Assessment for Learning in Waldorf Classrooms

How Waldorf Teachers Measure Student Progress toward Lifelong Learning Goals: A Report from the Author

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This book, published by Academica Press, documents how nine Waldorf class teachers spanning grades three through seven prepared lessons and assessed their students' learning across several domains:

- Cognitive: for understanding of the material presented
- Affective and social: for the children's relationship to the lesson content and to each other in collaborative learning situations
- Psycho-motor: for their ability to respond in movement activities
- Aesthetic: for their effort in recording their work in writing and drawing.

The study, designed using qualitative research methods, took place in real time over five months in 2010. The teachers were asked to keep journals of their preparations, goals, and methods of assessment, as well as describe what evidence they were looking for to ascertain that their students were learning. We conducted weekly phone interviews to maintain an ongoing dialogue.

We used the qualitative methods described by Geertz (1934) as "thick description," analyzed the data using the method of coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), and adapted the grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2006) by using our knowledge of Waldorf education while remaining open to new insights and interpretation as we analyzed the data.

This study was conducted in hopes that it would be published in the mainstream of academia to provide a clear description of how Waldorf schools approach assessment without the use of standardized tests. We thought it would help other teachers and academics with an in-depth look at how Waldorf teachers conduct comprehensive assessments of their students and to point out that Waldorf schools, which have been in existence for over ninety years, have an international track record that can be useful for those who argue for more comprehensive, child-centric assessments in public school classrooms. Our wish was granted when Academica Press agreed to publish this study. Most of what is contained in this book is well known to Waldorf teachers.

The book begins by putting the study in the context of the current debate on education in the U.S., a country in the grip of the idea that the only way to assess student learning is by conducting standardized tests on a yearly basis beginning in third grade. These kinds of tests measure a limited set of knowledge of literacy and math skills in order to show whether schools are making annual yearly progress (AYP) as described in President George W. Bush's education policy "No Child Left Behind." Sanctions are put in place for schools that fail, and pressure is placed on schools—especially their teachers—to get their students to "perform." With President Obama's "Race to the Top" program, the competition for federal funds has increased and more pressure is put on schools to show AYP or risk being taken over by the state or simply shut down.

Two points of concern

What is not being discussed nationally is the fact that half of our nation's children live in poverty, and evidence shows that learning cannot occur if basic needs are not being met. (Maslow 1943; Ravitch 2010) Geoffrey Canada's "Harlem Children's Zone" is attempting to address these issues by providing "wrap-around services" for the children in his neighborhood. The services include medical and dental care,

meals, counseling, and afterschool programs for the children. Canada has engaged the community to provide services so the children will have their basic needs met. His theory is that they will be able to apply themselves to their education. The experiment is ongoing and has shown some promise.

The other consideration is the narrowing of the curriculum. The natural tendency to teach to the test in order to make AYP becomes the goal of learning in public schools. Daily schedules rotate around literacy skills and math in the elementary grades, with some science and social studies being offered when the students are not preparing for the tests. Many teachers also have to cram curriculum content in because they know it will be on the test. One teacher explained after the tests were over that she was "so happy to get back to the real teaching now—the fun part." (personal conversation, 2014)

What this research project affirms is that teachers using curriculum-embedded assignments give a real-time picture of what a student is learning. Curriculum-embedded means that students show what they have learned in the subject unit as taught by their teacher, either through work sheets, writing, tests, quizzes, or a portfolio of evidence. Until recently, this was considered common practice and is still used in public school classrooms for most of the year. The *emphasis* on high-stakes testing is what has changed. In an attempt to outperform their own students' scores in the prior year, public school teachers are under extreme pressure to have their current group score higher.

This points to another piece of questionable reasoning on the part of testing proponents, namely that there is too much "noise" in the data. Some psychomatricians would argue that there are too many variables affecting student performance to get reliable, valid information from the tests. In general, the assertion is that teachers in public schools have a different group of children every year, so they cannot measure those students again to see if their test scores have improved. The teacher receives a whole new set of students coming in at various levels of accomplishment, so her ability to raise test scores is dependent on the new incoming group, who may or may not be at the same level as the group she just passed to the next grade. The test scores can only be used as one indicator of a narrow measure of student achievement. There are still those who argue that we need a national snapshot of U.S. students in their skills and knowledge of Language Arts and Mathematics. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the merits of this idea.

What we show in this study is that it is still possible to assess student learning without the use of standardized tests. This is especially true in Waldorf schools where a child's progress is observed and recorded across several domains and multiple modalities. The teachers participating in the study were interested in all aspects of the child's progress and stated so in their preparation documents. Included were statements like "appreciation for" or "understanding of" a particular subject, which shows that the teacher is thinking about the student's engagement with the material and not only about skill mastery.

Teachers were also cognizant of detailing specific skills and knowledge gains, such as "will be able to make and read simple maps" or "form sentences with proper punctuation" or "memorize recited alliterations in poetry to develop speech capacities." The teachers were observing the children's physical development. One goal recorded was "that students improve in individual spatial orientation and physical coordination." All teachers reported assessing artistic engagement with the lesson content; specifically, one goal was to "learn new drawing techniques." (Ciborski & Ireland, p.74)

We also make the distinction in the study between popular rhetoric about the purpose of an education and what Waldorf teachers see as their reasons for educating students. The popular notion—that we are educating to "compete in the

global economy"—has been the cry of reformers most recently. Waldorf educators know that the purpose of an education is to prepare the students to find meaning and purpose in their lives, to become global citizens and have respect for all of humanity, and to be able to make informed and thoughtful decisions.

To that end, teachers reported assessing students in order to motivate them to further inquiry, to excite curiosity—to engage them with the material in a variety of ways and through many modalities in order to elicit questions and dialogue. This was especially true in the upper grades, where students are asked critical questions to spark dialogue and initiate thoughtful responses. One example from the Roman History block points out how the teacher expected the students to synthesize and analyze information in order to compare two ancient civilizations. "How was the expansion of Greece different than the expansion of Rome?" (Ciborski and Ireland, p.93)

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Another point of departure from the public school system is that in the early years of Waldorf schooling, no letter grades are given. The teachers stated clearly that giving letter grades to a third grader, for example, would ruin his enthusiasm for learning. Teachers in the upper grades typically gave quizzes and tests for several reasons: to further engage with the content of the lessons, to have the student see how well they grasped the lesson content, and for the teacher to see if there was any content that the class as a whole had not grasped. These assessments were always considered formative—that is, indicating the level of mastery at a given point in time. Even the end-of-block tests were considered formative since children are always growing and changing, and learning is never static.

The other consideration that is unique to Waldorf teachers is that they are with the students over several years and therefore are in a privileged position to assess whether a student has actually made progress in any given domain. Unlike their public school colleagues, Waldorf teachers have the luxury of watching their students develop over several years and can observe, record, and report progress in all domains and modalities. The teachers reported the arc of progress in our informal telephone conversations. They never considered their assessments or evaluations of a student's performance as "summative." In other words, there was never an endpoint; rather, the children were described as being in a state of "becoming"—always continuing to learn, grow, adapt, and advance in their cognitive, social, affective, physical, and aesthetic abilities and awareness.

Since we stated that none of the teachers used standardized tests and always created their own assessments, it became obvious that we needed to ask the question, "Can we trust the teachers?" This arose because of the public discussion about validity and reliability of anything other than standardized tests. We chose to think about this in another way. Like doctors or lawyers who have a specialized training in order to enter their profession, Waldorf teachers have a specialized training before entering the classroom. We interviewed instructors working in Waldorf teacher training institutes belonging to the Teacher Education Network (TEN) of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) and confirmed curriculum, entry, and graduation requirements for teacher preparation. We compared these to the Finnish school system, in which teachers are trusted as professionals and "local schools have autonomy and carry

responsibility for standards and assessments." (Ciborski and Ireland, 2015)

To satisfy the question about not using externally imposed standards, most Waldorf schools engage in an accreditation process through AWSNA and have written standards derived from the Stockmeyer curriculum, revised and adapted to the specifics of a particular school as needed by the teachers.

Further in the book we discuss what makes a good teacher. Our understanding aligns with current popular opinion that good teaching is the most critical factor in improving student learning. For good Waldorf teachers we include:

- Being dedicated to the profession, highly educated, and self-reflective
- Engaging in a rigorous system of peer evaluation
- Genuinely caring and respecting students
- Employing a curriculum that is age-appropriate and content-rich, addressing multiple intelligences and learning modalities
- Using a multiplicity of assessment tools to monitor the students' competence in all areas of development

An additional component is that the schools are self-governed and independent of government standards and regulations, so that teachers have the requisite autonomy to address the pedagogical needs of the children in their care. We found that the Waldorf teachers in our study met these criteria.

In conclusion, we found that the teachers in our study were conscientious about making assessments that were inclusive of all the domains—cognitive, affective, social, psycho-motor, and aesthetic—and went far beyond what is required of public school teachers. The teachers in our study noticed the unpredictable, non-measurable attributes in their students through extensive observations and long-term relationships with the children.

Because our study began at third grade, we suggest that further studies include how the early childhood educators and teachers in grades one and two assess their students. The early years in a Waldorf school deviate even more from public schools in which early academics and the pressure to perform are emphasized.

To complete the entire cycle of assessment in Waldorf schools, we could conclude with a study of assessment methods used in Waldorf high schools. There, an added focus would be on the college acceptance rates of Waldorf graduates and the types of colleges and universities they attend. This would complete the picture and further make the case that students can be assessed and accepted in colleges without heavy reliance on standardized testing. Following this would be another survey of Waldorf graduates to see how they are faring in a global economy, if they self-report being successful in their careers, and how they define success.

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