

Schooling the Imagination

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Waldorf schools, which began in the esoteric mind of the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, have forged a unique blend of progressive and traditional teaching methods that seem to achieve impressive results -- intellectual, social, even moral

by Todd Oppenheimer

DRIVING down out of the foothills of Yuba County, California, at dawn recently, past wide, flat fruit orchards, abandoned stony gold mines, and endless river levees, I asked my escort, Ruth Mikkelsen, the principal of the local school for juvenile offenders, what the area's main industry was. "Methamphetamine," she said with a chuckle. Yuba County lives with some of California's most dismal demographic statistics. Its unemployment rate is 12.8 percent, twice the state average. Teen pregnancy rates and the proportion of children on welfare are among the state's highest. The county sends a larger percentage of its adults to prison than any other county in the state. It also has the highest proportion of children classified as low-income (68 percent), and the state's stingiest dads when it comes to child-support payments.

As we entered Marysville, the county seat, we passed a scattering of burnt-out storefronts bandaged with dry, broken boards -- reminders that until the 1950s this town was locally famous for its rich economy of bars, brothels, opium dens, and gambling houses. Descendants of those days now fill Ruth Mikkelsen's classrooms at Thomas E. Mathews Community School. "If you take all the kids who are being thrown out of school and put them in one room, those are the kids we have," Mikkelsen said. "One of those kids in a normal class will pretty much destroy that class." It was easy to see what she meant. When we pulled up to the school, a group of boys playing basketball on a crumbling court out front were guarding each other with real hostility. Inside, a dozen boys and girls, dressed in the school's official uniform of blue jeans and white T-shirts, jostled and sassed each other in the tiny common room. One hulking skinhead leaned against the wall, alone, slump-shouldered, quiet, angry.

Underneath this toughness, one could see signs of softness and hope. Before I'd even started exploring, Gary, a skinny fourteen-year-old, spontaneously grabbed me for a quick tour of what I had come to watch: how the Waldorf-school movement, an old, Austria-bred system of private education, is working in a new venue -- a hard-boiled public institution for troublemakers. After introducing me to each of his teachers, Gary walked me past the primary tools of the Waldorf day: the recorders every student learns to play, the numerous paintings and art projects, and a pile of "main lesson books" -- lengthy creative reports by students on their studies in each academic subject, which they must generate every few weeks.

Later, during an English class, I noticed a fifteen-year-old I'll call Robert waving his hand desperately. A small boy with an angelic walnut-brown face, Robert had been expelled from his previous school for smoking marijuana; soon after his arrival at Mathews, he jumped out the probation officer's window and ran away. On the day I visited, Robert sat attentive throughout a two-hour class. When the teacher finally called on him, he flawlessly recited six lines memorized from *The Merchant of Venice*. In the early days, Evelyn Arcuri, the teacher, said later, when she asked the students to return their materials, "they would just toss stuff at me. Now there's better control. They're more engaged." I noticed something similar. One twelve-year-old boy sat with me after school, regaling me, in enthusiastic detail, with a creative mixture of Greek and Roman history. The boy could barely read, but he'd been inspired by the oral storytelling that Waldorf teachers emphasize. These roughnecks even like Waldorf's focus on art. Thomas, an outgoing and restless seventeen-year-old, had found that when he was forced to draw pictures of stories he had read or heard, "you get more visual ideas of what you're doing." Arcuri believes she can see that the students are learning more from what they draw. "This year kids are saying, 'Can I take this home?' We never had that happen before."

Mikkelsen and her teachers attribute these changes to the battery of skills they learned at Rudolf Steiner College, a small private school near Sacramento that serves as the West Coast teacher-training center for Waldorf schools. Much of what teachers learn there is how to reach children through all their senses. Child-development experts have long advocated a multisensory approach to learning -- as a way both to deeply imprint lessons in a youngster and to accommodate the different learning styles that are bound to exist among diverse students, particularly those with learning difficulties. Yet few education systems in this country have the history with these methods that Waldorf schools do. "I now have a way to give it to them many times, in different ways," Arcuri told me. "We had tried everything with these kids," Mikkelsen recalls. "Nothing worked. You can't lecture to them. Independent study doesn't work. They need constant support and a lot of socializing." During Mikkelsen's discussions with teachers at the Steiner College, "I said to them, 'If this is so good, if Rudolf Steiner is as hot as you say, then this will work for our kids.



The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn.

John Lubbock

Otherwise, it's another bunch of elitist B.S."

Several years later an outside evaluator dropped by the Mathews School. After his visit he told Mikkelsen that the effectiveness of her program for juvenile offenders couldn't be fairly judged, because it was clear that she did not have truly problem kids. "I suddenly realized it was working," Mikkelsen recalls. John Cobb, the local probation manager, has a similar impression. "Kids who can't make it anywhere else can make it here," he told me.

The main lesson books at Mathews and other Waldorf schools illustrate Waldorf's unusual mixture of teaching techniques. The books are filled with students' careful records of field trips and classroom experiments; impressions of the teachers' regular oral presentations; and, in more advanced classes, syntheses of what the students have read in primary sources. (Waldorf teachers avoid textbooks, considering their digested information a poor substitute for original material.) The texts were neatly handwritten, with fountain pens. They were also often accompanied by detailed drawings and poetry, some of which the students had written themselves. Playfulness is encouraged in these books, because Waldorf teachers believe that imaginative wonderings can be just as educational as objective facts and conclusions, if not more so.

This notion, that imagination is the heart of learning, animates the entire arc of Waldorf teaching. When that concept is coupled with the schools' other fundamental goal, to give youngsters a sense of ethics, the result is a pedagogy that stands even further apart from today's system of education, with its growing emphasis on national performance standards in subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading and its increasing rigor in standardized testing -- to say nothing of the campaign to fill classrooms with computers. This is not to suggest that Waldorf schools have a monopoly on contrarian ideas; Quaker and other religious schools teach ethics too. And various alternative private schools have been practicing innovative approaches to learning for years. Obviously, some Waldorf practices will resemble those in many of these schools. But that makes the Waldorf method all the more intriguing, because the daily experiences of one creative education system ought to tell us something about the challenges and possibilities for other schools, both alternative and traditional.

It is odd, actually, that the public knows so little about Waldorf schools, because they've been operating in this country since 1928 and have collected quite a few famous followers (Waldorf parents have included Paul Newman, Joe Namath, John DeLorean, and Mikhail Baryshnikov; graduates include Victor Navasky, the publisher of *The Nation*, and Ken Chenault, the president of American Express). During the past twenty-five years in particular, Waldorf schools have proliferated vigorously; roughly 130 now operate in the United States, and 700 worldwide. Waldorf schools are quite possibly the world's fastest-growing independent school system; David Alsop, the chairman of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, calls them the world's "best-kept education secret."

The secret is getting out. In the past decade a dozen public schools have adopted Waldorf methods, in an effort to enliven classrooms that many educators see as having become sterile job factories. Unfortunately, some of the Waldorf methods have caused trouble of their own, both in public schools and in private Waldorf classrooms. There has been controversy and a lawsuit, stemming largely from the attention that Waldorf teachers pay to an unorthodox form of spirituality. (To some critics, this threatens the prevailing taboo against teaching religion in a public school.) Running through these bumps, however, is a substantial record of achievement -- one that has earned the respect of a number of leading figures, from Howard Gardner, the prominent Harvard professor of education and psychology, to the well-known education reformer TheodoreSizer, to Saul Bellow, whose hero in the novel *Humboldt's Gift* is fascinated by the philosophy of Waldorf's creator.

Proletarian Beginnings

WALDORF education was born one spring day in 1919, when Rudolf Steiner, a maverick Austrian philosopher and scientist, visited the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, to give a speech to its workers. The First World War had ended just five months earlier, and Steiner talked about the need for a new social order, a new sense of ethics, and a less damaging way of resolving conflict. After the lecture Emil Molt, the factory owner, asked Steiner if he would consider starting a school for the workers' children. Steiner agreed, insisting on some conditions, including that his school be run by the teachers. (That rule has spawned occasionally chaotic but cooperative styles of Waldorf-school management today. And it prefigured the modern-day theory, popularized by the Yale psychiatrist and school reformer James Comer, that for education to work, teachers and parents must be involved in school decisions.) Steiner also insisted on a highly ambitious curriculum. "The need for imagination, a sense of truth and a feeling of responsibility -- these are the three forces which are the very nerve of education," he once said. Twenty years after the Stuttgart school opened, the Nazis shut it down, along with six other Waldorf schools that had sprung up by then. The reason, according to the state press at the time, was that Germany had no room for two kinds of education -- one that educated citizens for the state and another that taught children to think for themselves.

By then seven other Waldorf schools had been started around the world -- three in Switzerland, and one each in

London, Budapest, Oslo, and New York City. (The Waldorf schools in Germany reopened after the Nazi regime collapsed, and the German contingent now numbers approximately 140.) Today, although the schools' Old World academic philosophy runs counter to some academic trends, it may dovetail with others. "All the things you read about public schools," Mikkelsen told me, "that you need to do this, you need to do that -- hell, they've been doing it for eighty years."

Mikkelsen was referring to myriad reforms that policymakers incessantly propose to reverse a range of problems besetting American youngsters: gradually weakening morality and family structure; students' shrinking capacity for creativity and self-discipline, and their increasing turns to violence; diminishing appreciation for the nuances of language in reading, writing, and conversation; and graduates' spotty preparation for the professional world. When pressed on such issues, school administrators often grumble that they're being asked to handle problems better solved outside school -- at home or, later, in the workplace. That may miss the main piece in the education puzzle. Steve Grineski, the interim dean of the College of Education and Human Services at Moorhead State University, in Minnesota, said, speaking before the Littleton, Colorado, horror, "The most serious problem in schools is kids not getting along. The reason people get fired isn't their lack of job skills, it's their lack of social skills." That is precisely why Mikkelsen was attracted to Waldorf. "It's like learning to be a really good parent, plus tapping into every creative thing you ever thought of," she says. Ben Klocek, a high school senior at the Sacramento Waldorf School, whose family has been involved in Waldorf for years, says, "Have you ever heard of that thing about emotional intelligence?" He is referring to Daniel Goleman's provocative book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), which suggested that IQ isn't nearly as important as personal traits such as self-awareness, confidence, and flexibility. "Waldorf," Klocek says, "gives you very high emotional intelligence."

Although the Mathews School has embraced Waldorf teaching techniques with enthusiasm, it has chosen to forgo parts of the Waldorf curriculum, which can be too involved for a thinly educated student body that comes and goes as this one does. I was eager, therefore, to visit some of the private Waldorf schools elsewhere in California and on the East Coast, where the full program has been practiced for decades. There, I hoped, I would see how both teachers and students have fared in their attempts to realize Steiner's dreams of enriching people's imaginations and ethical sensibilities, and putting them to work in modern daily life.

The Primacy of Imagination

WALDORF teachers offer roughly the same subjects other teachers do. Before introducing facts, however, they take a few steps back, and sideways.

Rudolf Steiner believed that people actually have twelve senses -- the accepted five plus thought, language, warmth, balance, movement, life, and the individuality of the other. Vague as some of these additional "senses" sound, most of them have been roughly confirmed by modern research. John Bloom, who was the administrator of the San Francisco Waldorf School at the time of my visit, said, "We try to engage and connect the thinking and feeling realms. When you separate those, therapists get [students] as adult patients." On my visits to Waldorf schools I felt as if I were watching sensory foundations being built in each class, almost in layers.

Walking into the kindergarten class at the San Francisco Waldorf School one morning, I felt my stomach relax. The lights were dim, the colors soft pastel. Intriguing materials for play were everywhere. The children had organized them into a half dozen distinctly different fantasy worlds -- there was a make-believe woodshop in one corner; in another, reminiscent of a farmhouse bedroom, two girls were putting a curiously bland doll to bed in a cradle. This doll, I learned, is standard issue in Waldorf kindergartens. It's the old-fashioned sort, simple stuffed cotton, with almost no facial features. "The only thing an intelligent child can do with a complete toy is take it apart," a kindergarten teacher told me. "An incomplete toy lets children use their imaginations." There were also wild hats and capes, pinecones and driftwood, bowls of nuts and other items from the natural world. John Bloom explained that the raw materials are meant not to celebrate nature but to challenge children's spatial creativity.

Most adults think it's cute when children imitate whatever they see. Waldorf teachers take it seriously. Susan Kotansky, a kindergarten teacher at the recently closed Westside Community School, in Manhattan, which used the Waldorf methods for several years, said that at first her students imitated superheroes they'd seen on television. In time, after they had cooked with their teachers, worked with them on other projects, and listened to fables and fairy tales with their moral lessons (a staple in Waldorf primary grades), "their play changed and got more purposeful." Learning through practical experience is a concept long advocated by progressive education leaders, particularly the turn-of-the-century reformer John Dewey. In recent years the idea has been gaining popularity, though it is still rarely put into practice.

To my surprise, young Waldorf children seemed to understand the principles embedded in their exercises -- so well, in fact, that they could comfortably explain Steiner's methodology themselves. At the original U.S. Waldorf school, the

Rudolf Steiner School, housed in two limestone townhouses on Manhattan's Upper East Side, I fell into a provocative discussion one morning with a dozen fourth-graders. The class was finishing a year-long project: making mallets for wood carving out of stubborn pieces of hardwood, which they were patiently filing and sanding by hand. One boy, who had finished his mallet, was making a knife out of teak, and regularly paused to feel its smoothness on his cheek. Waldorf students work on some kind of art project virtually every day. Recalling her early years, Eliana Raviv, a ten-year-old, told me, "We never had green or purple. We make it out of vermilion, red, yellow, and blue, two kinds of blue. It's important to get forms out of your own painting. That way you learn how to develop forms." Waldorf students aren't graded on their work until around the seventh grade; Eliana's classmate, Maisie Weir, told me about a friend in a traditional public school in Atlanta. "All they think about is tests," she said. "They don't even have recess anymore." In the early grades students also do quite a bit of drawing with crayons -- not the standard paraffin Crayolas but thick chunks of beeswax imported from Germany. Beeswax that can be molded after warming in the hand is also used to teach sculpting. There is an almost bland conformity to most student artwork in the early grades -- an oddity that repels more than a few parents. But the purpose is to build a foundation of technique. Sure enough, in the work of older students one sees plenty of refinement and individuality.

But why learn an archaic art like wood carving moments before we enter the twenty-first century? "You almost need it as a balance for the high-tech world," Tove Elfstrom, the woodshop teacher at the Washington Waldorf School, in Bethesda, Maryland, explained to me during my visit. "So they can make something. To give them an innate sense of material." Various studies have found that engagement with physical tasks -- those requiring great dexterity but also surprisingly simple activities -- helps to build other skills, both intellectual and psychological. Or, as Elfstrom put it, "Your finger sense develops your overall brain capacity." Waldorf teachers believe that one of their primary jobs is to help youngsters develop a strong will. To do that, they argue, students must learn that the rewards they reap from an experience require a commensurate amount of effort -- mental, physical, even emotional. Many Waldorf loyalists lay the blame for some of the troubles of today's youth on cultural forces that tilt the balance -- technology being chief among them. As Douglas Gerwin, a Waldorf high school teacher, puts it, technology "promises an experience by which we don't have to do anything to make it happen." This is why teachers discourage younger students from watching television and don't generally expose them to computers until the eighth grade or later. The delay doesn't seem to do much harm. Peter Nitze, who graduated from the Rudolf Steiner School, Harvard, and Stanford, is now a global-operations director at AlliedSignal, which manufactures aerospace and automotive products. At a recent open house at the Steiner School, Nitze told the audience, "If you've had the experience of binding a book, knitting a sock, playing a recorder, then you feel that you can build a rocket ship -- or learn a software program you've never touched. It's not a bravado, just a quiet confidence. There is nothing you can't do. Why couldn't you? Why couldn't anybody?"

Emphasis on the creative also guides the aspect of a Waldorf education that probably frightens parents more than any other: the relaxed way that children learn to read. Whereas students at more-competitive schools are mastering texts in first grade, sometimes even in kindergarten, most Waldorf students aren't reading fully until the third grade. And if they're still struggling at that point, many Waldorf teachers don't worry. In combination with another Waldorf oddity -- sending children to first grade a year later than usual -- this means that students may not be reading until age nine or ten, several years after many of their peers. In earlier times the idea that children might come to reading later, at their own pace, was considered appropriate. David Elkind, a noted child psychologist at Tufts University, cites prodigious evidence, particularly from other countries, that late readers ultimately fare better at reading and other subjects than early readers. A number of prominent figures, including Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein, were very late readers. But in today's competitive frenzy the drive in this country is to get children to learn as much as they can, about reading or anything else, as early as possible.

It's no surprise, then, that Waldorf parents occasionally panic. Others may distrust Waldorf education because they have heard tales of parents who pulled their children out of a Waldorf school in the third grade when the kids still couldn't read. "That's like a standing joke," Toba Winer, the mother of two graduates of the Rudolf Steiner School, told me. "People say, 'Oh, can your kids read?' There was no concerted effort to drum certain words into the kids. And that was the point." Before teaching sound and word recognition, Waldorf teachers concentrate on exercises to build up a child's love of language. The technique seems to work, even in public schools. Barbara Warren, a teacher at John Morse, a public school near Sacramento, says that two years after Waldorf methods were introduced in her fourth-grade class of mostly minority children, the number of students who read at grade level doubled, rising from 45 to 85 percent. "I didn't start by making them read more," Warren says. "I started telling stories, and getting them to recite poetry that they learned by listening, not by reading. They became incredible listeners." Many Waldorf parents recall that their children were behind their friends in non-Waldorf schools but somehow caught up in the third or fourth grade, and then suddenly read with unusual fervor.

Still, the system isn't fail-safe. Although Waldorf teachers learn techniques, phonic and otherwise, that can pinpoint reading troubles, some have such faith in the Waldorf way that they overlook children with real disabilities -- a problem that school leaders consider the teacher's failing, not the system's. Nonetheless, I spoke to several disgruntled parents whose children were later found through outside testing to have dyslexia or other reading difficulties. Such accounts obviously inflame the worries of some reading experts; others are less concerned. Lucy Calkins, a well-known reading specialist at the Teachers College of Columbia University, says that in most public

schools children who start reading later tend to do worse, and Waldorf students might benefit slightly from starting earlier. But, she says, "I would not necessarily be worried in a Waldorf school. The foundation of literacy is talk and play."

Music's Power

MUSIC is as central as art in the Waldorf curriculum. Practice begins in first grade, with recorders that are stored in cases the students knit themselves; in fourth grade they each choose an orchestral instrument. A typical Waldorf school offers several different music classes -- at least one choir, an orchestra, and a jazz ensemble in which students learn to improvise and sometimes make their instruments.

In the past decade a half dozen scientific studies have supported the notion that the study of music enriches a youngster's thinking capacities. Some of those studies are tentative, but a few suggest powerful associations. In one study, for example, Swiss and Austrian researchers increased students' music lessons from one or two to five a week while cutting back on math and language studies. After three years the students were as good at math as students who had stuck with the standard curriculum, and even better at languages.

Researchers found the music students to be more cooperative with one another as well.

What's going on here? The answer may lie in a German study, by Gottfried Schlaug, now at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, in Boston. Schlaug determined through MRI scans that intense exposure to music actually expands brain mass. Musicians he studied who had perfect pitch also had an unusually large planum temporale in the left hemisphere of the brain. When comparing nonmusicians with those who had started playing music as young children, Schlaug found that the musicians also had a larger mass of nerve fibers connecting the brain's two hemispheres. The implications of this last finding are significant. A person's creativity and analytical skills depend greatly on the ability to think with both hemispheres of the brain; yet many of us lack this agility.

Ambitious as these assertions seem, I sometimes felt as if I were experiencing their genesis myself in Waldorf's musical exercises. On one occasion, when I joined a Waldorf teacher-training class, I started the day by learning a complex singing round. As I struggled to keep up, I could feel my thinking being pushed. The process exhausted and stretched me in unfamiliar ways, and made me envious of Waldorf students. My envy peaked one evening in New York City, at a parents' night for the Steiner School. As part of a fundraiser, several faculty members had arranged to sing cabaret songs; when they finished, some of the eighth-graders, who were helping to serve food, decided that they would sing something too. Moments later the adults sat transfixed as half a dozen teenagers performed James Taylor's "That Lonesome Road" a cappella, in slow, layered parts, with the polished harmony of a professional chorus. "All I could think," Chris Huson, a banker and the parent of a Waldorf second-grader told me later, "is that when my kids grow up, I want them to be just like those guys."

This Is Math?

A central objective of Waldorf teaching is to create a sense of wonder about each subject, even math. Sixth-graders study geometric progression by doing graphic-art projects. In San Francisco, I observed second-graders studying arithmetic by creating concentric circles of times tables and musing about their similarity to planetary patterns; later they sang out complex multiplication drills while clapping and hopping across an exercise room in syncopated rhythm -- a display of mental and physical dexterity that would be beyond most adults. "Their numbers are in their bodies," John Bloom, the school administrator, explained.

A standard exercise in Waldorf classes is a riveting game called "mental math." One day at the Mathews School, when students were particularly disruptive, Evelyn Arcuri, the teacher, clapped her hands and said, "Okay, I'm thinking of a number." The students quickly turned quiet. "If you add twelve," she said, "subtract twenty, multiply by nine, and subtract six, the answer is thirty. What's the number?" Within moments -- before I could recall the arithmetic steps of the exercise or even the numbers -- several students were pumping their hands in the air, promising answers, often the correct one. (The answer, by the way, is twelve.) As students get older, the formulas get more complex and are recited more quickly.

Beau Leonhart, who has taught math for twenty-two years at the Marin Academy, a non-Waldorf high school in California, and her husband, James Shipman, also a long-time teacher at Marin, have found that Waldorf graduates tend to exhibit unusually long attention spans. Shipman says, "Waldorf kids aren't the ones out the door when the bell rings. They're the ones who tend to linger, who want to carry on a conversation. If anything, they're a little slower, because they're thinking about it." Leonhart adds, "If they can't do it one way, they'll go at it from another angle." Shipman, who teaches aikido, among other subjects, told me, "In thirteen years I've had two black belts, both Waldorf kids. They know the meaning of focus and discipline. They have a depth, there's no way around it. They're

very present." It may be no coincidence that Waldorf schools concentrate on building athletic foundations in children's early years -- balance, coordination, agility -- before introducing competitive sports in the upper grades. It seems to pay off. School news clips are full of accounts of victories over teams from schools two or three times their size.

Waldorf students' capacity for concentration may be stimulated by an old-fashioned but increasingly rare practice: allowing time for reflection. Science classes are an example. In the average school, teachers introduce a concept first and then do a demonstration or an experiment to illustrate it. "It takes the kid out of it," Mikko Bojarsky, the science teacher at the Sacramento Waldorf School, told me. Waldorf teachers turn this process around, doing an experiment before giving the concept much discussion. "Then you let it go to bed for the night," Bojarsky said. "They literally sleep on it. A lot happens in their sleep life." The next day, he said, students generally come in with many more questions than they had the day of the experiment, often including some the teacher never considered. "Nowadays we always push people to think so fast, instead of letting them reflect," Bojarsky continued. The process institutionalizes an important principle that evades many a teacher -- to let students struggle toward their answers and individual understanding. "One of the things I had to learn," Bojarsky said, "was to not answer their questions, especially in the twelfth grade. If you give them answers, they'll just shut down. It's amazing what they'll come up with if you wait long enough."

A Sense of Ethics

EACH morning when Waldorf students in the elementary grades first get to class, they find their teacher standing in the doorway, waiting to look them in the eye and shake their hands. "You can tell so much by how they shake hands, who's a little off," Lynda Smith, at the time a San Francisco teacher, told me. Moments later, after the students have taken their seats, they rise for another Waldorf tradition: recitation of the morning verse.

This is a short poem, written by Steiner, that aims to inspire students about nature and good work. (The verse for the first through fourth grades, for example, says in part, "I revere, Oh God, the strength of humankind, which Thou so graciously has planted in my soul, that I with all my might, may love to work and learn.") When possible, classes may go for a walk to recite these verses on a riverbank in Sacramento, say, or in New York's Central Park. Cloying as this ritual may seem, many graduates remember the verses fondly. One admits that he still says his morning verse while shaving.

The solemnity of the verses sets the tone for the morning "main lesson," an intense two-hour class. (Coincidentally, carving out large blocks of study time like this has become a popular reform today.) Teachers are supposed to avoid reading from books when presenting their lesson material, and to prepare original oral presentations virtually every day. The emphasis placed on these presentations occasionally fills class time with more droning lectures than engaging student projects -- a borrowing from traditional education's more oppressive side. But there are other features that can make classes lively. Teachers are taught to present lessons as topics for open discussion, and to create a dramatic atmosphere in which the moral principles involved in a given subject can be not only pondered but felt. First-graders, for example, will pretend that they are gnomes in a fairy tale that poses concepts of good and evil. Fourth-graders may act out Nordic myths, fiercely stomping their way through a poem's iambic and dactylic rhythms. The poems also talk about Norse gods who symbolize pride, loss of innocence, and the power of the intellect -- issues that Waldorf teachers believe are just beginning to dawn on fourth-graders.

Waldorf's assorted lessons in goodness (the schools also ask students to do regular community service) seem to have their effect. "A lot of optimists come out of here," says Damon Saykally, a recent Sacramento Waldorf senior who entered the program as a sophomore and describes himself as a nihilist. "When I first came here, I was shocked at how much they think they can help the world. I think it's great."

Waldorf's philosophy of teaching through living out stories may be unusual, but it comes out of a long tradition, from the folkways of ancient cultures to the modern-day theories of child psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim and Robert Coles. In his well-known books on the development of a moral and spiritual intelligence in children, Coles stresses an immersion in moral stories. Waldorf teachers go even further. They believe that when students go through school without such stories, their ability to develop a sense of empathy is inhibited, and that limits their capacity to find meaning in life. Pointing to the psychologist Jean Piaget's famous theories about a youngster's gradual stages of development, Waldorf teachers argue that traditional schools aggravate this problem by imposing intellectual demands on students before they're ready for them. This only discourages youngsters, they say, leaving them prone to become unfeeling but clever cynics or, worse, simply apathetic.

One big plank in Waldorf's platform that is a bit difficult to get a grip on is the exhaustive references to the "soul." The word comes up, Saykally told me, "all the time." ("Soul" occurs no fewer than four times in the nineteen lines of the upper-school morning verse.) I was perplexed by the ubiquity of this term and by the apparent lack of discussion of its meaning, so I began asking students what it meant to them. "Regardless of what you do, it's who you are," a San

Francisco eighth-grader said. "What you believe and think," one of her classmates said. "How you act with that in the world," another said. Pretty good answers, I thought. An hour or so later David Weber, the head teacher of their school, abruptly pulled me aside. "Don't interview them about that!" he said. "They're not at that level yet. It's too analytical. That's for the eleventh grade. Now they're just feeling it. It's just an experience. That's where it should stay." Later, when he had cooled down, Weber explained his concern more fully: questions from a reporter might encourage eighth-graders' tendency to be judgmental, a trait that Waldorf teachers try hard to temper. "How healthy is it for children to make judgments at this age?" he asked me. Eighth-graders want to see everything as "black and white," he said. "It's cool or it sucks. Some never get beyond that. We're trying not to dignify this kind of self-absorbed judgment."

Though aspects of Weber's goal sound laudable in theory, they can prove elusive in practice. During my visits I saw many seventh- and eighth-graders roll their eyes at various exercises meant to feed the soul (a puppet show of a fairy tale in a school assembly; the relentless morning verses; and, once, a seventh-grade science lesson wrapped in a fable, in which a king ordered an alchemist to get the dirt out of his salt). When I asked students about these exercises, I got mixed but mostly respectful reactions. Some outsiders, however, are considerably more distrustful, having sensed a huge piece of Waldorf philosophy that teachers keep largely hidden from their students.

Covert Spirituality

IN early 1998 Dan Dugan, a disenchanting Waldorf parent in San Francisco, sued the Sacramento school district and another nearby for introducing the Waldorf philosophy in two public schools in the mid-1990s. Dugan argued that the movement has a secret agenda that violates the Constitution's First and Fourteenth Amendments: the indoctrination of children into Waldorf's "religious doctrines of anthroposophy." Anthroposophy is the name Rudolf Steiner gave to his theories about the evolution of human consciousness, drawn from a multiplicity of disciplines -- anthropology, philosophy, psychology, science, and various religions, particularly Christianity. As Steiner wove these disciplines together with his own research, he created his own brand of spirituality, some of which complements the New Age movement. A number of Steiner's beliefs are now somewhat accepted -- for example, the notion that virtually all fields of study, from the humanities to the sciences, share a foundation of explanation. Yet many of his theories remain suspect -- in large part, no doubt, because of the dreamy way in which Steiner expressed them. In a typical essay, "The Roots of Education," he argued, "If you observe man's development with the means of inner vision of which I have already spoken -- with the eyes and ears of the soul -- then you will see that man does not consist only of a physical body . . . but that he also has supersensible members of his being."

These notions make Dugan, who is a sound engineer, smile and shake his head. "I'm opposed to magical thinking; I'm a secular humanist," he told me as we chatted recently in an office stuffed with electronic equipment on one side and dozens of anthroposophy books on the other, all of which he claims to have read. In Dugan's view, Steiner's theories are simply "cult pseudo-science." After Waldorf began spreading into public school classrooms, Dugan formed a group called PLANS (People for Legal and Non-Sectarian Schools) to declare what he calmly calls "epistemological warfare." His goal, he says, is to sort out two questions: "What is reliable knowledge? How is it obtained?"

Waldorf teachers counter that they don't formally teach anthroposophy. This is true; in fact, their own rules prohibit them from doing so. They do study it, however -- most intensively at the Steiner College, where virtually every class text was written by Steiner or another anthroposophist. (The Steiner College does expect student teachers to come to it with standard bachelor's degrees.) Waldorf teachers say they hide anthroposophy not because they see anything evil or dangerous in it but because they don't want to push their philosophy onto the students. The purpose of the teachers' anthroposophical studies is to enliven their own sensibility and deepen their understanding of evolution. Only then, according to Waldorf theory, can they inspire students with the wonder and curiosity that make for profound learning. Steiner himself encouraged this distinction. "If I had my way," he wrote,

"I would give anthroposophy a new name every day to prevent people from hanging on to its literal meaning.... We must never be tempted to implement sectarian ideas. . . . We must not chain children's minds to finished concepts, but give them concepts capable of further growth and expansion."

Steinerian pronouncements of this sort have excited legions of Waldorf teachers. Ruth Mikkelsen, of the Mathews School, noticed this when she first observed Waldorf classes. "Why do they think these kids are so special?" she remembers wondering. "Thousands of times I've sat with teachers and heard them say, 'I want to kill Johnny,' or 'I can't wait till I get home and can have a glass of wine.' At Waldorf they say, 'How can we help little Ronnie, who's, you know, killing puppies now?'" That attitude may be precisely the point. Jerome Kagan, a developmental psychologist at Harvard, says, "In most of the curriculum changes schools make, if there's any benevolent effect on students, it's because the teacher is now motivated and passionate. And kids benefit from that, not from the curriculum."

But anthroposophy still "leaks into the curriculum," as Dan Dugan puts it. "They try to hide it, but they can't," Rebecca Bolnick, a recent graduate of the Sacramento Waldorf School, told me. Take, for example, Steiner's belief that each child's temperament matches one of the four medieval types: choleric (bold), phlegmatic (deliberate), melancholic (brooding), or sanguine (lighthearted). Steiner also believed that physical and spiritual development fall into distinct seven-year periods, the first beginning with the arrival of a child's permanent teeth.

Suspect as these ideas may seem, the outside experts I spoke to consider them relatively innocent. ("When you think of what the learning-disability people cook up, this is very mild," a prominent expert on early education told me.) Harmless or not, zealotry in the practice of Steiner's theories usually has a much simpler cause: bad teachers. Although this problem afflicts every school, Waldorf wrestles with an extra challenge by being one of the last refuges for the countercultural values of the 1960s. "A lot of people think Waldorf schools are the place for the kids of ex-hippies," says Eugene Schwartz, the director of teacher training at Sunbridge College, in Spring Valley, New York. That image often attracts teachers who are "dropping out from the world of competition or power," Schwartz says. They can find great comfort in Steiner's spirituality, and become more devoted followers than even Steiner himself might have wished. The result is that students sometimes learn more about Steiner's scientific theories than about Isaac Newton's. "People often think Waldorf offers an easy way to teach the sciences," Schwartz says. "In fact it's just the opposite."

As public school officials collaborate with Waldorf leaders (who come to public schools by invitation only), they are working out some interesting armistices in response to their critics' epistemological warfare. There is no uniform system as yet, and given the diverse interests of the nation's school districts, there may never be one. Some schools follow Waldorf's practice of using the Old Testament in the early grades, in world-literature studies and for inspiration on student projects; others avoid it. Most adopt Waldorf's accelerated approach to basic arithmetic and some form of its relatively slow, layered approach to reading. The initiatives show intriguing signs of success, particularly with underachieving minorities. For instance, although reading scores are often low in the early years, they generally rise dramatically by eighth grade. But the partnerships have also presented challenges. The Waldorf pedagogy and class readings are heavily Eurocentric; public school teachers must modify this orientation to accommodate American literature and, increasingly, multicultural points of view. (In California, for example, white students may be inspired by gardening, but Hispanics generally aren't.) And dramatic change in schools never proceeds smoothly. When teachers are asked to try, as adults, learning to sing, play music, and paint, many suddenly find their old ways quite attractive. As for any broad troubles with religious indoctrination, the classes in public Waldorf schools have been pretty well stripped of explorations of the spiritual.

The Second Mother

ONE of the unusual aspects of Waldorf education is a system called looping, whereby a homeroom teacher stays with a class for more than a year -- in Waldorf's case, from first through eighth grade. The practice has an intriguing combination of pros and cons, and is attracting growing attention in other education circles both private and public.

Although Waldorf students work with other teachers each day in subjects such as music, foreign languages, and physical education, the main lessons are taught for eight years by the same teacher. The purpose of this is to build solid, long-term relationships and to teach students how to do that themselves. "If you get in an argument with someone, you have to work it out," says Karen Rivers, a Waldorf educator and consultant in California. (This is a fair point of pride -- by all accounts Waldorf teachers do spend considerable amounts of time talking with students and their parents.) For students, looping offers a base of support. "I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have a second mom," Ivi Esguerra, a recent graduate, told the audience at the Steiner School open house. "The caring went beyond the academics."

The downside of looping, however, is substantial. Although the task of preparing new lessons each day keeps material fresh for the teachers and students, it also restricts the teacher's ability to perfect given lessons with repetition. And conflict between teachers and students isn't always overcome; even when it is, tension can remain. "Our teacher was great," Ben Klocek, the recent Sacramento senior, told me. "But it was way too much. By the eighth grade you're completely sick of each other." Perhaps most important, the holes in a given instructor's teaching aren't always readily filled later. Scott Embrey-Stine, a Waldorf high school teacher in Sacramento, has spent most of his career in public schools, and has been impressed by the rare skills that Waldorf develops in students. Still, after two years at Waldorf, he says, he could identify the strengths and weaknesses in the lower-school teachers by the distinct character of each class. "You see the imprint of the class teacher," he says.

A Different Citizen

IN the end the measure of a school lies in the graduates it produces. The Waldorf record seems pretty impressive. Consider students' scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests. Despite Waldorf students' unfamiliarity with standardized

tests, their SAT scores have generally come in well above the national average, particularly on verbal measures. "The concepts, they've got," Kathleen O'Connor, who is the college counselor at the Washington Waldorf School, told me. "When they get direction on how to take multiple-choice tests, their scores soar." More important, considering the limited extent to which SATs measure ability, Waldorf students seem to do well in college admissions. Graduates from the New York and Washington schools are enrolled at many of the country's top private colleges, including Amherst, Stanford, Princeton, Swarthmore, Wellesley, and Yale.

Waldorf graduates have never been carefully tracked in this country; the only longitudinal study is a German survey, published in 1981, in which three independent researchers looked at 1,460 Waldorf graduates. They found that 22 percent had passed a rigorous German achievement test -- triple the rate for state-school students. Evidence here in the United States is anecdotal but encouraging. College professors who have had Waldorf graduates as students have been impressed with their humble confidence, passion for learning, and intellectual resourcefulness. And alumni rosters are replete with professional acclaim in fields as varied as industry and the arts, medicine and the military.

Still, a persistent fear about Waldorf schools is that their noncompetitive approach doesn't prepare students to fit in and succeed in a dog-eat-dog world -- a criticism that some Waldorf leaders acknowledge is sometimes justified. Indeed, many students choose demanding schools after leaving Waldorf precisely because they, or their parents, want more pressure and rigor in their lives. Karen Rivers, who talks frequently to worried parents in her role as a Waldorf consultant, thinks many miss the point. "We're not trying to teach them to fit in," she told me. "They already know how to fit in. We're trying to educate them to create a better world." But what about those who don't change the world -- who, like most people, don't even rise to the top? At a Steiner School alumni gathering in New York, Deborah Grace Winer, now a freelance writer, recalled that her mother always told her, "Life is not a horse race." Because someone will always beat you? I asked. "Yes," she answered. "And when someone does finally beat you, you have nothing."

Winer's comment reminded me of my visit to the Mathews School for juvenile offenders, where students begin each day already behind, with little of the foundation that Winer now has. A feel for music is but one example. "Our kids have no sense of rhythm," Evelyn Arcuri told me. As the students master a musical instrument, teachers say, their sense of rhythm grows. This seems to provide an anchor that strengthens their confidence in other work. "The recorders are just excellent," Thomas, the outgoing seventeen-year-old, told me. "It calms you down, helps you think better." Thomas was kicked out of his previous school for getting in fights. Now his grandmother says, "He's different when he's in that school. He doesn't come home as frustrated as he did." As I watched several students practice playing their recorders one morning, I understood what Thomas's grandmother meant.

When the students hit a difficult section, some gave up, and a few stomped out of the room. Most soon returned. "I screwed up too," the teacher told them, "but I don't let that stop me. Just play through. Persevere. That's what this is about." They tried again and then again, did better, smiled.

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