



Reading Research Supports the Waldorf Approach

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About four years ago, I approached my to-be Ph.D. supervisors with an idea: Would they be willing to supervise a quantitative research project investigating whether the earlier-reading state school pupils maintained an advantage in reading over their Rudolf Steiner/Waldorf school peers? To my delight, both Dr. Elizabeth Schaughency and Associate Professor Elaine Reese agreed.

The research initially began with three ages of children (in their first, third, and fifth years of school), in three state, and in three Rudolf Steiner schools in the South Island, New Zealand. After months of working with children in both types of schools, I was frequently struck by the way in which the young five- and six-year-old state school children could work their way through texts, usually quite fluently, whereas the Rudolf Steiner school pupils showed very little interest in doing so. I often wondered how such an initial gap in reading could ever be closed. After the beginning phases of visiting schools and working with the children and teachers, we had collected enough data for reliable preliminary analyses (this particular study was conducted over two full school years, thus the complete findings were some time away). At that early stage in the project, it was still possible to observe that the reading achievement of the Rudolf Steiner school pupils, on average, seemed to “take off” somewhere between grades III and V. I began to second-guess the patterns emerging from the results. Was the sample of Rudolf Steiner school pupils going to be large enough to trust the findings? Or was perhaps one of the classes in the study a “freak” class (e.g., particularly intelligent), skewing the data?

A second study was conceived to firm up the available evidence. This second study focused on a new sample of 11- and 12-year-old Year 7 state school students and grade VI pupils from around New Zealand. The results from this project corroborated those of the earlier study still underway—the state and Steiner school pupils were again reading at a similar level.

By the end of our research project, we had extensive data from around 400 pupils and, after taking account of differences in children’s school and home environments, as well as developmental differences such as language ability, the data robustly suggested that by around age ten, there was no difference in reading achievement between children who had been given early instruction in reading and those who had not.

In order to augment the findings with supporting evidence from other sources, I began to search for published data from well-known international studies (e.g., PISA). To my surprise, such rich data sets had only been quantitatively analyzed and published once before (and in a methodologically problematic manner at that) with respect to looking for an effect of early reading instruction. After I had taken account of differences in countries’ economic, educational, and social development, the analyses found no advantage, by age 15, attributable to beginning formal schooling before age seven.

It was particularly pleasing for me that people involved in early childhood education—according to responses I have received—have taken these findings, by and large, as a relief. Many have felt frustrated by societal pressure to teach young

children to read. It is perhaps also fair to mention that national literacy-based standards in education for young children would appear to be empirically questionable as well in the light of this research. Finally, a clear benefit exists for Waldorf education; now empirical data exist supporting the Waldorf approach to reading.

The entire experience has bolstered my conviction that—as Rudolf Steiner repeatedly asserted—with care and rigor, many of the assertions of Spiritual Science can be tested with conventional scientific methodology.

References

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