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Where Creativity Flows

By: Kathryn Boughton

For decades Americans have wrung their hands over the state of the nation's educational system. The tense environment of the Cold War era led to the first real angst as Sputnik soared into the heavens and Americans belief in their innate superiority plummeted. How, they wailed, could Russia have outstripped us in science and math to beat us into space?

Since those grim years, reform after educational reform has been launched, but always the emphasis has been on technical, measurable achievement within our schools. As late as 2005, Fortune magazine reported that China had produced 600,000 engineers, India 350,000 and the United States only 70,000. These figures were later disproved by a Duke University study that showed the U.S. training more engineers per capita than either of the other two countries, but the first impression lingered, helping to spur even greater concern about the United States' position in the competitive global economy. In this nervous atmosphere, creativity in the arts has been viewed as a pleasant diversion for students, easily cut in times of economic contraction. Despite studies showing that students who study artistic disciplines perform higher in academics, the emphasis has continued to be on standardized achievements measured through regularly administered tests. No Child Left Behind is meant to assure us that all our children will be ready to take on an increasingly complex world.

How then does one integrate the kind of education students encounter in alternate learning environments into the overall picture of educational success (or failure)? Why do home-schooled children often far exceed the minimum standards set for public school performance? And how do independent schools, such as those offering a Waldorf education, where creativity is a cornerstone, produce so many exemplary students?

Indeed, Waldorf schools seem to take a leisurely approach to educating students in a world gone mad for early productivity. Current mainstream pedagogical methods call for reading readiness beginning in preschool, for 3- to 5-year-olds. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "School readiness is a goal around which the entire nation has enthusiastically rallied. ... [But] many young children are still entering kindergarten without the prerequisite language, cognitive, and early reading and writing skills they need in order to benefit fully from early formal reading instruction."

By contrast, while mainstream students are learning their letters in kindergarten, Waldorf schools [also known as Steiner schools] approach learning in early childhood through imitation and example. Oral language development is addressed through songs, poems and movement games and teachers tell daily stories, usually fairytales recited without a written text. Extensive time is given for guided free play in a classroom environment that is homelike and includes natural materials.

These young scholars, nudged along the path of knowledge through individual exploration, sometimes are not reading fluently by the third grade, but that lag is not viewed with alarm. They seem to later catch up with and often surpass to their mainstream counterparts, becoming voracious consumers of the written word.

"The Waldorf schools see education in three stages," said Steve Sagarin, faculty chairman of the Great Barrington (Mass.) Waldorf High School. "Up to first grade, the kids play, take walks in the woods, cut carrots and make soup. There are no desks and they learn by doing."

Things become only slightly more regularized around the age of 7. "From grades one through eight, they learn 'through the heart,'" continued Mr. Sagarin. "This is where people get the 'soft and warm, but perhaps not rigorous' image many people have of Waldorf schools. But we feel that students will learn best through their interests. They do have desks and classes, but the single most important difference between a Waldorf school and most schools is that in public schools creativity is seen as something extra-an add-on if the budget allows. At Waldorf schools, we believe humans are innately creative and that underlies not only what we teach but how we teach it. That doesn't mean that there is a lot of art, but our approach is that human beings, in general, are creative."

For instance, young learners are guided into writing through art. Instead of phonetics, they naturally assimilate the sounds of letters through visual means-they might start to learn the letter "f" by drawing a fish. Then the fish stands upright on its tail. In a third drawing, the fish might bend its head and extend its fins, assuming an image very much like the lower-case letter.

The third stage of a Waldorf education is more intense. "High school is where it becomes intellectually rigorous," Mr. Sagarin explained.

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"In high school, they are learning by thinking. We have thought out our methods year by year, so that in ninth grade, they learn by observation and description. They have to remove their subjective feelings from their observations. In 10th grade, it's more the idea of comparison, while in 11th grade they get into analysis of what they have observed. They break [a problem or issue] down into parts, look at the structure, and try to find meaning. Then, in 12th grade, we work hard on synthesis, at genuine research-how do they find an answer that is meaningful."

Mr. Sagarin, himself a product of a Waldorf education and a graduate of Princeton, said he believes this method produces independent thinkers. "I have seen a large number of people who claim training in critical thinking," he said. "They have the critical tools, but no grist for the mill. To criticize something, you should first understand it."

Similarly, those verbal skills that started out so laconically in kindergarten are honed over the course of the student's exposure to the Waldorf method. "My view is that by the time you finish eighth grade you should be able to write a perfect declarative sentence," he said. "I really stress that-that you start as the best writer you can be and then become more facile. The ninth and 10th grades are about writing well and in the 11th and 12th grades you find their own voice."

Waldorf schools were started by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919 for workers's children at a Waldorf cigarette factory. When the schools came to America, many objected to them being named after a cigarette factory and thus many of the facilities became known as Steiner's schools, named after the founder, an Austrian philosopher, scholar, educator, artist, playwright and social thinker. Today the names are interchangeable.

This Austrian paragon created his educational paradigm to integrate practical, artistic, and intellectual elements into the teaching of all subjects. Steiner advocated ethical individualism with a strong spiritual base, although his schools are nondemoninational and nonsectarian.

"We want our kids to go out and save the planet," said Mr. Sagarin, "but at their age that is a little premature-so every day they clean the building. They have to take responsibility for it. We have no vandalism, no graffiti-and if we do, the other students take care of it."

There is no handbook or set of rules for Waldorf schools, only suggestions from Steiner. Each school is established independently by parents and teachers, and is self-governing, although there is an association, AWSNA (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America). The Great Barrington Waldorf High School is an outgrowth of the three-decade-old Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School. It opened its doors in 2002 with 13 students in ninth grade, two teachers and a half-time administrator, a core faculty supplemented by several adjunct teachers.

The school was originally located in a classroom at the Steiner elementary school. That arrangement continued into the second year when a 10th grade was added. The high school was officially incorporated in December 2003 and that same year a search for a separate location for the school bore fruit when a "friend of a friend" led school administrators to the Christian Science Church in Great Barrington, where the second floor was rented.

The second floor of the Victorian-Gothic stone building is dedicated to the high school, but the church allows it use of additional spaces during the week. Just before classes resumed this year, the four rooms on second floor were sparkling under fresh paint that had been applied by students and parent volunteers-the big room, where Spanish and German classes meet, warm in shades of peach and orange; the computer room a soothing blue. Math, English and other classes are taught in the other two second-floor rooms, while student assemblies take place in the church sanctuary on the first floor. Overflow classes are held in a church schoolroom in the basement and a new photography lab is being created in yet another basement room. The students journey off-campus for specialty classes, using science labs, the library and athletic fields at Simon's Rock preparatory school and visiting artists' studios for art classes.

While many American schools worry about the ratio of students to teachers, Mr. Sagarin said the Great Barrington Waldorf School has more teachers than students. "We don't have one art teacher, we have a dozen," he said of the area artists who host the students in their studios. The school now has a core faculty of seven teachers with Mr. Sagarin as the only full-time teacher/administrator. Some of the teaching staff is shared with the Steiner elementary school, while other teachers are retired educators who work halftime at the facility. The curriculum includes humanities, sciences, mathematics, arts, crafts, performing arts, physical education and foreign languages. Many classes are combined, so there are enough students in each area to supply good competition and a chance for social exchanges. Community service is required of all students, and juniors have a weeklong internship in the spring, either locally, in New York City or, in one case last year, Los Angeles.

Mr. Sagarin said that the students help to form the curriculum. The photography lab is the outgrowth of student interest and is being built by volunteers. "We will set it up for about \$1,000, and that is good because we have no money," quipped Mr. Sagarin.

A regular student forum is held during which students are allowed to express their views. "The teachers are in charge," Mr. Sagarin said, "but you can't disrespect the students. The students don't run the school, but they are given a voice."

He said the school staff hears "over and over again how polite and well-behaved our students are."

"We have an honor code," the faculty chairman said. "We don't try to impose it on our students, but if they are treated with respect and dignity, they are more likely to respond with respect and dignity. Many of the teachers say they are impressed with how engaged the students become in their classes."

The students are being prepared "for the best colleges," Mr. Sagarin said, but some students are admitted who are not as academically gifted. "I believe we can set high academic standards and still include students who are not as academically gifted," he said. "A less gifted student might not do the language courses, for instance, and use that time for English and math."

He said the student body is evenly divided between male and female students, with about 80 percent of the first students coming from the Steiner elementary school. That percentage is dropping with perhaps 60 to 70 percent of incoming students being Steiner graduates.

"Some of our students have been home schooled," Mr. Sagarin explained, "and others are coming from public high schools or other prep schools who want a different educational experience. We have had three or four students who had never been in a Waldorf school who came and saw our school and thought it might be interesting. I think they were surprised that they can like school. By the end of October they were as engaged as any of our other students and not as worried about being 'cool.' One girl said she was working less and learning more. I liked that-I don't believe in working for work's sake."

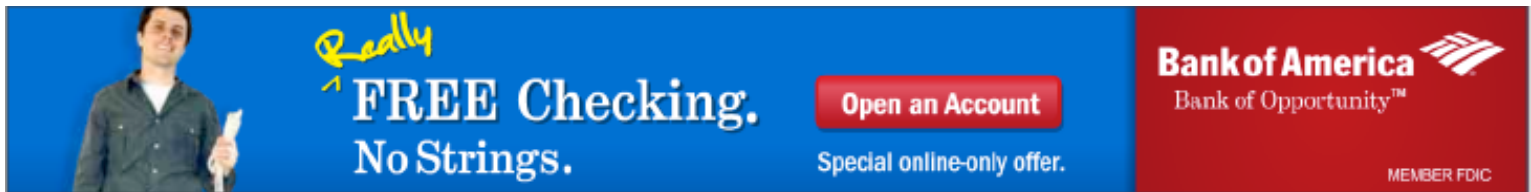
The school has graduated its first senior class and is still growing, but Mr. Sagarin does not necessarily want a surge in attendance. "We will have eighteen students this year," he said. "I would eventually like four classes of eight-25 students will be our break even point. Successful Waldorf schools have fewer than 60 students or more than 120-in between is deadly ground [where you have to add facilities and staff, but don't have enough income to pay for it.] Under 60, it is the educational equivalent of locally grown produce while over 120 it's like agri-business."

Tuition for the 2007-2008 school year is \$12,100. "But," Mr. Sagarin stressed, "we won't turn anyone away for inability to pay; everyone at the school pays what they can. We have no tuition remission for teachers' kids, for example. We need money and we need students, but we don't want to educate only children of wealthy persons!"

The intimate little school is highly mobile because of its small class sizes. All the students can be transported to Simon's Rock and other sites in one van. In 2004 the ninth and 10th-grade students from both the German and Spanish language classes went abroad in the a foreign exchange program-the German students to Munich and the Spanish students to Peru for three weeks. They attended Waldorf schools in the respective countries and the Peruvian group worked on a community service project for women and children and trekked to Machu Picchu. The trips were financed through student fund-raising, a grant from the Berkshire-Taconic Foundation and the German government.

The exchange program has continued with Peruvian and German students visiting Great Barrington and the American students going abroad.

Mr. Sagarin sees these international exchanges as well as the ideas explored in his little school as vital to the future of the world. "We live in a world where people's minds objectify things," he said. "We are threatened by fundamentalism and a world that is fragmented. Kids need a school that will help them not just live in a world that's fragmented, but to live in that world and make it better. Our goal is to graduate students each year who are more ethical, who are the new humanists."



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