

# Waldorf Education

Information presented by the Southern African Federation of Waldorf Schools

*"Education and development are seeds one to the other: the key is the humanisation of schools and the development of a comprehensive curriculum based on the worth of the whole individual."*

Steve Biko

## **Educating the whole child towards creative responsibility**

**E**ducation is a burning issue today. The well-being of our children and the health of our societies are greatly influenced by our schools. A child's development must be carefully and lovingly guided if he or she is to have a firm foundation for becoming socially balanced and productive. We cannot know the demands which the future will place upon our children, but it is clear that inner strength, intellectual flexibility, empathy and sound independent judgement will be qualities vital to their future. Rudolf Steiner's insight into child development enabled him to indicate ways in which Waldorf Schools can methodically work to develop these qualities.

### **The Curriculum**

The curriculum is designed with the growing child in mind. Year by year, following the developmental stages of childhood, the curriculum mirrors the inner development of the child and seeks to give the child experiences that they are unconsciously yearning for. This makes the lessons naturally relevant and satisfying.

All the important areas offered in conventional schools are taught - with an approach carefully developed for each age, but the timing might be different. The breadth of the curriculum is a unique aspect of Waldorf Education and the material covered is used as an integrated whole with one part always enhancing another.

### **The Pre-Primary School: A Time For Imitation And Play**



Young children live in a rich world of play and discovery. They are completely open and deeply influenced by all that surrounds them. What they see and hear they imitate; unconscious imitation is the natural mode of learning for the Pre-School child. Everything around the child is absorbed by the still forming organism. Accordingly, the nursery school is a world of harmony, beauty and warmth. The teachers themselves, in their attitudes, feelings and actions, strive to be worthy of the children's unquestioning imitation.

In this secure and intimate environment, the children learn about themselves and their world. Their days are filled with artistic and practical work, imaginative play and fairy tales, puppetry and music, circle games and healthy outdoor play.

Toys in the nursery are made from nature's gifts: wood, sea shells, stones, pine cones, lamb's wool. The simpler the toys the more active can the children's imagination be - and so is the ground better prepared for a fertile mind.

Formal intellectual schooling is quite purposely excluded from the Nursery. With an active imagination, energetic physical development, and a true reverence for the world, children are best prepared for the challenges of Primary School and later life.

## **The Primary School: A Time for Imagination And Caring Authority**

As the child enters Primary School, the earlier stage of imitation expands into a need for applied learning and a guiding authority. The class teacher should become the beloved, respected, and readily accepted representative of the world. In Waldorf schools the class teacher moves with his or her class right through the Primary School. Through this a deeper understanding develops between the pupils and their teacher. This secure continuity enhances the children's learning. Throughout the years the class teacher and the parents form a co-operative relationship centred around the growing child.



The school day begins with a lively two hour Main Lesson which concentrates on one subject for a period of three to four weeks. This is an economical method of teaching. The uninterrupted focus on a theme enables the children to immerse themselves completely in the subject matter at hand. It also allows the class teacher the freedom to structure the lessons creatively, incorporating a variety of activities such as music to enhance the teaching of geography, and the use of drama and story telling to expand the work in history.

The child's feeling of wonder for form is encouraged and stimulated in the earliest classes. Through large coloured free-hand drawings the child develops an experience of inner harmony which can be applied later, both in practical tasks and in exact thinking. In addition to helping develop good handwriting, these exercises give a real basis for the exact geometrical constructions which follow.

Main Lessons include Mathematics, Geometry, Ancient Civilisations, Mythology, English Literature, and later Biology, Science, Astronomy and the Humanities. Other subjects such as Languages, technical skills, Religion, Eurythmy and Sport are taught by subject teachers.

## **The High School: A Time For Independent Thinking**

The child's view of the adult as a natural authority changes at puberty, when the individual personality is felt more strongly. The students must now learn to think for themselves and form their own judgements. Class teachers now give way to specialist teachers who lead the students through a rich and varied selection of lessons. Clear writing, lively thinking and good work habits are emphasised. Through exploration, discussion and individual research, the adolescent is trained in acute observation, logical thinking and self-discipline. The student is guided to understand the laws underlying world phenomena and the human being's central position and responsibility in all fields of human endeavour.

We live in a highly scientific and technological age, and therefore the study of science and mathematics plays a crucial role in preparing the young adult to understand and integrate into today's world. In the Waldorf approach to science and mathematics pupils also study the dramatic biographies of remarkable personalities whose discoveries changed and moulded the social conditions of our civilisation. The studies always begin with observation and personal experience. Through exploration and careful observation the laws are discovered.

With imaginative presentation, natural curiosity can be aroused in all pupils. For the potential specialist in science, there is much that can be done to sharpen the senses and clarify the thought processes that are essential for later specialisation. Students thus develop a truly scientific training that is coupled with a dawning awareness of the social significance of the sciences.

The arts and technical skills are not reserved for the gifted but provide some of the most outstanding learning opportunities for all. Drama, music, painting, sculpture, eurythmy, bookbinding, metalwork, weaving and woodwork give vitally important challenges and training that help round out the experience, abilities and character of the pupils. Adolescence can be a celebration of growing independence. Stifled with cynicism or

irrelevancies the damage can easily lead to unhealthy escapism. The school therefore plays a critical role in this period of a person's development.

The matriculation results of the Waldorf schools are consistently good showing that academic excellence can be well achieved within a very broad education for life.

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## Reports and Examinations

**I**n the Primary School conventional examinations are considered unnecessary since the child is under constant observation. The Waldorf schools believe that the stress factor of exams in young pupils can do real harm. Creative involvement in work provides the key to motivation, not competitive accomplishment which separates winners from losers. Very rarely will a child have to repeat a class and this is done only after consultation with the parents. The decision would be made after evaluating the psychological, physical, artistic, social, practical and academic development of the child - never on the academic alone.



In the Primary School an in-depth written report is given to the parents at the end of the year and in the High School detailed reports are given each term. In the higher classes tests and full exam preparation are given as they move towards matric.

## Discipline

In a Waldorf School discipline is neither rigid in the traditional sense nor free in a permissive way. The objective of discipline is an easy, peaceful atmosphere in which all can breathe freely. This arises quite naturally when there is the right human understanding amongst pupils and between teacher and pupil: a mutual caring concern and regard. Correction, if required, is carefully considered regarding the nature of the behaviour and the dignity of the individual.

## Religion Education

Waldorf schools provide a supportive base for children of every faith. The schools are Christian in the universal sense and therefore non-denominational. The teachers hold that all young children are naturally religious, and that if this quality is not distorted by dogmatism, nor withered by neglect, it can become a firm basis for confidence in life. In the High School existential questions become matters of burning interest and concern. With openness, religion lessons can provide crucial meaning for the adolescent.

## Parents' Evenings

One of the unique experiences for the parents at Waldorf Schools is the termly Parents' Evening. Each class holds these separately. Here is an opportunity to regularly meet the teachers, discuss pupils' progress and become informed about the work the children are busy with. It is also a time to share concerns or queries with other parents and the staff. Invariably parents express particular appreciation for the opportunity that these evenings provide.

## Sport

The development and maintenance of a healthy body is as important as that of the intellect or feelings. For this reason a wide range of games and sporting activities that develop teamwork and co-operation is offered by the Waldorf school according to choice and available facilities.

## A Worldwide Education

Throughout the world parents have joined together to found Waldorf schools for their children. In countries as different as Japan, Russia, Australia and the USA the growing demand for Waldorf Education shows the universality of the methods used in the Waldorf Schools. In the last ten years the number of Waldorf schools has more than doubled to over one thousand world-wide.

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### The Child

**R**udolf Steiner - and later Piaget and others - recognised that a child passes through specific developmental stages both physically and psychologically. Different faculties, interests and problems arise at different ages. Every new phase is important and needs special care. The curriculum of the Waldorf School is based upon this understanding.

Each year the child ripens to another level and the natural modes of learning change dramatically in the three principle phases: Pre-School, Primary School and High School. The loss of milk teeth and the transformations at puberty mark the two most important changes in the physical and psychological development of the growing child which have to be taken into account both in the curriculum content and the teaching methods used.

Therefore a subject is only introduced when the child has reached the particular stage where understanding and assimilation can best take place. To skip a phase or to introduce one too early can be harmful to the child.

Each child has her own needs, her own temperament and her own level of capability relative to thought, feeling and action. A versatile, creative personality is formed through the harmonious interaction of intellect, emotions and will activity.

### The Teacher

Full time Waldorf teacher training is offered in countries throughout the world including South Africa. A conventional training is the starting point of most Waldorf teachers. While qualifications are important, enthusiasm and the ability to inspire the children are considered indispensable. In-service training and on-going studies are part of the work of all Waldorf teachers.

The teacher aims to become a worthy authority and role model for the pupil. Commitment, care and positivity foster mutual respect and help to develop self discipline in the child. A close study of child psychology and development prepares the teacher to meet the different temperaments and the growth phases of each child. Waldorf teacher training also develops a constant striving for inner mobility and empathy - essential qualities in all creative teaching. This is one of the cornerstones supporting the Waldorf ethic and reputation.



It is of utmost importance that the teacher works imaginatively and is challenged to bring originality, creativity and movement into the lessons.

The teacher always strives to see what the child can become as a developing moral being. This needs the practice of looking beyond the immediate situation while meeting each day with its fresh needs.