



Cultivating Humanity against a “Monoculture of the Mind”

Stephen Keith Sagarin

Dry, rigorous, and, in the end, philosophical, Bo Dahlin’s study on Waldorf education in Sweden nonetheless provides a ringing endorsement for the power of Waldorf schools to humanize students, for the possibilities of Waldorf teacher education programs to meet state requirements, and for the necessity to preserve and support holistic and other non-mainstream pedagogies in the face of a developing global, technocratic “monoculture.”

Between 2002 and 2005, Dahlin, Professor of Education at Karlstad University, and colleagues conducted a study to compare Waldorf schools, including students, teachers, and parents, with Swedish “municipal” (public) schools in three areas: pupils’ knowledge attainment; relationship of the schools to society; and teacher training.

The study, released in preliminary reports on results for each of six questions, was based on questionnaires and interviews with students, parents, and teachers. These findings were supplemented with classroom and school observations; in addition, some data were generated by including test questions and other assessments in questionnaires. The six questions that express the purpose of the study are these:

1. What percentage of Waldorf pupils go on to higher education and what results do they achieve?
2. In their capacity as independent schools, Waldorf schools attract many pupils from special groups within society. How far does this contribute to increased segregation or to greater understanding between different sections of the population?
3. Are Waldorf pupils encouraged to develop social and other human skills necessary to be active citizens in a democratic society?
4. What results do Waldorf pupils attain in national curriculum tests, compared with pupils in municipal schools?
5. Do Waldorf schools need an especially “tailored” teacher training program or can it be a part of the state teacher training program?

6. How do Waldorf schools cater to children with learning difficulties?

It is worth highlighting or summarizing some of the findings for each question:

1. Higher Education

In contrast to a more instrumental (“I just want to pass the test”) approach to their own higher education, Waldorf school students take a deeper approach to their studies than do their contemporaries educated in state schools. Waldorf school students also show increased confidence in their ability to handle independent study and they experience a more fruitful relationship to learning and knowledge. They pursue as broad a range of higher education goals as do their public school counterparts and they continue on to higher education at rates comparable to their peers in public school. (This comparison is trickier to make than it may appear; public schools offer several “tracks” and Waldorf school students don’t easily compare with any single one of these. See the full report for details.)

2. Segregation and Understanding

Sweden does not bear the burden of shame that the United States, with its history of slavery and racism, does. Instead, Sweden faces challenges to a stable society from questions regarding the assimilation of immigrants and the rise of fringe neo-Nazi ideologies. Swedish schools, therefore, promote a concept of “school for all” that aims to reduce ethnic and socio-economic segregation. Interestingly, although Waldorf schools are “factually segregated” because of their cultural homogeneity, which includes “left wing” politics, relatively highly educated parents, and a greater number of native Swedish speakers who share an interest in religious or spiritual questions, they are not “ethically segregated” in that they demonstrate a greater commitment to universal solidarity and a greater openness to foreign cultures.

3. Active Citizens in a Democratic Society

Researchers began by asking 9th and 12th grade students to react to a scenario or picture. In one instance (the “Växjö Task”) they were asked to describe a picture from a newspaper that showed an elderly woman hitting a neo-Nazi, during a demonstration, over the head with her umbrella. Students were then asked to explain the events that led to this moment, in which ways this scene raised questions of right and wrong, and so on. Researchers discovered that Waldorf school students felt greater responsibility for social and moral issues than did their peers in public schools, and that, unlike public school students, their involvement with social and moral issues increased with age (between 9th and 12th grades).

Not all responses can be categorized as equally enlightened, however; Waldorf school students were also more likely than their public school peers to leave the test blank, to write sarcastic or “destructive” answers—refusing to engage with the testers—or to write criticisms of the test itself.

When asked about their experiences in their own schools, Waldorf school students said that their teachers attached greater value to human dignity, equality, and respect for the environment. They reported that they experienced less bullying or unfair treatment, and that their teachers were more likely to intervene to stop such activity among students. The Waldorf school students also demonstrated more tolerant attitudes toward minority groups—homosexuals, for example—and their responses to this portion of the study showed less variation between boys and girls than did public school students’ responses.

4. National Curriculum Tests and Attitudes Toward Teaching

The fourth question addressed schoolwork specifically. A primary finding here is that, despite differences in school community, parent background, or pedagogy—these are all thorny issues for researchers, and those interested should consult the study itself to see how they were dealt with—Waldorf school students and public school students scored and achieved equally on virtually every measure.

Waldorf school students are more active in politics and culture, are more likely to be involved in what we would call extracurricular activities. They enjoy school more, and have a more positive view of schoolwork in general. They work less just to pass tests, and report that school is calmer and more pleasant than do their counterparts. They report, too, that the study of Swedish (their native language) is easier, and they have a more positive attitude toward math. They don’t demonstrate a statistical difference in performance in either subject. Finally, boys in Waldorf schools do better on the whole than boys in public school (girls perform equally well in both settings).

The only reported shortcoming for Waldorf school students in English (foreign language study) is that they demonstrate greater insecurity with regard to performing concrete tasks—say, booking a hotel room in English. Perhaps the cultural focus of Waldorf school language instruction leaves students feeling less prepared for “practical world” activity.

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5. Teacher Education

At the core of this portion of the study is a question of importance for the future of Waldorf teacher education in Sweden: Can state teacher training include a “Waldorf profile”? The report takes into account state requirements and Waldorf teachers’ attitudes, which might be at odds, and concludes that state standards and Waldorf teacher education requirements may be met in the same program if the program designers give Waldorf teacher trainers a “wide degree of freedom.”

6. Learning Difficulties

The last question examined the education of students with special needs or learning difficulties. Waldorf schools report the same proportion of students in need of support—between 10 and 30 percent, depending on grade, teacher, and school—but do not use traditional concepts and diagnoses in supporting these students. On the other hand, a strength of Waldorf schools’ treatment is that students are more likely to be seen as

the “responsibility of the whole school,” and not just of one (specialized) teacher.

Interpretation of Results

In light of the overwhelmingly positive results of the study (for Waldorf schools), researchers asked, “Was there nothing negative?” They acknowledge a few challenges that Waldorf schools face. Among these, discovered in the course of research but not in the data of the research itself, are:

- A lack of administrative order and an inefficient use of time and energy in such things as school decision-making;
- A greater requirement for communication with parents, given teachers’ mastery and virtual possession of Waldorf pedagogy; and
- A “reserve and dogmatism which can easily follow from all well-developed holistic world views.” (p. 54)

In a narrative consideration of overall findings, researchers laud Waldorf schools’ focus on the individual human being and the social responsibility that students evidence—despite stereotypes among some of an “authoritarian” approach to education. Researchers also comment on the value for education of a concept of development that includes transformation or metamorphosis (versus linear progression), as Waldorf schools embody. Finally, they remark that, despite concern that Waldorf schools may “indoc-trinate” students in order to produce anthroposophists, only 1 to 2 percent of Waldorf school graduates in Sweden continue in anthroposophical training courses.

What Waldorf Education Stands For

A final chapter examines Waldorf schools as “cultural power factors,” which I take to mean their existence as social and political institutions. Here, Waldorf schools are examined not according to questionnaires and interviews, but according to prevailing concepts and theories of the role of education in society. Much of this chapter is heavy-going, even for cognoscenti; there is just

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enough difference between the thinkers relevant to Swedish educational theory today and those relevant to the U.S. to make an American reader wish for a scorecard.

The report ends with a consideration of the value of the role or mission of

Waldorf schools, among other institutions that fulfill similar roles, in a global context. It is worth quoting the end of the report on this:

There are different “cultures of perception” in the world. . . . Waldorf education is one such particular culture of perception, cultivating specific forms of thinking, understanding and experiencing the education of human beings, as well as the world in general. Such non-mainstream cultures today need active protection and support from the state and economic spheres—unless we want to end up in a virtually totalitarian world system, a worldwide “monoculture of the mind.” (p. 94)

If we agree that a chief aim of education is to cultivate the humanity of our students in the face of a “monoculture of the mind,” then it is gratifying to discover that, in Sweden at least—and we can see much that is the same in North American Waldorf schools—Waldorf schools seem to do just this.

Reference

Dahlin, Bo. *The Waldorf School: Cultivating Humanity? A Report from an Evaluation of Waldorf Schools in Sweden* (available in English translation at www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org), Karlstad, Sweden: Karlstad University Studies, 2007.

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