

Dyslexia in the Waldorf Classroom

Survey of North American Waldorf Schools

Lalla Carini

This survey is part of a larger study aimed at better understanding how Waldorf schools approach reading difficulties and what can be done better or differently to serve seriously dyslexic children.

As a class teacher and remedial teacher for the last eighteen years, I came to the conclusion four or five years ago that an anthroposophical approach to dyslexia and other reading difficulties has not been sufficiently articulated. In spite of insightful discussions of the complex phenomena of dyslexia by esteemed doctors such as Thomas Weihs (1971), Michaela Glöckler (2013), Walter Holtzapfel (2006), Armin Husemann (2002, p.290), and Karl König (2002), and the lifelong dedication of Extra Lesson founder Audrey McAllen (2004, 2002, 1998), no typology of reading difficulties, validated by current findings in the neurology of reading, is available to English-speaking Waldorf professionals.¹ In the latest revised edition of their landmark book, *A Guide to Child Health*, Drs. Glöckler and Göbel give a brief description of dyslexia. The section ends with the statement: "For severe cases, we recommend contacting a program that specializes in dyslexia therapy." (2013, p.388)

When should a family turn to specialized professionals? When should parents rather follow the strategies for support commonly used by Waldorf class teachers and remedial teachers? Can parents trust that the screenings used in Waldorf schools are accurate in identifying a serious reading difficulty? Can teachers feel that they have been well prepared to identify and address different types of learners with respect to literacy development, and to what extent? It has been my experience, as a Waldorf class teacher and remedial teacher who has also trained in a variety of mainstream approaches to

educational therapy, that Rudolf Steiner's overall methodology for teaching reading and writing has elements of genius when applied to the slower or different learner. However, remedial teachers trained in the Extra Lesson often lack the training or experience of the class teacher. The training that remedial teachers receive is quite broad in scope, and does not specialize in literacy issues. In recommending intervention to anxious parents, Waldorf professionals often find themselves in conflict between two extreme positions. One position relies too heavily on the child's ability to "outgrow" a learning difficulty, the other rushes to seek a "fix" through approaches that were created to fit the timeline and context of the mainstream classroom.

In practical terms, when a child is not reading fluently in the second, third, or fourth grade in a Waldorf school, does this mean s/he needs specialized help? Will this child develop gradually the analytical skills required for proficient reading? Or will s/he stall and suffer in self-esteem if not met with a specific intervention? Questions coming toward Waldorf parents and teachers from specialists working with the mainstream also include: When do you expect the typical child to learn to read in a Waldorf classroom? How do you understand early detection? Do you practice early intervention, and, if so, in what ways? The survey I conducted serves to clarify which of these questions live most strongly in the schools and which are already being addressed. Short of giving full answers, this report will point out some of the perceptions and opinions that may need to shift before teachers can work in full confidence with parents and professionals to meet the needs of these children.

A Word on the Label “Dyslexia”

What is *dyslexia* and why would we label a child dyslexic? Dyslexia or *specific reading disability* is used in the mainstream to ensure that children who struggle to learn to read will not be labeled unteachable, as they were in the past, but rather will be met with the most effective known practices suited to their learning differences. Reading is a fetish in our culture. It is also a fundamental skill. The definition of dyslexia, as a difficulty with reading acquisition that is unrelated to the child’s overall cognitive abilities, points to a *continuum*. (Shaywitz 2003, pp.27–29; Siegel 2006, p.1) The continuum spans from children who, in our view, may have been forced to learn to read when they were not mature enough in their sensory-perceptual development, all the way to children with a specific neurobiological profile, most often with a genetic component. (Siegel) This profile is characterized by a number of significant gifts, which Drs. Brock and Fernette Eide designate collectively as “the dyslexic advantage.” (Eide 2012).

There are pros and cons to calling children “dyslexic.” In the first school years, children need to be seen and supported in the development of foundational capacities. As they get older, however, explicit dialogue about the strengths and weaknesses of their dyslexic learning profile has proven, in my experience, to be an essential strategy for supporting the child’s self-esteem.

Historically, Waldorf teachers have resisted labeling children who struggle to read because they find that the Waldorf method, by supporting the maturation of all underlying capacities, could succeed in getting children to read fluently by the end of the grade school years. However, as early as 1988, in the report on the conference in Herdecke, “On the Present Situation of Dyslexia

in the Waldorf Schools,” Dr. Glöckler urged that teachers learn to distinguish “harmless, ‘normal’ spelling mistakes from the not so harmless, dyslexic ones.” (1988) Reporting on the contribution of psychologist Peter Zimmermann, Dr. Glöckler stated the need to recognize this profile early and to address it appropriately at each stage of the child’s development. In *A Guide to Child Health*, Glöckler goes as far as to say, “The appearance of physical and psychological symptoms [that stem from anxieties connected to reading failure] is a clear sign that the condition needs to be treated as an illness.” She concludes, “Thorough diagnosis followed by individual help and support is required.” (2013, p.387)

One aim of my survey was to determine whether Waldorf professionals distinguish dyslexia, as a specific neurological profile, from other learning issues. Such issues include the reading difficulties

encountered by many children who simply need more time to develop the analytical skills necessary to master reading.

The Survey

I received 66 complete responses, providing data relative to 57 schools in North America. Of these schools, all but three serve students up to grade eight or beyond. Survey respondents include the following: 33 class teachers, some of whom also cover educational support duties in the school or are Care Group members, 20 educational support teachers with a variety of duties, 6 respondents not directly involved with learning support, and 6 working exclusively in private practice. Only one response came from a eurythmy teacher who is also a support teacher; no responses came from eurythmy therapists.

The survey was comprised of two sections. Section A focused on the monitoring and

Dyslexia or specific reading disability is used in the mainstream to ensure that children who struggle to learn to read will not be labeled unteachable ... but rather will be met with the most effective known practices suited to their learning differences.

detection of reading difficulties. Section B polled perceptions and opinions about the current approach to reading difficulties in Waldorf schools. Following the survey, I interviewed six seasoned class teachers for their experiences with dyslexic students. Their responses further confirmed the general findings summarized in this article. They also strengthened the case for the questions that remain to be addressed.

The collected data show that Waldorf schools are succeeding in creating structures for educational support (80%) to help with prevention, screening, and intervention. Tutorial support is part of these efforts in most of the schools (70%). Eurythmy therapy is also offered (59%), but at a lower rate than both tutoring and educational support. Only 26% of respondents indicated that their school consults with an anthroposophical physician, and then usually on an irregular basis.

Monitoring and Detection

Given the continuum on which reading difficulties manifest, I consider it important in my own work as an educational support teacher to be clear at what point, on average, the gap between readers and non-readers in a class begins to widen. Most schools do not have quantitative data of this sort, even though they can easily be collected through yearly observational assessments.

For the survey I chose to pose the question of reading proficiency at two different points in time. The overall response I received is comparable to what I found in my school: Upward of 75% of children are deemed to be independent readers by the end of third grade; almost 90% read regularly for pleasure in sixth grade. The more specialized colleagues with a mainstream background, who think in terms of graduated readers and fluency rates, would have wanted more detail. However, I considered it sufficient

to confirm that Waldorf schools teach reading successfully and that identifying a Waldorf timeline of reading development is important and helpful. In fact, in lectures given in Dornach in 1923, when Rudolf Steiner discussed the three methods for teaching reading, he stated that “if young pupils have been taught in this way, they will be able to read in due time—perhaps a few months after the ninth year. Depending on the child, this stage may occur a little earlier or later.” (1996, p.83)²

Teachers repeatedly raised the concern that the ability to monitor and address struggling students varies greatly from one class teacher to the other.

Steiner also said that children who don’t learn to read before the twelfth year may in the end be healthier, even “smarter,” than those who read very early. The question for the teacher is: Do we know what we are seeing? My stance, shared by Susan Goldstein, an experienced teacher and mentor from Santa

Cruz, CA, is that “if a child is not reading by the end of third grade, a Waldorf class teacher should know why that is so, and an open conversation should be happening with the parents about the child’s learning profile.”³ This level of expertise in the teaching of reading is necessary for all teachers and certainly for anxious parents who want to trust the school with their different learners.

The survey confirmed that class teachers have complete freedom and independence in how they assess learning. Teachers assess learning mostly through informal measures. However, use of some formal assessments is becoming more common. Teachers repeatedly raised the concern that the ability to monitor and address struggling students varies greatly from one class teacher to the other, which is why educational support positions have been established. Many of the larger schools also offer small-group tutorial support. Most often, a resource teacher with mainstream training does this tutorial work. In my experience, simple phonics, reading, and spelling inventories used in the mainstream can

add a helpful tool to a teacher's observational notes about their students.⁴

Brock and Fernet Eide (2012), authors of *The Dyslexic Advantage*, highlight the gifts that accompany the neurological profile associated with serious reading struggles. These include strong visual-spatial capacities, strong oral narrative abilities, strong interpersonal skills, and strong associative thinking. A simple test offered for free on their website⁵ provides a general indication. When it comes to proper recognition of this specific profile, the survey showed a lack of such knowledge among teachers in Waldorf schools. In fact, 53% of respondents had no acquaintance with specific screenings that would identify such a profile, but showed interest in learning more about them. One such assessment is the WRAT-4, which might be helpful for schools that are feeling pressure to send children for outside assessment. Easy to administer, it is available for purchase by teachers with a master's degree.⁶

When a school administers simple screenings, it spares the parents from having to get a full assessment outside, which is not necessary in most cases until high school. Proper identification and treatment of seriously dyslexic students has been an issue in many Waldorf schools. Forty-six percent of respondents stated that they knew of children in their schools who "fell through the cracks." Some respondents spoke from personal experience, voicing disappointment that so little had been done to help their child. It is important to note that in one third of the schools polled, such incidents happened prior to the establishment of an educational support position, which was often instituted as a response to parent dissatisfaction.

Early detection is seen by dyslexia advocacy groups as a means to ensure that the gifts that accompany dyslexia are taken into consideration

Early detection is seen by dyslexia advocacy groups as a means to ensure that the gifts that accompany dyslexia are taken into consideration when choosing appropriate teaching strategies.

when choosing appropriate teaching strategies. Although many of these strategies are already best practices in most Waldorf schools, the six experienced colleagues I interviewed agreed that ongoing monitoring by resource teachers provides immense support to the class teacher. All six of these colleagues were able to maintain one or more deeply dyslexic students in their classes thanks to specialized programs set up by the parents within or parallel to the Waldorf program. In the upper grades accommodations were set in place to enable these students to succeed.

Measures such as audio books and previews of reading assignments can contribute greatly to the success of a seriously dyslexic or struggling reader. The survey showed that the use of accommodations for struggling learners in the upper grades is limited to 44% of respondents. All

teachers need to make conscious use of these differentiated strategies, which range from giving extra time for the completion of assignments to frequent conferencing for either more explicit instruction or oral assessment. Implementation should not be dependent on the goodwill of individual teachers, as is the case with 47% of our respondents, but should rather become best practice for all.

Perceptions and Opinions

The survey showed a solid commitment among the respondents to the Waldorf approach to literacy. Careful support for the maturation of the four bodily senses comes first, then an artistic approach with strong oral language experiences and the "writing road" to reading, then a patient recapitulation of missed steps once the time is ripe, and, I would include, much eurythmy and form drawing. Almost one third of respondents saw struggling readers thriving in the upper grades when given individual plans of support.

However, half of the respondents confirmed that a Waldorf approach to reading difficulties hasn't been sufficiently articulated. This calls for a more extensive sharing of success stories.

A statement by Abigail Marshall, a dyslexia specialist, on the inadequacy of the Waldorf classroom in meeting dyslexic students came right up when I searched online the words *Waldorf* and *dyslexia*. Responses commenting on her book, *When Your Child Has Dyslexia* (2009), confirmed my experience that a standard Waldorf school, with relatively large classes and no abundance of resources to pour into support systems, meets challenges similar to those in mainstream private schools, where parents carry most of the financial burden of remediation. The question is, again: What can schools do to minimize the need for families to pour extra resources into individual support outside school? Giving a clear presentation of the many options available in the greater community is helpful to parents, as well as a strong retention tool.

Given all the forms of support that have been implemented in the schools during the last few years, it is not surprising that more than half of the respondents perceive teachers to be reasonably to extremely satisfied with the overall way they have been addressing reading difficulties. What shall we make of the other 45% who either feel teachers are not satisfied (30%) or do not have a way of telling? We should again hope that more schools invest in supporting their class teachers and that the benefits of this support will be shared with their communities.

The experienced class teachers I interviewed echoed Dr. Glöckler's advice: "In all cases ... close cooperation among therapists, teachers, and parents is necessary." (2013, p. 388) This report highlights several questions that live in

Waldorf schools around reading and literacy difficulties, both at the level of understanding the phenomena and teacher preparation, and at the level of school structures for support and communication with parents. The results of the Dyslexia Survey should serve to spur discussion,

stimulate further research, and renew enthusiasm for solving the riddles that these different learners bring to our schools.

Careful support for the maturation of the four bodily senses comes first, then an artistic approach with strong oral language experiences and the "writing road" to reading, then a patient recapitulation of missed steps once the time is ripe.

ENDNOTES

1. The most recent typology, developed jointly by anthroposophic doctors and educational researchers, was given by Dr. Michaela Glöckler 28 years ago, in 1988, after a conference held in Herdecke, Germany. A report on this conference, which I will reference here from a typewritten copy in English, titled "Are There Dyslexic Children in Waldorf Schools?", was published in the German periodical *Erziehungskunst* in the same year.
2. This timeline was given in the context of the German language, which has a far simpler spelling structure.
3. Private interview, March 2015.
4. See the rich word study resource *Words Their Way* (Bear 2008) for an example of spelling inventories.
5. www.dyslexicadvantage.org
6. Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT-4), G. Wilkinson, published by Pearson.

WORKS CITED

- Bear D., et al. (2008). *Words their way*, 4th Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Eide, B.L. and F. (2012). *The dyslexic advantage*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Glöckler, M. (1988). "Gibt es legasthenische Kinder an der Waldorfschule?" *Erziehungskunst*, Heft 9, S. 585.
- _____. (2013). *A guide to child health*. Edinburgh, UK: Floris Books.
- Holtzapfel, W. (2006). *Children's destinies*. Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press.
- Husemann, A., Grief, D. & Bucher, E. (2002). "Dyslexia in the Waldorf school: A case report." In M. Glöckler, *Education as Preventive Medicine* (pp.290–301). Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press.

- König, K. (2002). *On reading and writing*. Camphill Books.
- Marshall, A. (2009). *When your child has dyslexia*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.
- McAllen, A. (2004). *The extra lesson*. Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press.
- _____. (1998). *Learning difficulties: A guide for teachers*. Wilby, M.E. (ed.). Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press.
- _____. (2002). *Teaching children handwriting*. Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press.
- Shaywitz, S. (2003). *Overcoming dyslexia*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Siegel, L.S. (2006, 11(9)). "Perspectives on dyslexia." *Paediatrics & child health*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, national Institutes of Health, pp.581–587.
- Steiner, R. (1996). *The child's changing consciousness*. New York: Anthroposophic Press.

Lalla Carini is a Waldorf class teacher and Extra Lesson remedial teacher with 20 years of experience as an educator. Currently a block teacher at The New Village School in Sausalito, CA, Lalla also holds a private practice working with individual students with learning differences through high school. Her experience includes the establishment of educational support in a large independent urban Waldorf school, early childhood and adult education. She is currently completing a Master's Project on the Waldorf approach to the remediation of reading and writing difficulties. Lalla lives in San Francisco with her husband Paolo, also a Waldorf teacher, and their three children.