers to the act of communicating that awareness and understanding. He calls such criticism “the art of disclosure.” It is a means for providing information that ultimately may transform a person’s perception about something, such as a play or a

poem or a painting—in this situation, the something is Waldorf education—into a public forum that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced and the various forms of information that have been gathered.

Basing my procedures on the guidelines of Eisner’s method, I gathered information using a variety of techniques in a variety of venues. Interviews were conducted with veteran Waldorf teachers and with Waldorf high school seniors. The interview questions were framed to elicit comments relevant to moral development. At the same time, ongoing interviews and conversations were carried on with a highly experienced Waldorf teacher, and with visitors to her home, during a three-week participatory observation. This observation included accompanying this teacher to school on two separate occasions and

observing her class of third graders; accompanying her to a fundraising event at which she was the featured speaker; attending several informal dinner parties during which the conversation centered largely on Waldorf school-related topics; and being present daily for three weeks while this teacher prepared for classroom responsibilities.

After gathering the data, I began to form my criticism by first listening again and again to the taped transcripts of the interviews and transcribing the conversations onto index cards. At that point, there was no attempt

to edit or organize the information, only to hear it fully. In the next step, the index cards were loosely sorted into piles of “similar statements” and “similar ideas,” followed by a more focused reading of the information in which I made interpretations about what the statements probably meant.

In the final step, I began to connect ideas, putting them into categories, continually rewording and refining the categories both during and after my teacher observation, and after the student interviews were completed. Through this sorting process, the notes and transcripts from the

**Waldorf education nourishes and enhances moral development by continually reminding students, in the most detailed nuances of its practices, of what it is to be a whole human being.**

---

8. Eisner, Elliot W., *The Art of Educational Evaluation*, Palmer Press, 1985.

teacher and student interviews, as well as from the Waldorf teacher observation, were used to inductively generate the following broad response themes:

1. An emphasis on educating the whole person
2. A commitment to what is developmentally appropriate
3. Storytelling
4. The integral role of the arts in a Waldorf school
5. Preserving a sense of wonder about the natural world

In other words, these five thematic statements, based on the data I collected using Eisner's qualitative method, summarize the answer to the question of what Waldorf education does that nourishes students' moral development.

### Consolidation of the Findings

The themes emerged in a relatively straightforward manner from the qualitative response data. Less clear was how these themes, descriptive of particular practices or curricula in Waldorf school settings, might be connected to moral development. The high scores that Waldorf students received on the DIT were impressive. In addition, the unique practices that are emphasized in Waldorf school settings appeared to fall neatly into five major themes. Yet the connection between the two findings remained vague and tenuous.

Part of the problem, as discussed previously, was related to the implicit nature of moral development within Waldorf pedagogy. When asked about a connection between teaching methods or curriculum and morality, Waldorf teachers seemed genuinely confused; they considered my continual queries about such a connection to be a little odd. In interviews, I consistently heard, in one form or another, that they did not do anything to directly promote morality, and then, almost as an afterthought, referred to familiar practices used in their classrooms daily to generally educate their students. For example, in one interview, after a frustrating and lengthy attempt failed to coax the responses into a form that

would directly address morality, I finally asked a teacher outright which parts of the Waldorf school experience she thought contributed to students' moral development. After a short pause, the teacher laughed out loud and said, "All of it." She then proceeded with a discourse on how the general purpose of Waldorf education is concerned with "awakening" the whole person, and how, in Steiner's view, this inherently involves a moral component. This teacher also stated that it was fallacious to say "this thing" or "that thing" is solely directed to teaching for a specific skill or body of knowledge, or, in this case, morality, because Waldorf teachers teach people, "whole" people. Like many of the teachers with whom I spoke, she was well versed in and articulate about Steiner's ideas and explained that in his writings, morality is directly connected to a strong will, to the felt ability to be able to do something of consequence. It must involve action in the world, will power; otherwise, "What good is morality?"

A paragraph of recognition needs to be added here concerning a study done by Joan Armon in 1997, paralleling my own, and to which I was introduced after I had collected data for my own study.<sup>9</sup> That another independent researcher was also convinced of a correlation between Waldorf education and higher moral development provides corroboration for the cogency of the topic. Coincidentally, Armon also employed Eisner's qualitative method of connoisseurship and criticism, and her resulting model delineating the parts of Waldorf education that contribute to moral development is analogous in many ways to the themes generated in my research. Armon posits the dynamic interplay of four dimensions contributing to moral development in Waldorf schools. My first two themes, "emphasis on the whole person" and "commitment to developmental appropriateness," correspond nearly word for word with two of the dimensions in her model. The theme I call "encouraging a sense of wonder toward the natural world" corresponds in an oblique way to the dimension Armon calls "attention to Steiner's holistic, anthroposophical considerations." That is, my theme touches upon what

9. Armon, Joan, *The Waldorf Curriculum as a Framework for Moral Education: One Dimension of A Fourfold System*, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 1997.

her dimension directly states about the nature of human beings as incorporating awe and reverence in the face of the universe and one's place in it. Finally, my themes concerning the practice of storytelling and the integral place of the arts are permutations of Armon's discussion about the spontaneity of lessons and the creative contribution of teachers in forming curriculum.

#### A Final Consolidation

During extensive deliberation over the data collected during the qualitative section of the research, I became convinced that it was possible to consolidate my five themes into one single motif, a terse, yet possibly more precise reflection of the moral intent of Waldorf education. It appeared that all the other themes could reasonably be subsumed under the aegis of the one I call "educating the whole person." For example, when teachers integrate the arts into the curriculum, they do so because they are cognizant that an arts-based education is one of the best ways to engage a human being's many forms of intelligence, as discussed and elaborated, for example, in the writings of John F. Gardner.<sup>10</sup> Storytelling as a tool, especially in the way in which Waldorf teachers encourage pictorial imagination, can also be understood as a means of encouraging uniquely human qualities that are as important to full development as is the ability to conceptualize intellectually. When Waldorf teachers place beautiful natural objects in their classrooms, take students on wilderness treks, and provide other opportunities to engage with nature and preserve a sense of wonder toward it, they are again responding to the commitment to honor the wholeness of the human person by working to prevent the dimming of an essential ingredient of that humanness. Finally, Waldorf teachers' sensitivity to what is developmentally appropriate can also be interpreted as a way of educating the

**[B]oth groups of students who met the definition of a Waldorf education scored significantly higher than students in the religiously-affiliated setting and significantly higher than the norm for students from public school settings.**

whole person in the sense that it is a tool for ensuring that full development is not stunted or shortchanged by omitting steps or experiences that are essential for the next steps to build upon and to flower. I proposed then, in the summary conclusion of my research, that Waldorf education nourishes and enhances moral development by continually reminding students, in the most detailed nuances of its practices, of what it is to be a whole human being.

#### Conclusion

What, then, is it to be a whole human being? If the result of my qualitative analysis is that all Waldorf school practices and curricula are fundamentally subsumed under a commitment to support a rigorous, consistent, diligent attention to nourishing the development of a whole person, it becomes important to understand how that wholeness is defined. The definition in a Waldorf school environment is different from what it appears to be in other educational environments. In Steiner's anthroposophical paradigm, the essential quality of humanity is a "divine connection with spirit,"<sup>11</sup> and a marker in the evolution of consciousness is recognition of this divine connection. This spiritual component is the most significant departure from more standard ways of describing whole person education. Moreover, Steiner's epistemological conceptualization in some sense equates spiritual and moral; his definition of spiritual is inclusive of those qualities that lift us out of solitary egoism into community with other human beings and all aspects of our environment. In this sense, Steiner and the Waldorf school approach that sprang from his ideas "defragment" the concept of morality. There is an acknowledgement of morality as something entwined with all aspects of life, public and private, and with how a human being generally lives in the world.

---

10. Gardner, John F. *The Experience of Knowledge: Essays on American Education*, New York: Waldorf Press, 1975.

11. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Spiritual Foundation of Morality: Francis of Assisi and the Christ Impulse*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995.

The connection Steiner makes between spiritual and moral is, of course, intimately connected to his ideas of what is pedagogically correct. I think this is one of the reasons why Waldorf educators, when asked about what they do to enhance moral development, gave answers that could just as easily have been responses to questions about what they do to improve self-esteem, or improve creative thinking, or nourish spiritual growth. A wonderful example of this occurred during a phone conversation I had with the Waldorf educator and author Eugene Schwartz, near the end of my dissertation process, at a time when I was attempting to clarify the results. He replied to my request for verification of some of my statements connecting Waldorf education and moral development by branching off into a related discussion of why many Waldorf students seem to exhibit high self-esteem and personal confidence. In that context, he brought up many of the same themes I outlined as central to the moral domain. When I pointed this out, he stated, "Well, really, self-esteem and moral development are intertwined...the moral element is woven into everything."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the most appropriate way to close this discussion is to emphasize again how Steiner unequivocally establishes a connection between moral reasoning and moral action. Children from Waldorf school backgrounds realize in a concrete way that words in and of themselves do not make something so, and that, in the moral domain especially, it is taking action that counts. The Waldorf students in this research who felt compelled to tell me what was wrong with my survey are a great example of that. I suggest that a valuable contribution to the moral development literature would be future research designed to help clarify the dynamics of the connection between moral reasoning and taking action. This connection, I believe, is one of the keys that can enable all education to be the transformational process it aspires to be, and help students achieve a humanity that includes embracing the twenty-first century, not with theories, but with gusto and active optimism.

12. Summarized from a private phone conversation with Eugene Schwartz, July 2001.

## References

- Armon, Joan. "The Waldorf Curriculum as a Framework for Moral Education: One Dimension of A Fourfold System," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Chicago, March 1997.
- Bennett, William J. *The Moral Compass*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- Eisner, Elliot W. *The Art of Educational Evaluation*, Palmer Press, 1985.
- Gardner, John F. *The Experience of Knowledge: Essays on American Education*, New York: Waldorf Press, 1975.
- Hether, Christine A. *The Moral Reasoning of High School Seniors From Diverse Educational Settings*, Saybrook Graduate School and Research Institute, 2001.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. *Essays in Moral Development: The Philosophy of Moral Development*, New York: Harper and Row, 1981.
- Rest, James. *Developments in Judging Moral Issues*, University of Minnesota Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_, R. Bennett, M.J. Deemer, et al., *Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory*, Praeger, 1986.
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Spiritual Foundation of Morality: Francis of Assisi and the Christ Impulse*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995.

---

*Christine Hether currently works as a psychologist in Hawaii. She holds a Masters Degree in Psychology from the University of British Columbia and a PhD from Saybrook Graduate School and Research Institute in San Francisco. Recently, Christine became a member of the Board of Directors for Haleakala Waldorf School on Maui.*