

The Remedial Staircase

A Holistic Approach to Remediating Reading Problems and Other Learning Disabilities

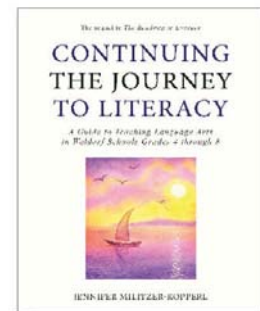
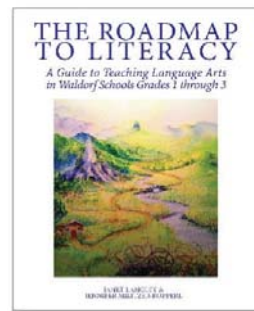
Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl

Something was clearly missing—the data did not make sense. Two remedial reading students with average intelligence and a diagnosis of dyslexia presented with nearly identical scores on a battery of tests that measure reading skills. Both students scored in the low range in all skills tested (less than 10th percentile). Both had undergone the same treatment to remediate weak reading skills (a six-week intensive remedial reading program). At the end, they were both retested. The first student's scores now ranked within the 50-80th percentile (average to above average), while the other student's scores remained virtually unchanged. Why did one remedial student make several years of academic progress in six weeks of intensive instruction while the other remedial student made no progress whatsoever? What were the tests missing?

This question was the genesis of my own personal journey that began twenty years ago. I left Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes®, a private remedial education company, to find out why remedial students have variable responses to treatment and what teachers can do to help.

The journey led me to Waldorf education, where I discovered the germ of an idea that could be used to transform remedial education; however, I also discovered that Rudolf Steiner's language arts curriculum, originally developed for the German language, was being used to teach English, with predictable results. Waldorf-Steiner schools that assessed all their students' reading skills were discovering that large percentages of students had gaps. In one area school, one third to one half of each class qualified for remedial reading instruction.

I co-authored a book to address the latter problem, *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3* (Langley and Militzer-Kopperl 2018, 2021), and then I authored its sequel, *Continuing the Journey to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 4 through 8* (Militzer-Kopperl 2020). These books are part of *Renewal of Literacy*, a program I created to improve language arts instruction in Waldorf schools. In both books, I included a chapter summarizing my research on remedial issues; the current article is based on that work.



I will summarize here my work on remedial issues and will include a foretaste of material to be published in the upcoming *Renewal of Literacy Edition of The Roadmap to Literacy* (due out end of 2021). In the following pages, I will explain what current academic assessments are missing and what can be done to help more remedial students. I will lay out the basis for a framework that teachers can use to bring the best of Waldorf education and the best of academic research into a living dialogue to spur further improvements in remedial education. In a nutshell, I recommend addressing learning disabilities such as reading problems by doing the following: 1) removing impediments; 2) strengthening capacities; 3) improving academic instruction; and 4) addressing the environment. A successful implementation of this frame work, I believe, will lead to fewer students qualifying for the label *learning disabled* and more students being able to take their place in the world as healthy, well-educated human beings.

The Case of Otto Specht

The Genesis of a Waldorf Approach to Remedial Students

Rudolf Steiner faced an unusual situation. As a tutor, he worked with four brothers, three of whom needed some preparatory instruction and assistance in school. The fourth brother, Steiner reports, was “so subnormal in his physical and mental development that the family had doubts as to his capacity for being educated.”¹ The boy's name was Otto Specht.

1. Rudolf Steiner, *The Story of My Life* (London: Anthroposophical Publishing, 1928), Chapter VI.

Steiner reports that Otto had had years of academic tutoring before Steiner worked with him, but the tutoring had not had an effect. Steiner took Otto's education in hand. He became solely responsible for educating the boy and lived with the Specht family.

Steiner concluded that Otto had great intellectual potential, but his faculties of soul were asleep, and he could not gain mastery over his body. Developmentally, Otto was at a preschool level. Steiner began a program to help him. He took great care in preparing Otto's academic lessons to awaken his capacities for thought, feeling, and will. Steiner spent two hours of preparation for each half hour of instruction in order not to strain Otto's mental and physical powers, so Otto would attain his highest capacity for academic achievement. Steiner reports that he won Otto's love so that the relationship between the two of them would help awaken Otto's sleeping faculties of feeling. In the course of his work with Otto, Steiner offered many suggestions to help address Otto's impediments.

The work paid off. Steiner reports, "I had the satisfaction of seeing the child in the course of two years accomplish the work of the *Volkschule*, and successfully pass the examination for entrance to the Gymnasium. Moreover, his physical condition had materially improved. The hydrocephalic condition was markedly diminishing."²

The case of Otto Specht is important because it illustrates a Waldorf-Steiner method of addressing learning problems:

1. Work at the student's developmental level. Otto's development was at a preschool level—hence, remedial instruction needed to begin there.
2. Strengthen capacities (of thinking, feeling, and willing). For example, Steiner made a point of gaining Otto's love and trust so that their relationship would educate Otto's capacity for feeling.
3. Provide appropriate academic instruction to bring the student's skills and knowledge up to grade level. Steiner took pains to prepare an academic curriculum specifically for Otto: he spent two hours of preparation for each 30 minutes of teaching. He also took great care in ordering the lessons. At the beginning of their work together, Steiner had to limit lessons to 15-30 minutes.
4. Improve the student's environment so that it does not undermine the remedial process. Steiner lived

with the Specht family when he was working remedially with Otto.

Following this protocol paid off handsomely for Otto. In two and a half years, Otto had progressed enough to do the work of grammar school, and his health improved. With regular academic tutoring, Otto was able to continue schooling—including attending a public school with other children. Through the remedial program Steiner created, Otto completely overcame his learning problems, studied medicine, and later took his place in life as a medical doctor.

Combining all of these four elements can be powerful. Teachers who do so are able to help a lot of students, just as Steiner helped Otto. However, it would help to flesh out this protocol. In the next section, I will describe the fruits of my own research to begin the creation of a framework Waldorf teachers can use when addressing the needs of remedial students.

The Remedial Staircase

A Framework for Working with Remedial Students

Otto Specht's story provides a partial answer to the question I posed at the beginning of the article: Why do some remedial students make several years of academic progress with structured, intensive, academic instruction while other remedial students make no progress at all?

The first part of the answer is simple: Students who have not completed key aspects of child development will continue to struggle with academic work. To help these students, it is necessary to go backwards as Steiner did with Otto, but where to begin?

Child development can be described as a staircase. Each step depends on the one before it. Academics depend on sensory-cognitive functions, capacities, and reflexes. Therefore, if a child is presenting with problems in academics, the preceding steps should be considered and any weaknesses addressed. Children climb up the staircase as they develop and begin school; therefore, teachers should ascend and descend the staircase looking for clues to students' learning challenges, as shown in figure 1.

² Ibid.

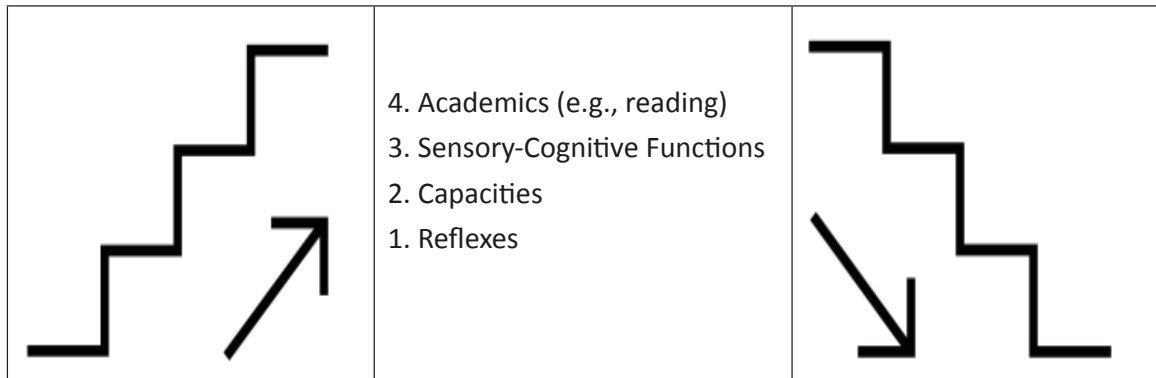


Figure 1: The Remedial Staircase

Each step is introduced below; advice for addressing each step is given later in the article.

Step One: Reflexes: “Reflexes, or *Early Movement Patterns*, as they are sometimes referred to in Waldorf schools, are a sequence of stereotypical movements that young children progress through in their first years of life. They provide the physical foundations for capacities (both physical and psychological).”³

Step Two: Capacities: “As the child is mastering her reflexes, she simultaneously begins to develop physical and psychological capacities. After the reflex work is finished at age three and a half, the child continues to develop these capacities in the following areas: 1) She is able to perform more difficult, coordinated movements like skipping or swinging a golf club. 2) She begins to strengthen her ability to pay attention and develop her imagination. 3) She matures in her understanding and utilization of the information gained from her senses. 4) She is able to cross the midline freely and develop dominance.”⁴ In other words, she develops her soul capacities of thinking, feeling, and willing and her ability to work with her senses.

Step Three: Sensory-Cognitive Functions: Sensory-cognitive functions first emerge as an aspect of physical and psychological capacities in preschool and kindergarten, but to develop fully, they require formal academic instruction. As shown in figure 2, there are three sensory-cognitive functions: 1) phonemic awareness; 2) symbol imagery; and 3) concept imagery.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to detect the individual phonemes, or sounds, in words and manipulate them. For students who do not have developmental dyslexia, phonemic awareness begins to develop as part of capacities. Its full development depends on academic education and makes further academic education possible (e.g., phonics instruction). How many sounds are in the word *cat*? (Three) What are they? (/k/ /a/ /t/) What happens if you remove the sound /k/? (The word becomes *at*.) These are aspects of phonemic awareness.

Symbol imagery is the ability to visualize letters and words. Close your eyes. Imagine the spelling of the word *cat*. If you can see the letters *CAT* or *cat*, you are using symbol imagery.



Figure 2: The Three Sensory-Cognitive Functions: Phonemic Awareness, Symbol Imagery, and Concept Imagery⁵

3 Langley and Militzer-Kopperl, *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3* (Maitland: Mill City Press, 2021), p. 545.

4 Ibid., p. 548.

5 Ibid., p. 168 (picture 2), p. 194 (picture 3).

Concept imagery is the ability to create a mental image on the basis of language. Close your eyes. Imagine a cat. If you see a furry mammal with whiskers, you are using concept imagery.

Note: The terms *symbol imagery* and *concept imagery* sometimes go by the umbrella term *mental picturing*; however, they are separate sensory-cognitive functions. Practice in one function does not cause concomitant growth in the other.

Step Four: Academics: Academics refer to any mental skill or subject a child learns in school (e.g., reading, math, history, science, etc.). For the purposes of this article, the term ‘academics’ will refer primarily to reading and its related skills; however, any skill or subject could be substituted in the Remedial Staircase.

The four steps of the Remedial Staircase comprise an important part of the remedial process, developed below. Before that, we must consider one final piece.

The Environment

A school in California was the source of a cancer cluster among faculty. Milham [a physician-epidemiologist who specializes in public health] was investigating the school to determine the cause. The school had numerous challenges, including fluorescent lighting, a cell tower adjacent to campus, and dirty electricity, a form of electromagnetic pollution that occurs when wires are carrying too high of a load. It was noted that the 4th Grade teacher complained that her students were hyperactive and unteachable.

Milham measured the 4th Grade classroom for dirty electricity. A safe reading is less than 50 Graham/Stetzer units. The 4th Grade classroom measured 5,000 Graham/Stetzer units.

Milham provided a simple environmental solution to address the dirty electricity (Stetzerizer filters). The dirty electricity levels dropped back to acceptable levels. Interestingly enough, there was a concomitant change in the students’ behavior. The 4th Grade class calmed down and could focus.

The teacher was curious. Were the filters responsible for this change? She unplugged them. Within 30–45 minutes, the students returned to their old ways: hyperactive and distracted. She re-plugged the filters back in. Sure enough, within 30–45 minutes, the students calmed down and focused again. Every time she removed the filters, the same thing happened. Removing the dirty electricity from the environment had a profound effect on the students’ ability to learn.⁶

The environment is the second half of the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article: Why do some remedial students make several years of academic progress with structured, intensive academic instruction while other remedial students make no progress at all? Environmental factors can also undermine a student’s success with a remedial program. Therefore, the Remedial Staircase needs to be amended to include the environment, as shown in figure 3 by the inclusion of the shaded background.

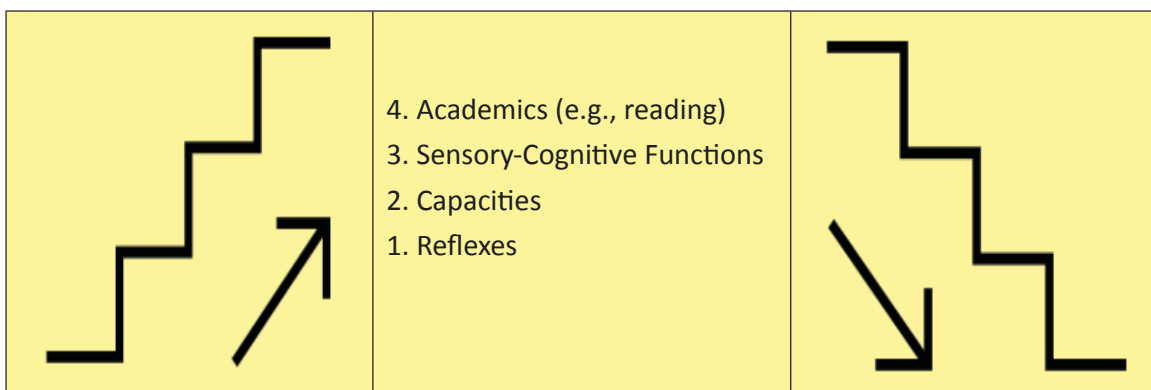


Figure 3: The Environment (shaded area) Impacts Every Step on the Remedial Staircase

The rest of this article, adapted from *The Roadmap to Literacy* and *Continuing the Journey to Literacy*, offers suggestions for how teachers can work with

remedial issues by using the Remedial Staircase and the environment. A few common issues will be pulled out to discuss separately.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 557–558.

Is a Remedial Response Necessary? What about Late Bloomers?

Mrs. Davidson was faced with a student who was not learning to read: Kurt. In first grade, she had concluded that Kurt was a late-bloomer and dreamy and had told his parents that Kurt just needed more time. It was the middle of second grade, and Kurt was still struggling with basic reading skills. Should Mrs. Davidson double down on her original position or question it?

Science has provided an answer to this question. An article from the American Federation of Teachers entitled, “Waiting Rarely Works: Late Bloomers Usually Just Wilt,” summarizes three studies:

In the simplest terms, these studies ask: Do struggling readers catch up? The data from the studies are clear: Late bloomers are rare; skill deficits are almost always what prevent children from blooming as readers. This research may be counter-intuitive to elementary teachers who have seen late-bloomers in their own classes or heard about them from colleagues. But statistically speaking, such students are rare. (Actually, as we’ll see, there is nearly a 90 percent chance that a poor reader in first grade will remain a poor reader.⁷)

In other words, most students who are failing to read at so-called grade level have not mastered the necessary academic skills. Giving these students more time to catch up just exacerbates the problem because skills build on top of each other. The longer teachers wait to intervene, the longer it will take to remediate the academics step of the Remedial Staircase. Furthermore, taking a wait-and-see approach just postpones work on lower step(s) if the root cause of the learning challenge is lower down on the Remedial Staircase. For these reasons, Mrs. Davidson is advised to question her position. What follows is a framework teachers can follow.

Things to Rule Out Before Beginning the Remedial Process

There are three areas to rule out before beginning the remedial process: 1) problems with instruction; 2) problems with the student’s eyesight; and 3) problems with the student’s hearing.

Problems with Instruction

A leading cause of learning problems in a Waldorf classroom is an insufficient language arts curriculum, and/or an insufficient amount of time to teach it.

First, review your language arts curriculum. The curriculum given by Rudolf Steiner is for a foreign language (German); consequently, it is a poor fit for English. English-speaking students need different instruction and more of it due to difference in the languages. I have explained the problem (English is not German) and outlined a language arts curriculum for grades 1–3 and grades 4–8 in the *Renewal of Literacy* books. Readers are encouraged to consult both books for information on how to teach language arts in English and to consult the *Renewal of Literacy Edition of The Roadmap to Literacy* when it comes out, as it will provide proof that the language arts curriculum contained therein aligns with Steiner’s indications.

Second, review the amount of time available to teach your language arts curriculum. A main lesson class in language arts should feature two full hours of instruction and follow up practice in skills, and there should be practice classes during the off blocks. If there is not enough time in your schedule to teach language arts skills and have students practice them, some students will fail to learn. This subset of students does not necessarily need a remedial program—just a more robust academic one.

Waldorf teachers are reminded that Steiner asks them to use soul economy (economy in teaching) when preparing a curriculum: two to three hours of concentrated preparation for each half hour of instruction. Steiner states, “The aim of Waldorf education is to arrange all of the teaching so that within the shortest possible time the maximum amount of material can be presented to students by the simplest means possible.”⁸

Problems with a Student’s Eyesight

There are three areas to consider:

1. **Glasses** Ask the student to read from the board and from a book in front of her. Try different sized fonts. Note any difficulties in reading and any signs that the student cannot see well (e.g., squinting, moving the book closer or further away, etc.).
2. **Vision Therapy** Sit in front of the student. Ask her to track your finger without moving her head. Slowly move your finger left to right, up and down, diagonally, and further and closer to the student’s nose. Note any difficulty the student has tracking your finger such as the following: eyes may jump ahead, lock in place, stutter, lag, etc. A student should have no problems tracking your finger. Refer student to a vision therapist for a full screening if the student struggles to do so.

⁷ American Federation of Teachers. “Waiting Rarely Works: Late Bloomers Usually Just Wilt.” *American Educator*: Fall 2004. <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/fall-2004/waiting-rarely-works-late-boomers-usually-just-wilt>

⁸ Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy: Body, Soul, and Spirit in Waldorf Education* (Anthroposophic Press, 2003), 118.

3. **Irlen Syndrome** This is a visual processing problem that causes difficulties in reading. Students afflicted by this syndrome have difficulty processing all the wavelengths in visible light. As a result, they see distortions when they look at text and/or experience physical fatigue and/or discomfort while reading. In general, 12–14% of the population tests positive for Irlen Syndrome, but the percentage jumps to 45% among students who have difficulty reading.⁹ It is relatively easy to address the problems created by this syndrome. A colored overlay reduces the symptoms of Irlen Syndrome for most students. Colored Overlays Sample Pack of 10 can be purchased at the following address: <https://irlen.mybigcommerce.com/colored-overlays/>.

If you suspect Irlen Syndrome, do a quick screening by asking the students to try different colored overlays to see if any make it easier to read. If so, let the student pick the color that works best and get her an overlay for reading. Ask parents to follow up with an Irlen specialist, provided there is one in your area, for a diagnosis and other treatment options, such as Irlen lenses. Just as glasses prescriptions change as students mature, so too can the preferred color. Reassess every 1–2 years.

Problems with a Student's Hearing

1. Screen a student informally: Sit behind the student. Ask her to repeat nonsense words. If she struggles, try the same list again but this time facing the student so she can see your lips. Refer to a professional for a hearing assessment and consider dyslexia.
2. Set the student in the front row and insist the class be quiet when you are presenting information so this student will hear better.

Address these three factors first and then continue to the next section, remediating environmental factors, if the learning problem is not resolved.

Remediating Environmental Factors

Once you have ruled out common problems with the senses and reading problems persist, it is time to consider a remedial program. Begin by considering environmental factors, as these may be the sole cause of learning problems or a contributing factor, and keep them in mind at each step of the Remedial Staircase. There are four areas to consider: 1) Maslow's Expanded Hierarchy of Needs; 2) Simplicity Parenting; 3) Electromagnetic Pollution; and 4) Screen Technology.

Maslow's Expanded Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Expanded Hierarchy of Needs is a useful tool for identifying environmental factors that can undermine education. An excerpt with examples is shown in table 1.

Maslow's Expanded Hierarchy of Needs	Sample Consequence to Students
Biological and Physiological Needs (e.g., food, water, sleep, etc.)	Academic instruction will not register until basic needs are met.
Safety Needs (e.g., security, order, stability)	The student will focus on the danger at hand rather than the lesson.
Love and Belongingness Needs (e.g., friendship, acceptance, etc.)	The student is able to function academically but will be a drag on self and others.
Esteem Needs (e.g., self-esteem, achievement, mastery)	The student is able to function in the classroom but has a chip on her shoulders and may lie about her work.
Cognitive Needs (knowledge and understanding, curiosity)	This is the optimal level for students in school.

Table 1: Excerpt of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Effects on Education¹⁰

⁹ Helen Irlen, *The Irlen Revolution: A Guide to Changing Your Perception and Your Life* (Garden City Park: Square One Publisher, 2010), pp. 75, 77.

¹⁰ Langley and Millitzer-Kopperl, p. 542.

Address any unmet needs in the first four levels so students can focus on cognitive needs in class. Involve the parents as the home environment affects students even more than the school environment.

Simplicity Parenting

Simplicity Parenting is a program by Kim John Payne, M.Ed. It reduces environmental stress on the child. Payne suggests that students who qualify for diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) are often just sensitive children who are so stressed by their environments that their quirks become illnesses. When the stress is removed or reduced, they no longer qualify for such a diagnosis. Payne's program targets four areas for simplification: 1) environment; 2) rhythm; 3) schedule; and 4) filtering out the adult world.

In his book, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids*, Payne walks parents through ways they can simplify any or all four areas. Payne has found that up to two-thirds of children who undergo Simplicity Parenting no longer qualify for a diagnosis after completing the program.¹¹ In other words, once the environmental stress(es) are removed and their environment made more child appropriate, many students no longer need medication or therapy.

Waldorf teachers and schools can work with Simplicity Parenting. Some have formed book study groups and parental support groups. There are also Simplicity Parenting family life coaches available. Teachers can refer interested parents to the following website: <https://www.simplicityparenting.com/the-movement-an-overview/parent-groups/>.

Electromagnetic Pollution

Electromagnetic pollution is an environmental factor that can compromise every level of the Remedial Staircase. It is generated by modern technology including cell phones, cell towers, Wi-Fi, smart meters, devices wired for the Internet, faulty wiring, overhead power lines, etc. Electromagnetic pollution comes in many forms, including dirty electricity (i.e., high voltage transients that result when power lines are carrying too high a load) and electrosmog. Unlike other polluting smog, this type of environmental pollution cannot be seen, but it is ubiquitous in modern environments.

Waldorf teachers can study the book, *Zapped: Why Your Cell Phone Shouldn't Be Your Alarm Clock and 1,268 Ways to Outsmart the Hazards of Electronic Pollution*,

to learn more about the subject. Chapter nine "Zap-Proof Your Kids" offers usable suggestions.

If a student is struggling to learn, there is a protocol parents can follow to see if electromagnetic pollution is a factor, written by Katie Singer who studies the harmful effect of advanced technology. The protocol, entitled "Calming Behavior in Children with Autism and ADHD: The Electromagnetic Radiation (EMR)-Lowering Protocol," can be downloaded at <https://www.electronicshiltspring.com/calming-behavior/>. Despite the title, it can be applied to students with any type of learning or behavioral challenge.

Screen Technology

Amanda's challenges were odd. With a tested IQ in the 120s, Amanda was not a typical student who needed tutoring. She was also popular with her peers, a group of eighth-grade Waldorf girls who had just adopted a new form of communication with a brand-new technology: texting with smart phones. However, Amanda had suddenly developed memory trouble, and it was starting to affect her schoolwork and her social life. "I literally can't remember what someone just said," Amanda stated. What was the source of her problem?

A visit to Amanda's house revealed that she slept with several electronic devices under her pillow—an iPod and her new smart phone. She was using both in bed when she was supposed to be asleep. Amanda's nocturnal use of screen technology was causing her to miss out on much needed sleep; consequently, she was having short-term and long-term memory problems.¹²

As it turns out, interfering with sleep was only one of the ways Amanda's use of screen technology was undermining her education. Television, movies, cell phones, tablets, and computers all have an effect on a child's ability to learn. In *Continuing the Journey to Literacy*, I devote an entire chapter, "The Anti-Language Arts Curriculum: Screen Technology" (pp. 852–877), to the effects of screen technology. Teachers are encouraged to read, so they could better educate parents on this topic.

In addition to addressing the environment, it is often necessary to remediate the steps of the Remedial Staircase.

Remediating Reflexes

The first step on the Remedial Staircase calls for remediating reflexes. Reflexes come in several types. Problems in the classroom result when primitive

¹¹ Kim John Payne, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), p. 28.

¹² Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl, *Continuing the Journey to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 4 through 8* (2020), p. 849.

reflexes are not inhibited and/or postural reflexes are underdeveloped.

Primitive reflexes are movement patterns a baby is born with that help protect the baby and help it develop its muscles and senses. The grasp reflex is an example: if you put your finger in a baby's palm, the grasp reflex is triggered, and the baby will hold on to your finger with enough strength that you can lift her off the ground. If this reflex is not inhibited, it will prevent a school-aged child from holding a pencil correctly. Primitive reflexes are inhibited around the age of six months to one year.

Postural reflexes emerge when the primitive reflexes are inhibited, and they support conscious movement. They help coordinate the muscles so a child can sit, stand, skip, play, etc. They should be completely developed by the age of three and a half years. If they are not fully developed, a child will struggle.

In the classroom, typical reflex problems are manifested in students who have difficulty sitting at their desks, paying attention, and/or holding their pencils correctly. These students must exert extra effort to overcome the effects of their reflex problems. In addition, there is a correlation between retained primitive reflexes and underdeveloped postural reflexes and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Many learning problems are reduced when reflexes are addressed.

The best time to address reflex problems is early childhood. Waldorf schools can encourage their early childhood teachers to work with reflexes. AWSNA has a wonderful book called *Developing the Observing Eye: Teacher Observation and Assessment in Early Childhood Education* by Cynthia Murphy-Lang. It has more information on the subject and has developmentally appropriate assessments early childhood teachers can use.

Waldorf grades teachers can work with reflexes too. Sally Goddard Blythe has a series of exercises called "Early Morning by the Pond," in the book *The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning* (2005 edition, pp. 205–237). The exercises consist of images and developmental movements that can be done with students.

Note that environmental factors can cause reflex problems to re-emerge or not resolve. Primitive reflexes can re-emerge later in life if a person is threatened, and electromagnetic pollution can trigger the re-emergence of reflexes in some individuals. Therefore, it is wise to address the environment before working with reflexes.

If reflex issues are quite pronounced and/or are not responding to intervention in school, refer students to professionals. Some Extra Lesson practitioners have training in this area, as do some occupational therapists.

Bear in mind that the zoo exercises are not recommended for reflex remediation because they are not presented in a developmental sequence. They are, however, useful at the next step.

Remediating Physical and Psychological Capacities

The second step on the Remedial Staircase focuses on physical and psychological capacities. These include movement, attention, and the soul capacities—thinking, feeling, and willing. Once reflexes are addressed and determined to be functioning as they should, it is desirable to address any deficits in capacities that can undermine learning. They include but are not limited to 1) movement; 2) psychological issues; and 3) sensory integration.

Movement

There are many movement programs available for class teachers. A short list includes:

- *Take Time/Move in Time* from the book *Take Time: Movement Exercises for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists of Children with Difficulties in Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Spelling* by Mary Nash-Wortham and Jean Hunt.
- Bal-A-Vis-X is a series of rhythmic balance, auditory, and vision exercises for brain and body integration invented by Bill Hubert. They are similar to *Take Time* but include more challenging exercises that can be done with sandbags and/or racquet balls and exercised either alone or with partners. For more information, see <http://www.bal-a-vis-x.com/>.
- Zoo Exercises are a series of exercises included in some Waldorf teacher training programs. They can be useful in the classroom setting.

Psychological Issues

Psychological issues impact classroom success, but it is not advisable for a class teacher to work with psychological issues. Teachers are advised to refer students to appropriate professionals.

Sensory Integration

Minor problems with sensory integration can be addressed through some movement programs such as Bal-A-Vis-X, but students with more severe sensory integration problems should see a professional.

Remediating Sensory-Cognitive Functions

Sensory-cognitive functions are the third step on the Remedial Staircase.

Sensory-cognitive functions are the meeting point of child development and academic work. These functions

start to develop on their own as part of child development but require academic training to reach their full potential. The sensory-cognitive functions then support further academics. For example, children without developmental dyslexia begin to develop phonemic awareness around age four or five when they begin to rhyme words; however, full development of phonemic awareness depends on education. Introducing the letters of the alphabet is the primary way to bring children's awareness to the level of the phoneme or individual speech sound. For example, once students learn that the letter *B* has the sound /b/ as in *bear*, they can become aware that the sound /b/ is in other words, too: butterfly, bath, tub, bib, bulb, etc. As they learn the letters and sounds, they can then be taught to segment words down into their individual sounds and discover that *cat* has three sounds: /k/ /a/ /t/.

All teachers in grades 1–3 should teach the sensory-cognitive functions as part of teaching academic work. Direct instruction improves students' capacities for thinking and makes it easier for students to learn academic skills.

Providing information on how to teach each sensory-cognitive function is outside the scope of this article: it would take a separate article for each function to do justice to the topic. However, the information is already written and available in *The Roadmap to Literacy*. I wrote a chapter on how to teach each of these sensory-cognitive functions based on my work at Lindamood-Bell (1999–2001) and tutoring Waldorf students from 2005–2015. Consult the following chapters in *The Roadmap to Literacy* (Langley and Miltzer-Kopperl, 2021):

- Chapter 3.3: Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: The Key to Encoding and Decoding
- Chapter 3.5: Symbol Imagery: The Key to Sight Words
- Chapter 3.7: Concept Imagery: The Key to Comprehension

Teachers who provide direct instruction in sensory-cognitive functions will discover that their students learn basic literacy skills more quickly and easily.

Remediating Literacy Instruction

The fourth and final step on the Remedial Staircase deals with academics (in this case, literacy instruction).

Instruction for children who are at risk of reading failure needs to be different from the instruction provided to the full class. Joseph Torgesen has identified three key components in his article, "Avoiding the Devastating Downward Spiral: The Evidence that Early Intervention

Prevents Reading Failure."¹³ They are: 1) strong core classroom instruction; 2) screening [assessment] to identify children at risk of reading failure; and 3) appropriate—and extra—instruction that matches at-risk students' needs.

Strong Core Classroom Instruction

Research has discovered an important truth: a handful of early reading skills are critical if students are to master reading. If a student is not learning in class, it is time to consider explicit teaching of key skills. The critical components are as follows:

- Phonemic awareness
- Decoding skills
- Fluency in word recognition
- Fluency in text processing
- Reading comprehension strategies
- Vocabulary (oral language)
- Spelling skills
- Writing skills

Screening [Assessment] to Identify Children at Risk of Reading Failure

A 3rd Grade teacher was asked by her new mentor for her student tracking forms, so that she could get an idea of the progress her third graders were making in language arts and math. The teacher informed her mentor that she did not need to give planned assessments or officially record student progress because she had been with these students for almost three years and knew where each student was in each academic area.

The mentor decided to explore the accuracy of this approach to find out if it was truly as effective as the teacher thought. . . .

After spending some time with one of the class's reading groups, the mentor . . . discovered two students who still had not developed full phonemic awareness or decoding skills. . . . These two students easily read grade-level texts because of their strong visual memories (symbol imagery), but they had no decoding skills when it came to sounding out a word they had never seen. These deficits came as a surprise to the teacher. Initially, she had indicated that they were two of her best readers. She had no idea that they had not developed two core reading skills and were thus in danger

13 Joseph K. Torgesen, "Avoiding the Devastating Downward Spiral: The Evidence that Early Intervention Prevents Reading Failure", *American Educator*: Fall 2004. (The American Federation of Teachers. <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/fall-2004/avoiding-devastating-downward-spiral>)

of needing reading remediation in the upcoming grades.¹⁴

Teachers will not necessarily know which students are at risk unless they assess the class's learning. There are many assessments created by educational testing groups available on the market. These assessments allow teachers to determine which students have learned which skills. Some of the important skills to assess are:

- Letter-name knowledge
- Phonemic awareness
- Letter-sound knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Word-level reading
- Oral reading
- Comprehension

These assessments are administered individually and are not group-administered standardized tests. Screening assessments are brief, often just 5–10 minutes per student. They are administered several times a year, initially for screening and then for progress monitoring, to determine which students need extra help and to check that no students are falling behind.

Note: A few assessments that are recommended in *The Roadmap to Literacy* include: 1) *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures for Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade, 2nd Edition or higher* (CORE); 2) *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS); and 3) AIMSweb. However, these assessment tools need to be modified for off-grade use for Waldorf schools to accommodate the fact that Waldorf students begin reading instruction in first grade, not kindergarten, yet are expected to be caught up by the end of third grade. Modifications for *Assessing Reading Multiple Measures* are included in *The Roadmap to Literacy*, and modification for DIBELS will be included in *The Roadmap to Literacy Renewal of Literacy Edition*, which is coming out late in 2021 or 2022.

Appropriate—and Extra—Instruction that Matches At-Risk Students' Needs

Teachers then use the assessments to direct extra resources to the students who need the most help. A good way to deliver this instruction is in small groups of children with comparable skill levels and needs. Keep in mind three points:

- **Explicit:** Instruction for this group must be more explicit than for the other students. Teachers cannot leave anything to chance.

- **Intensive:** Instruction must be more intensive than for other students. It is good to meet with intensive groups 20–45 minutes per day, 4–5 days per week.
- **Supportive:** Instruction must be more supportive than for other students. In addition to providing positive emotional feedback, scaffold the instruction so that skills build very gradually and provide a dialogue between teacher and students to show the students what they are doing wrong and to help them get to the right answer.

When taught in this manner, many struggling students get the instruction they need to master academic skills, and the rate of students who learn to read proficiently increases.

Waldorf Remedial Therapies

A middle school student had dysgraphia, a condition that made it difficult for him to use a pen or pencil to write. It was so severe that his mother had taken him out of school and had been home-schooling him for years. He dictated all of his schoolwork to her. The arrangement worked well initially, but it was becoming more onerous with each school year. The boy's workload increased, and his mother had other children who needed her attention.

The student began Therapeutic Eurythmy to address the dysgraphia. One day, his mother was taking dictation for an essay when she was interrupted by a household emergency. She came back a few minutes later to find her son busily writing the rest of the essay himself. He looked up and said, "I couldn't wait for you any longer." Dysgraphia resolved, he was able to return to the classroom.¹⁵

If a student is still struggling despite the teacher's work with the Remedial Staircase, there are several Waldorf remedial therapies/processes that a class teacher can refer students to. They include: 1) Extra Lesson; 2) Therapeutic Eurythmy; and 3) Child Study.

Extra Lesson

Extra Lesson is a therapeutic approach to address learning difficulties that was developed in the 1940s by Waldorf educator Audrey McAllen. It includes movement exercises, speech exercises, form drawing, bean bag exercises, painting exercises, and more, aiming to address imbalances that can compromise learning. This should only be done with a trained Extra Lesson practitioner.

14 Langley and Militzer-Kopperl, p. 476.

15 Ibid., p. 536.

Therapeutic Eurythmy

Therapeutic Eurythmy is a therapy to address developmental and learning challenges along with other conditions. It is prescribed by an Anthroposophical doctor and must be done with a trained Therapeutic Eurythmist.

Child Study

Child study is a Waldorf protocol for helping students when the class teacher has exhausted her resources. For more information, consult Christof Wiechert's book, *Solving the Riddle of the Child: The Art of the Child Study*.

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What to Do if All Else Fails

When a student's problems cannot be resolved through other means, it is time to consider a formal diagnosis of a learning disability, so that the student can receive appropriate support. Waldorf teachers are advised to refer the student for an IEP (Individualized Education Program) through the public school system. This process will include diagnostic testing to look for learning disabilities. Students who qualify will then be eligible to receive specialized instruction and/or therapies through the public school.

Conclusion

Steiner's work with the remedial student Otto Specht and information from the remedial chapters in the *Renewal of Literacy* books provide a Remedial Staircase, or a framework teachers can use to work with students with remedial needs. In addition, the environment in which learning takes place could often be a wild card that can undermine an otherwise successful remedial program. Teachers and schools that use the Remedial Staircase protocol and consider environmental challenges will be able to address some common causes of learning challenges and will help many students, just as Steiner helped Otto Specht. As Steiner says, "If you look without prejudice, every child is a riddle waiting to be solved, particularly for educators."¹⁶ This article aimed to help Waldorf educators address the mystery of the struggling student and to provide a framework for other remedial researchers to build upon.

16 Rudolf Steiner, *The Renewal of Education* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2001), p. 123.