

There's More to Reading than Meets the Eye

By Barbara Sokolov

Everyone who comes in contact with Waldorf education is sure to notice how beautiful it is, from the enchanting natural toys and seasonal themes in the kindergarten rooms, to the incredible chalkboard drawings in each classroom. Visitors and prospective parents enjoy the amazing array of children's artistic creations — the paintings and drawings, knitted dolls and animals, woven baskets, beeswax figures, and wood carvings, just to name a few. The music that the children play, their singing, and the wonderful plays each class performs are truly impressive. They admire the main lesson books written and illustrated by the students, books that artistically reflect the rich curriculum of a Waldorf school. And of course they can't help but notice the happy faces of the children in a Waldorf school.

But invariably the question arises of how and when children are taught to read in a Waldorf School. The growing anxiety in our society over declining reading skills is so pervasive that suddenly, all the wonders and beauty of a Waldorf education pale in the shadow of the reading issue. "But Waldorf schools take a laid back approach to reading," people say. "Waldorf students are not taught to read in first grade like public school students."

As a mother of four Waldorf students, I have often heard such remarks, and each time a cry of protest wells up inside of me. "Take a deeper look," I want to shout. There's more to reading than you may think at first glance.

People generally think of reading as the ability to recognize the configuration of letters on a page and to pronounce the words and sentences represented there. This is the mechanical outer activity of reading that is easy to recognize. So, when people talk about teaching children to read, they mean teaching them to decode the symbols that stand for sounds and words.

I have taught for a number of years in public and parochial schools that use this standard approach. In kindergarten, children as young as four years and eight months, are required to memorize the alphabet, a set of abstract symbols, and to learn the sounds that go with them. This process, called reading readiness, is dry and abstract, foreign to the very nature of small children.

In the primary grades, children continue to work on the outer mechanical aspect of reading. Students spend long periods of time reading simplistic texts that correspond to the level of their decoding abilities. Readers and textbooks contain stories and information written with restricted vocabularies and simple sentence structure. There is little to ignite young imaginations, to evoke wonder, or to stimulate appreciation for the beauty and complexity of language.

By the time such students reached my fifth and sixth grade classroom, they were all capable of decoding the words on a page, with varying degrees of fluidity. Some were good readers, but for many of my students, the words and sentences did not come together into a coherent whole. They had difficulty understanding or remembering what they read. On the surface, these children appeared to be reading, but with such limited comprehension, can it really be called reading?

Clearly, there is more to reading than meets the eye! Besides the superficial process of decoding words on a page, there is a corresponding inner activity that must be cultivated for true reading to occur.

Waldorf teachers call it “living into the story.” When a child is living into a story, she forms imaginative inner pictures in response to the words. Having the ability to form mental images, to understand, gives meaning to the process of reading. Without this ability, a child may well be able to decode the words on a page, but he will remain functionally illiterate.

Of course non-Waldorf teachers recognize the importance of the inner activity of reading too. They refer to it as reading comprehension skills. In the middle and upper grades of elementary school, tremendous effort is spent trying to expand students’ vocabularies and to somehow work on comprehension. This is an arduous task, largely because reading is being taught in a way that is out of sync with children’s natural capacities. The teacher in the upper grades must address reading comprehension problems and also deal with the tremendous antipathy children with difficulties feel towards reading.

It is very difficult to teach fifth or sixth graders, who have trouble with reading comprehension, how to create mental pictures. This inner capacity seems to have never properly developed in many. In contrast, kindergarten and primary grade children, left unhindered, are naturally busy creating imaginative inner pictures. They love listening to stories and actually live in the visual realm of imagination. How tragic that, in most schools, kindergarten and primary grade students are diverted from developing and strengthening this inner capacity so essential to true reading, in favor of learning dry abstract symbols and decoding skills.

The same thing can be said for vocabulary enrichment. Everyone knows how effortlessly young children develop a sense for language and how quickly and unconsciously their vocabularies grow. They hear new words in stories and conversations and somehow have a sense for their meaning. They may not be able give dictionary definitions, but somehow new words fit into the images that flow through a child’s mind when she hears stories. How unfortunate it is that in the early grades most children are not exposed to rich complex language, simply because such language would not be compatible with their limited decoding skills. Just at the time when their minds are most open to language acquisition they are working with artificially limited vocabularies in school! Of course, vocabulary building is an ongoing process throughout the school years and beyond. But it is much easier for older children to learn new vocabulary if they already have a well-developed sense of language, and a large pool of words and mental images to build upon.

It is apparent that the growing illiteracy problem in this country is not caused by the lack of technical decoding skills. For most of the children with reading deficiencies, it is a crisis in comprehension, a crisis largely brought about by the early introduction of abstract decoding skills and by ignoring the powerful tools of imagination and artistic activity that are the natural avenues of learning for young school children. Ironically, the only cure put forward by the educational establishment is to work harder and earlier on decoding skills, which only exasperates the problem further.

The conventional method of teaching reading must be turned inside out in order to take advantage of children’s naturally developing capacities for learning. And this is precisely what happens in Waldorf Schools. On the very first day of kindergarten, children in a Waldorf school begin learning to read. True, it is not the technical, dry, outer aspect of reading that they are asked to work on. Instead they are engaged with the far more important inner aspect of reading.

Working with a real knowledge of the developing child, Waldorf teachers begin teaching reading by cultivating children’s sense of language and their inner capacities to form mental images. Vivid verbal

pictures and the use of rich language are constantly employed in the classroom. Difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structure are not held back in the telling of tales. Children sing and recite a vast treasury of songs and poems that many learn by heart. Children live into the world of imaginative inner pictures, totally unaware that they are developing the most important capacities needed for reading comprehension, for reading with understanding. They learn naturally and joyfully.

Imaginative stories, songs and poetry do not end in kindergarten. Rudolf Steiner points out that children between the age of about seven to fourteen have, above all, the gift of fantasy. So it only makes sense that children learn best if the curriculum is brought in such a way that it captivates their imaginations. In his book, *Kingdom of Childhood*, Steiner says, “We should avoid a direct approach to the conventional letters of the alphabet which are used in the writing and printing of civilized man. Rather should we lead the child in a vivid and imaginative way, through the various stages which man himself has passed through in the history of civilization.”

My own children experienced the joy of learning the letters of the alphabet through imaginative stories and through the painting or drawing that accompanied each one. The letter “K”, for instance, may be introduced by telling a fanciful story about a king. Then the teacher may draw a picture of the king standing in a pose that looks similar to the letter “K.” This process harkens back to the picture writing of early man, and gives our modern symbols real and living qualities to which children can relate. Although it took the entire year of first grade to present the alphabet in this way, my children were never bored. They were living into their fantasy, living with a wellspring of imaginative pictures. They were, in fact learning reading comprehension, long before they learned decoding. Amazingly, Waldorf children learn the hard part first without even knowing it! They live into the stories, they create inner pictures, and they understand the words. Then comes the easy part, learning to decode letters that are no longer so abstract and foreign, and to read the printed word

So, the first book that my daughter, Anna, read when she was “finally taught to read” was not a dull primer, but beautiful prose by E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web*. True, she learned to decode later than many of her public school counterparts, but she learned to read fluently, with understanding and enjoyment, much sooner than most. Take a look at the sophisticated novels and poetry that upper grade Waldorf students are reading. Take in an eighth grade production of Shakespeare, and you will see the wisdom of the Waldorf approach to reading

Working with a true knowledge of the human being, a true understanding of the stages of child development, the Waldorf teacher is able to educate children in ways that enable them to blossom forth with joy. As Rudolf Steiner says, “It is indeed so that a true knowledge of man loosens and releases the inner life of soul and brings a smile to the face.

Barbara Sokolov, a native of California, has taught in public and Waldorf schools. Four of her five children have been Waldorf educated.

Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*. Introductory Talks on Waldorf Education
Anthroposophic Press, 1995, p. 23
2 Ibid, p. 22

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