

Growing Up Whole:

## Salutogenic Aspects of the Waldorf Curriculum

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### **1. Introduction**

*"We need an art of education in every one of whose measures the children are educated and taught in a way that promotes health"*  
(Rudolf Steiner)

*(Gloeckler, 2006c, p. 140)*

Life as an adult today is as challenging and demanding as it has ever been. There are more choices and opportunities, but also dangers and problem situations that we face in our everyday lives. Especially in western civilizations competition for employment is fierce and healthcare through the state is often insufficient. A fast-paced lifestyle

is common and so health issues abound ranging from physical illnesses to emotional disturbances. Thus, it is a question of major concern today how children should be educated so that, as a direct result of their upbringing, they are able to meet the challenges that life brings towards them. A lot of activity is currently taking place in the field of education such as conducting research, modification of existing models, and exploring new and/or alternative modes of instruction. One such alternative mode of instruction that has established itself firmly in many countries over the last century is the Waldorf Curriculum as it is practiced in the so-called Waldorf Schools. It is based on the motive to gain a deeper understanding of the human being through Anthroposophy, a philosophy of scientific research inaugurated by Rudolf Steiner that aims to take into account spiritual as well as physical aspects of human nature. It shall be the aim of this paper to show in detail how the Waldorf Curriculum is structured in such a way that it consciously and actively promotes healthy development of students in Waldorf Schools. After a brief look at the concept of salutogenesis, I will outline therapeutic factors within the vertical curriculum, the horizontal curriculum, and the methods inherent in the Waldorf Curriculum. Finally, I will explore the therapeutic effects of the Waldorf Curriculum on students from different cultural backgrounds.

## **2. Salutogenesis**

*"Now the predominant questions are: Where does health originate? and How can we improve health? rather than: Where does disease originate and how can it be prevented?" (Michaela Gloeckler)*

*(Gloeckler, 2002, p.328)*

The word salutogenesis is made up of the two Latin words "salutis", which means health, and "genesis" which means origin (Gloeckler, 2002). It can thus be understood as "inquiry into the origin of health" (Gloeckler, 2002, p.325). This concept is the polar opposite of pathogenesis, "pathos" meaning suffering, which one could call "inquiry into the origin of suffering". Although there seems to be only a very subtle difference between these two ideas, the consequences of basing one's scientific research on the one or the other are far reaching. Pathogenesis has long been the foundation of all health research which led to the concept of disease prevention, i.e. seeking ways to avoid contact with pathogenic substances or organisms (health threats). Doing research based on the salutogenic concept constitutes a major paradigm shift, because now this research is directed towards finding and understanding health-giving factors

(Gloeckler, 2002). Aaron Antonovsky is widely considered as the father of the salutogenic paradigm after he discovered that among a large number of Jewish people those who were Holocaust survivors were generally healthier than others (Gloeckler, 2002). Naturally, he posed the question as to what exactly caused them to be healthier. This is a prime example for research based on salutogenesis. One could call this kind of activity "resilience research" (Gloeckler, 2002, p.327). It has been established that there are three factors determining resilience: heredity, the environment, and human relationships. This last factor is of special importance since honesty, love, and respect among individuals have been found to positively affect the state of health of those involved.

In her book *Education as Preventive Medicine: A Salutogenic Approach* Michaela Gloeckler (2002) states that sources of health have to be found on a physical, soul, and spiritual level. In the physical realm the ability to deal with unfamiliar elements and conflict has to be developed. This means, for example, allowing certain harmless childhood diseases to help develop the immune system. In the soul realm one has to be able to develop a sense of coherence by making the world comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable, and by building positivity, hope, and confidence in life. In the spiritual realm one should grow powers of resistance and resilience in mind and spirit,

by trusting in the progress and meaningfulness of human evolution, and by developing responsibility resulting in free acts of good will. With this outline as a backdrop, the salutogenic factors, i.e. the sources of health, inherent in the Waldorf Curriculum shall now be explored in more detail.

### **3. The Vertical Curriculum**

*"The ideal curriculum must be modeled on the changing image of the human being passing through different phases while growing up."*

*(Caroline von Heydebrand)*

*(Rawson & Richter, 2000,*

*p.7)*

The vertical curriculum "shows how each individual subject develops from year to year and from the youngest age groups to the oldest" (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.36). The major premise upon which the vertical Waldorf Curriculum is built is that it reflects and supports archetypal human development by providing the right challenges and support at the right times (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Through his spiritual scientific research Steiner identified key phases of human child development up to the age of 21 that educators need to

be familiar with and during which the children need to be addressed in the right way (Steiner, 1996). Throughout early childhood up to the age of 7 children learn primarily by imitation. Thus, they need to be provided with rhythm and repetition, meaningful sense impressions, and real, natural, and contextual settings and activities (Rawson & Richter, 2000). The keyword for this stage of development is "creative play". The children have to be given ample opportunities to discover their surroundings and one another through free play. This fosters not only an active and energetic character, imaginative creativity, and social awareness for others, but also lays the foundation for a clear conceptual penetration of the nature of the world, which, in turn, leads to the thinking abilities needed for later academic education (Lang, 2006). During the time between age 7 and the onset of puberty children learn primarily by imagination (Steiner, 1996). Here it is important to nurture the pictorial as well as the artistic nature of the child's inner life by bringing educational content through the use of narrative and images, artistic modes of expression, and engaging their feelings in the process (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Also, all discoveries about the world should be brought into direct relation with the children themselves as members of humanity (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Only once the child experiences puberty should he/she be confronted with purely conceptual thinking (Steiner, 1996). During this stage of

development up to about the age of 21 the focus should be on fostering the student's self-activity in developing ideas that lead to ideals, supported by awakening enthusiasm and inspiration as well as meaning and significance in life (Rawson & Richter, 2000). In this way key phases of development are marked by significant shifts of emphasis and the introduction of new activities and learning methods appropriate for the age the children are in.

Structuring the curriculum based on this knowledge works harmonizing right down into the child's physical organism and into the bodily rhythms and processes (Rawson & Richter, 2000). The movement and imitation that takes place in early childhood fosters the maturation and development of the central nervous system and sensory-motor coordination which are the focus of bodily activity in this stage of development (Gloeckler, 2006a). The stimulation of feelings through art and imagery supports the maturation of biological rhythms such as breathing and the heartbeat, which become stabilized by about age 15, 16. Finally, activating independent processes of understanding and creative thinking through enthusiasm after the onset of puberty actively affects the development of the skeleton, hormone changes, and the intermediary metabolism which take place at this time.

However, educating out of a true knowledge of archetypal human development goes beyond just supporting the growth and maturation of the physical organism to also addressing soul and spiritual needs of the child. Nevertheless, as Gloeckler (2000) points out in "A Healing Education: How Can Waldorf Education Meet the Needs of Children?" all development of soul and spirit depends on laying a healthy bodily foundation. She calls this a "health-oriented education" (Gloeckler, 2000, p.2).

#### **4. The Horizontal Curriculum**

*"...we plan the curriculum for each year in accordance with the nature of the growing child." (Rudolf Steiner)*

*(Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.36)*

The horizontal curriculum is comprised of "the various subjects that are taught to children in any one class, which means children of the same age" (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.36). These subjects are designed to complement and support each other in such a way that the healthy development of the child in any given stage of maturation is encouraged to the utmost. A big emphasis is placed on developing transferable skills by linking manual and practical work with cognitive

development (Rawson & Richter, 2000). For example, exercising one's skills in handwork (e.g. knitting) will have an effect on mathematical thinking skills and vice versa. Again, it becomes evident that it is important to address, or better to educate, feeling and doing in the child and not only thinking for a healthy and harmonious development to unfold.

## **5. Pedagogical Methods**

*"As long as the teacher feels in harmony with the underlying principles and with the methods employed, he must be given freedom in his work instead of being tied to fixed standards." (Rudolf Steiner)*

*(Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.36)*

The methods employed in Waldorf education form the true heart of the curriculum. Even though the vertical and horizontal curricula provide the necessary setup for a healthy education to unfold they would be utterly inadequate without the right pedagogical approaches. Probably the most important aspect in this realm is the freedom of the teacher alluded to by Steiner in the quote above. The teacher has to have ample room to practice flexibility in the classroom (Rawson & Richter, 2000). He/She must at all times have a sense for what the

children in the class need out of his/her observation of them as individual beings. Consequently, he/she must adapt what is given as guidelines in the vertical and horizontal curricula to the present situation within his/her class. This is the point at which education becomes an art and the teacher becomes an artist rather than a mere educator. Naturally, practicing this art requires an ongoing self education and inner work from the teacher, so that he/she can hone his/her skills of observation and understanding of the individual children in his/her class. The health of the children depends a lot on how their individual needs are recognized.

With this in mind it also becomes clear why it is beneficial for students to stay with the same class teacher over an extended period of time as it is done in Waldorf schools (ideally from grade 1 through 8). He/She has the opportunity to get to know the children well and, thus, learn to understand and help them in the right way. Furthermore, he/she can follow and actively guide their development over the years. From the point of view of the students he/she provides a strong focus point and continuity (Rawson & Richter, 2000). The teacher becomes "a figure of moral authority based on commitment, care for the children and a close relationship with the parents" (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.19). This is very important for children in the lower and middle school ages and can in itself be a significant

source of health and well-being, just as the opposite will be true if they are constantly confronted with different personalities of focus and authority.

Apart from the art employed in education by the teacher another key factor for encouraging health in children is rhythm. The Waldorf Curriculum seeks to acknowledge a wide variety of rhythms with the utmost consciousness of their salutogenic effects on the students. Recent research indicates that there are many links between particular time spans, some of which are based on natural rhythms, and human biological rhythms (Gloeckler, 2002). Gunther Hildebrandt reveals, for example, that human environmental adaptation is linked to the annual solar cycle, while the process of reproduction is related to the lunar cycle (roughly one month). The weekly rhythm is especially significant with regard to the bodily processes of regeneration and healing. Medical research has clearly shown that regeneration from an illness, for example, does not proceed in a linear way, but rather that moments of improvement and crisis recur in a weekly rhythm. The polar processes of sleeping versus waking, as well as academic achievement versus recreation are intimately connected with the rotation of the earth in the daily rhythm. For physiological processes inside the human body one can find that rhythms of muscle contraction and relaxation relate to hourly rhythms, heartbeat and

breathing activity relate to rhythms of minutes and seconds, and processes of the central nervous system relate to time periods of only parts of seconds (0.1 – 0.01 sec.) (Gloeckler, 2000, p.54 ff.). It becomes obvious that these rhythms need to be understood and addressed in order to promote health in the developing child. A good example for the failure of acknowledging such rhythms is the modern school week, in which students go to school for five days, then have two days off, and so on. Gloeckler (2000) states:

In Europe we have done research which shows that students in schools which have a five-day rhythm are ill more days each year than students who are in schools which have a six-day rhythm. But this is not astonishing, for it stems from the physiological capacity of the organism. (p.60)

Although, for obvious reasons, Waldorf schools do not employ the 6-day school week, they do encourage parents to set up the children's homework on a Saturday morning so as to simulate somewhat of a 6-day rhythm (Gloeckler, 2006b). Another example of addressing the biological rhythms of the child can be found in what the Waldorf Curriculum outlines for the daily rhythm. This is based on the understanding, which has been confirmed by scientific research, that students display a different amount of performance readiness at different times of the day (Gloeckler, 2000). Their performances peak

in the morning between 7 and 11 am and in the afternoon between 5 and 7 pm. In between one can observe a drastic drop of activity around lunch-time and, of course, at night. The Waldorf Curriculum aims to accommodate this natural rhythm by focusing on strong academic study in the morning, allowing for rest and recreation around lunch-time, and continuing educational measures in the afternoon with an emphasis on crafts and movement activities. Another important aspect of the Waldorf Curriculum with regard to the academic education in the morning is the emphasis of one particular subject in the so-called "main lesson" which lasts usually about two hours. Each main lesson subject is taught for a block of about 4 weeks, which in turn relates to the lunar rhythm connected to reproduction allowing the student to "get a break" from the subject and effectively "reproduce" its content at a later time (Gloeckler, 2002). This focus on one main subject possibly followed by one or two special subjects in the morning is much easier to digest than what Steiner calls the "dreadful timetable":

Religious instruction from 8:00 to 9:00, gymnastics from 9:00 to 10:00, history from 10:00 to 11:00, arithmetic from 11:00 to 12:00. All the later instruction blots out the earlier. One cannot accomplish anything. (Gloeckler, 2002, p.115)

Many more examples exist for how the Waldorf Curriculum incorporates knowledge about human biological rhythms into classroom education, but it would go beyond the scope of this paper to go into these.<sup>1</sup>

Another health-giving factor closely related to rhythm is balance. Again, the Waldorf Curriculum seeks to create balance for children in a wide array of realms: balance between activity and passivity, between listening and speaking, between sitting and moving, between thinking, feeling and doing, between social interaction and working alone, and so on (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Providing balance is maybe the most important and essential quality that is needed to ensure each child's healthy development:

Rudolf Steiner [...] intended that the curriculum would work in a harmonizing way [...]. In this sense, the Waldorf Curriculum has a fundamentally therapeutic task in that it enables and supports the healthy development of the whole person. Health in this sense means a dynamic balance of the forces within the child and that the individual can relate to other people and the world in a balanced way. It also means that the realization of each child's potential is fostered in an optimal way. (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.7)

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<sup>1</sup> See "Education as Preventive Medicine" by Michaela Gloeckler, Chapter 6: Weekly Schedules and Results of Research on Rhythm; also "A Healing Education" by Michaela Gloeckler, Lecture 3: The Metamorphosis of Growth Forces into Intellectual Forces and the Rhythmic Nature of Astral Activity

In the light of the tendencies to one-sidedness present in our modern society (materialism, natural science) it is ever more important to address the whole of the human being. Abstract, intellectual thinking as well as natural scientific and technological progress are a(n) (over-)valued part of this whole, but they are only a part. The human feeling life and the life of a human being's deeds are other parts of this whole that are mostly undervalued, if not absolutely negated. Yet, only when an individual is addressed and educated as such a whole will he/she have the opportunity to grow into a truly healthy person. To succeed in creating balance within the students a deep understanding of the physiological effects of subjects and teaching methods is required. One will discover that one can find many such subjects or teaching methods that form polarities in that they produce opposite physiological effects (Wiechert, 2006). Steiner gave many indications about such polarities that are to be discovered in education. For example, it can be observed that doing math works enlivening on the children, while writing on the other hand is quieting. Similarly, listening to someone speak brings a tendency towards sleep whereas speaking oneself is definitely a sign of being completely awake (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Steiner emphasized that not only within the school day, but within each lesson there must be a constant rhythmical flow of different activities always balancing different tendencies within

the children (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Thus, a main lesson will often start with movement exercises to really awaken the students in their bodies, followed by recalling recent subject matter to get everyone involved. Then new content will be presented by the teacher which requires the students to sit and listen, but shortly thereafter might follow a demonstration in which they can take part, or writing, or some other project. In this way, rather than having to sit and listen all day, the students are engaged with their whole being in a variety of ways. Consequently, the entire lesson becomes a lively and breathing process which is a great source of health (Wiechert, 2006).

A significant balancing effect can be attributed to the use of art in Waldorf education. It is quite likely that no other part of the Waldorf Curriculum is as much under scrutiny, criticism, and the source of misunderstanding as the artistic activities that are taking place in Waldorf schools. Yet, as Gloeckler (2000) points out, the arts have a profound effect on the health of all human beings, but especially children, because:

One of Rudolf Steiner's most wonderful discoveries is that the human being is not only constructed out of natural laws [...], but that the human being is also constructed through the laws of all the human arts. (p.63)

Thus she explains, for example, how the art of architecture directly relates to the human physical body and its health:

We create body related forms, and therefore we feel good in the buildings we have created. [...] If there is no space to breathe, if in form and color the architecture around us inhibits our feeling well, if there is a negative interaction and stimulation between the building around us and our physical body, then we feel unwell and dispirited. (Gloeckler, 2000, p.64).

This is why the architecture of the Waldorf school buildings is also important for the education taking place there, because it works on the physical well-being of the children. So also does painting stimulate the life forces and feeling life of the students. Music brings balance into the life of their souls, which helps them to control their aggressions and other involuntary emotions.

Speech is the most powerful activity for training a healthy breathing rhythm. [...] Steiner said criminality and aggression are merely a lack of education and specifically a modern speechlessness. [...] if students perform on stage, working with all these arts, it is an act of prevention for problems of this kind. (Gloeckler, 2000, p.67-68)

Lastly, Gloeckler (2000) points out that the way the arts influence the body formation of the children has an immense effect on their health constitution in the later stages of their lives (p.70). If the arts are not only constrained to special subject lessons, but continuously interspersed and used within other content lessons, as it is called for by the Waldorf Curriculum, then this supports the balancing processes discussed above.

Obviously the employment of speech and language in schools goes beyond their involvement with the arts. Students at all educational institutions are always exposed to language as part of all kinds of modes of instruction. No one can deny that language is a very powerful tool that has a great effect on children who in early childhood imitate and learn its usage and later try to formulate and create their own ideas and thoughts through it (Rawson & Richter, 2000). This is why Steiner laid great emphasis not only on the fact that all teachers should be well trained in clear pronunciation of language, but also gave indications as to how content should be conveyed (Rawson & Richter, 2000). In all stages of the students' development the language of the teacher should contain a pictorial and imaginative element which would provide them with living concepts that could grow with their changing understanding of the world, rather than just conveying "dead" facts. Obviously, the character of language has to

vary greatly depending on the age of the students, but even in high school education this element should not disappear completely and will have a good effect, especially if the students are familiar with this mode of instruction from their earlier childhood. This will lead to a different way of thinking about and seeing the world as an adult, to a more innovative and creative mindset, and, thus, to a certain inner freedom.

A different perception of the world is also encouraged through the wide variety of sense impressions that the children are exposed to in Waldorf schools (Rawson & Richter, 2000) These are, again, indispensable to their healthy development, according to Gloeckler (2006a):

[...] the nurturing of the senses is – in the true sense of the word – of constitutional significance, not only for the development of feeling and the forming of mental pictures, but above all for physical development [...] (p.14)

This can be observed most plainly in very young children where the entire body seems to become a sense organ (e.g. jumping for joy when seeing something beautiful, wriggling with delight when something tastes good, etc.) (Gloeckler, 2006a, p.14). It shows how vulnerable and sensitive to all sense impressions the whole body is at this stage of development, and even though it becomes stronger and

more resilient as the child is growing older, it is important to continue to "nourish" it with meaningful sense impressions, while protecting it from harmful influences.

Another aspect of Waldorf Curriculum methodology that has to be adapted to the students' development is their assessment and evaluation (Rawson & Richter, 2000). First of all, it is important to establish, especially in early childhood and the lower grades, a non-competitive environment, which allows each individual child "to take pride in their work and achieve the highest standards they are personally capable of" (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p.24). Our modern society is very oriented towards competition in all spheres of life (school, work place, social status, sports, etc.). This is the cause of a lot of stress, and many illnesses arise out of this constant pressure that people place on themselves and each other. To some degree one might say competition is good and healthy, but this depends on how people compete and how mature they are. Fair competition in sports may provide good learning experiences while competition about things that are existential for life, such as a job, often affects people negatively in the long run. Naturally, this kind of competition is a reality for our lives today, and thus students have to be educated in such a way that they eventually will be able to face these conditions as an adult. It belongs to developing the resilience that is described in the

chapter on salutogenics above. To achieve this while protecting especially the young child from its harmful consequences the Waldorf Curriculum employs different modes of evaluation and assessment at different ages. In the kindergarten all feedback on the children's "work" will be very positive and encouraging. Throughout most of the lower grades (1 -8) the young students do not receive grades, rather the teacher will review their work with them together, pointing out possible errors, and giving suggestions for how to become better at their work, while still maintaining an overall positive and encouraging attitude (G. LoDolce, personal communication, December 12, 2007). Only in high school will the students be continuously graded in all their subjects. Furthermore, the wide variety of activities taking place in Waldorf schools (artistic work and projects, apart from academic work) leads them to recognize the different strengths and weaknesses that all their classmates have (G. LoDolce, personal communication, December 12, 2007).

Lastly, if any one individual child seems to be confronted with a particular and serious problem, he/she will receive special consideration in the form of a child study, at which all his/her teachers and possibly therapists and/or a school doctor will be present (Rawson & Richter, 2000). At this meeting they will attempt to create an image and understanding of who the child is and how he/she can be

supported. Such support might be specific teaching methods, therapeutic activities and heightened awareness by the staff.

## **6. Different Cultural Backgrounds**

*"They are all children. That's the common denominator." (Gerry LoDolce)*

(personal communication, December 12, 2007)

How does the Waldorf Curriculum support the healthy development of children from different cultural backgrounds? First and foremost the curriculum is designed based on a true understanding of the human being, which is universal. Although the contents of different backgrounds, such as family and cultural values, have to be taken into account when educating children, they do not supersede that which is individual and, essentially, universally human (J. Goeschel, personal communication). Consequently, the teacher should be aware of the different cultural backgrounds that his/her students come from, but ultimately transcend them by showing them that they are free human beings within their cultural ties (J. Goeschel, personal communication). In all the classes that I visited for observation I noticed how much

enthusiasm and interest was present for students with different cultural backgrounds, not only coming from the teacher, but also from other classmates. These students can often contribute significantly to certain subject lessons (e.g. a student with an Indian background can share a lot in a main lesson block on Ancient India). Furthermore, Waldorf education makes a special effort to broaden the children's views of the world by educating them about other cultures, their lifestyles, beliefs, and values (L. Sturgis, personal communication, December 17, 2007). This as well as the regular practice at Waldorf schools to teach two foreign languages from quite early on aims for the students to "feel their way into the soul of another culture" and, thus, achieve such a broadened understanding of the world (L. Sturgis, personal communication, December 17, 2007). This kind of education will result in the adult showing respect and understanding for differing cultural gifts and weaknesses, and seeing themselves as part of a large conglomerate of varied cultures all across the globe. This kind of worldview is becoming more and more essential in our modern times of globalization to avoid the conflicts and misunderstandings that plague people from different nations everywhere and to build new ties and relationships by recognizing our common humanity.

## **7. Conclusion**

*"The therapeutic aspect of Waldorf education is the fact that it includes very consciously as part of the curriculum many activities which children would naturally do. Children have a way of finding their own therapy." (Gerry LoDolce)*

(G. LoDolce, personal communication,  
December 12, 2007)

Encouraging health throughout the development of a child is centered around bringing balance and harmony into their life on a physical, soul, and spiritual level. It has been shown how the Waldorf curriculum attempts to lay a foundation for such health-giving forces to abound. The vertical curriculum harmoniously accompanies the natural development of children. The horizontal curriculum brings balance through engaging the students in a variety of different activities. The methodology seeks to bring harmony and balance through the art of education practiced by the teacher, the continuity of the class teacher through grades 1 to 8, employing a wide array of rhythms, balancing polarities, the use of art, speech and language, sense impressions, assessment and evaluation, and child studies. Finally, a special effort is made to broaden the students' worldview by raising awareness about different cultures all over the globe. The ultimate aim is to

ensure the harmonious and healthy development of the physical body out of which a healthy soul and spirit nature can then arise.

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