

Waldorf Creates Genius

Waldorf Education and the Cultivation of Genius

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In their book, *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People*, Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein sound a call for a “new kind of transdisciplinary, synthetic education” in which educators focus not so much on changing what we teach, but on changing how we teach (page 316). Although the authors argue that schools with this new focus need to be created, I believe they already exist in the form of Waldorf schools. Indeed, the Root-Bernsteins have unknowingly made a powerful argument in favor of Waldorf education. As I shall argue below, both the way the Waldorf curriculum is brought and the curriculum itself encourage “sparks of genius” to blaze in Waldorf schools.

Waldorf teachers strive to look for and cultivate the capacity for genius in every student. Rather than seeing our mission as filling students' brains with information, we try, through our method and our curriculum, to unlock capacities for genius in all students. The famous Einstein quote, “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination,” is a fundamental tenet of Waldorf education.

Integrating Learning Styles. First, we teach with kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learners in mind. Practically speaking, this means that over the course of a day we are sure to present “academic” material through movement, through written material, and through oral presentation and discussion. In addition to these three learning styles we have the primary goal of engaging all students artistically. Hence teachers present academic material through the arts of storytelling, drawing, painting, beeswax and clay modeling, singing, recitation of poetry, and conscious, creative movement.

True Engagement of Students. Waldorf teachers want to encourage “heart-felt” thinking in their students, and this is best achieved when students have a heart or emotional connection to the curriculum. This does not mean that every student loves every subject taught, but it does mean that teachers plan lessons that engage students' imagination, critical thinking, and feelings of antipathy and sympathy. A student may really dislike some aspect of a lesson. Disliking something means the student is engaged; boredom, on the other hand, signifies the student is not engaged.

Integrating the Disciplines. The Root-Bernsteins argue that if teachers integrate the thirteen thinking tools of genius into their lessons then genius will arise in students. Because Waldorf teachers are responsible for all academic subjects, as well as artistic subjects such as painting, drawing, singing, and flute, we are able to prepare lessons in a truly interdisciplinary fashion. I would like to describe some aspects of the Waldorf curriculum and simultaneously show how the curriculum supports the tools that the Root-Bernsteins identify.

The Waldorf Day: Circle

Movement and Learning. It is becoming axiomatic, even in mainstream education, that younger students (especially those in grades one through four) learn a great deal through movement. Hence, in grades one through four at Waldorf schools teachers begin with “circle.” Circle ranges from forty-five to fifty minutes, depending on the grade level, and is designed by the teacher to exercise the student’s gross motor skills, body strength and balance, and ability to move through space both as an individual and as part of a group. Circle also corresponds to the main focus of academic material, known as a “block.”

Typically, the teacher will begin with a song or a seasonal verse or poem that has been set to movement and incorporates body geography, spatial awareness, crossing the midline, and balance. If a second or third grade is working on memorizing times tables, they will often sing the tables to a song with a strong beat that perhaps also includes a hand-clapping pattern. Next, the class, with the teacher at the helm, may recite a poem about a snail while moving as one whole line in a spiral, contracting in and then moving back out. Circle may end with a verse, spoken so that speech becomes art, which brings intention to do our best work for the rest of the day.

Referring to the Root-Bernsteins’ tools, the Waldorf “circle” engages the student’s body thinking, dimensional thinking, modeling, and playing. The student must move in space individually, but with the group in mind too. When students are marching, clapping hands, and reciting times tables or poetry, the information “gets into their bones.” Waldorf teachers and students alike will testify that when this occurs the learning is enjoyable and runs deep.

The Waldorf Day: Main Lesson Blocks

In grades one through eight the school day begins with a two-hour “main lesson” in which a teacher brings her class through a rhythm of review, presentation of new material, and a time for written work in “main lesson” books that the students create themselves. Blocks normally alternate between a math and a language arts focus and last about four weeks.

Music and Math—An Example. At their desks students may be asked to take out their flutes. Over the course of eight grades students come to play beautifully, at first modeling the teacher and learning visually and orally, and later learning how to read music. If it’s a fourth grade classroom, students will also be learning fractions. In true interdisciplinary fashion, the teacher will explain and relate the value of musical notes to fractions: the quarter note gets one of four beats, the dotted half note gets three of four beats, the whole note gets four of four! After ten minutes of flute, perhaps ten minutes will be taken for “mental (oral) math” problems.

This is one of the many opportunities teachers have to assess students’ learning styles. Who loves mental math” (oral)? Who prefers written problems (visual)? Who likes math games that include manipulatives or movement (kinesthetic)?

Once again, many tools to cultivate genius are employed: linking fractions and musical notation enables fourth graders to observe both mathematics and music in a new light.

Reading the notes and thinking of their value develops students' ability to recognize patterns. Learning to play and sing beautiful songs fortifies their empathizing abilities.

Review. During the critical review period students are actively engaged in the Root-Bernsteins' tools of analogizing, abstracting, empathizing, transforming, and synthesizing. The focus turns to review of material from the previous day's lesson. If it's a fifth grade class studying ancient Greece, students may take turns orally retelling a story. They may be asked to prepare a five-minute skit acting out one scene. They may engage in philosophical questions related to the story such as the symbolism of Odysseus' long journey from home. They may do a joint web-writing exercise in preparation for an essay that each student will write independently. They may draw, using beeswax crayons and colored pencils, a scene from the story.

Truly, the ideas for review are limitless and, if well prepared, will engage all three learning styles at some point. What could be a standard exercise, in the hands of a thoughtful and creative teacher becomes an opportunity for everyone involved to gain new insights.

New Material. Next the focus shifts to new material. In Waldorf schools this is yet another wonderful opportunity to engage students' imagination, critical thinking skills, and memory. As a myth or history lesson is told the room is quiet, the students held in rapt attention. Teachers present the lesson with an intention to enunciate beautifully while drawing on their skill for storytelling. This is a very different experience from reading a story to a class or having students read it to themselves.

Teachers are consciously exercising students' ability to remember, to think sequentially, and to form mental images of the events in the story. With no pictures or written words the students are creating rich images in their minds, thereby actively engaging emotionally in the material and ultimately honing their comprehension skills. The Root-Bernsteins would call these skills observing, imaging, abstracting, analogizing, empathizing, transforming, and synthesizing.

Individual Student-Directed Work. Finally, the focus is individual, student-directed work. Waldorf students create their own main lesson books, meaning they begin with a blank book and document, with direction from the teacher, a three- to four-week period (or block) of study. Upon completion the book will be full of student-directed essays and poems, pictures, and perhaps some classic verses or poetry. When students are asked to craft essays, poems, or pictures based on the myth or history they have learned, they are actively and critically reflecting on the material. Using the Root-Bernsteins' concepts of observing, empathizing, and synthesizing, students are absorbing the material and then "retelling" it, either with words or pictures, in their own unique way.

If, for example, the focus is ancient Greece, the opening to Homer's *The Iliad*, which may have been used as a speech exercise in circle, may be written in English and in Greek. Then students may want to enhance the beauty of the page by adding a form drawing appropriate to the theme. In this case the Greek key, a typical image found on ancient Greek pottery and paintings, would be an excellent choice. The entire two-hour period may end with the song "Glorious Apollo." Why? After a period of inwardly directed, intense work the class joins again as a whole in song. The beautiful music, filling the entire classroom, also fills the students' hearts. Thus the main lesson is completed.

The Waldorf Day: Special Subjects

Life-Long Learners. After a short break for a snack and outdoor recess, students return for Special Subject classes: art, choir, orchestra, games (like PE), foreign language, handwork (knitting, crocheting, sewing), woodwork, and Eurythmy. Each of these classes is taught by a specially trained teacher and is organized in conjunction with the particular curricular themes for each grade. In their chapter on “Synthesizing Education,” the Root-Bernsteins quote Shinichi Suzuki, who cautioned against teaching students to become professional musicians. Rather, according to Suzuki, students should be taught in such a way that they come to love music and thereby become lifelong learners.

This is exactly the point of the Waldorf “Special Subject” classes. Every Waldorf student is expected to create handwork such as knitted socks and mittens in fifth grade. In sixth grade every student hand carves a wooden bowl. Beginning in fourth grade every student plays a string instrument. The Waldorf curriculum is consciously rich in the arts, in part for “art’s sake,” but also because Waldorf teachers know that, for example, students who have mastered the fine motor skills necessary to knit have also developed in terms of brain functioning.

Arts Supporting Academics. As a concrete example, we found at the Cincinnati Waldorf School that students who play instruments well also tend to do very well in mathematics. Students who do Eurythmy learn intricate patterns as they move through space in time with the pianist and with the class. Students who are allowed to choose between cherry and black walnut for their wooden bowl come to love their piece of wood: they know its scent and grain, as well as the feel of their hands on the curves of the bowl that they have created.

Finally, because all subjects have been brought to them in an interdisciplinary fashion, Waldorf students don’t compartmentalize their knowledge and are thereby able to think musically about math; to think artistically about botany; to think mathematically about movement; and to think three-dimensionally about geometry. Students engaged in this incredibly rich and varied work constantly access all of the Root-Bernsteins’ tools for creating genius.

Who We Graduate

When asked to describe Waldorf education I often say it’s an arts-rich, interdisciplinary, classical education. I also say that we are graduating students who study and learn because they have a passion for knowledge, who would never ask, “Is this on the test?” Waldorf graduates not only will be able to answer questions in college or in job interviews, but also will ask new, creative questions of their professors and potential employees.

I believe Waldorf students are budding Renaissance men and women for this time and for the future. They are well read in literature, history, and science, well versed in the arts, love to think and to learn, and indeed will be life-long learners. They carry the awakened “sparks of genius” required for success as individuals; for success in relationships with others, from families to organizations; and for success as citizens, from local to global settings.