

# The Intellect in Waldorf Education

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“Intellectual curiosity is the lifeblood of real civilization.”—George Trevelyan

Previous essays in this series have illustrated how a Waldorf education cultivates practical, social, artistic, and spiritual capacities. This article concludes the series with a look at how Waldorf schools foster intellectual competencies.

Like a chiseled gem, a great thought awakens wonder, fructifies the imagination, and stimulates joy. In the course of a Green Meadow education, children encounter whole cabinets of such gems: veritable onyxes, rubies, jades, emeralds, and diamonds of thought. Many educational systems have the education of the intellect as their primary goal; after all, reason is often regarded as *the* preeminently human faculty. In contrast, Waldorf education views this as one very important competency, with a special purpose, within a wide spectrum of important competencies: developing the intellect allows us progressively to understand both the world we live in and ourselves.

The intellect awakens more slowly than practical, artistic, and social capacities. In the early years, Waldorf education brings intellectual ideas clothed in images and stories. The processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division might be anthropomorphized as characters with favorite activities. An understanding of cows might be awakened through a story about the life of one cow, or of Hinduism through hearing stories of Hindu culture.

Around puberty, the drive to comprehend the world noticeably intensifies, as year by year children become more capable of understanding increasingly abstract formulations. Waldorf education undergoes a correspondingly marked shift in the middle school, using systematic methodologies and scientific approaches to a broad range of questions. This is, of course, especially true in the natural sciences, which come into their own in these years. Waldorf schools are unique in offering physics, chemistry, and biology classes to every pupil in nearly every year from sixth through twelfth grades. It is also true of the ways *every* subject is approached in these grades.

For example, the complexities of rich literary traditions become available to adolescents. In eighth grade, while studying the American and French Revolutions, students might read Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. In high school, students come to terms with the plots and protagonists, the metaphors and meanings found in *Moby Dick*, the *Odyssey*, Dante's *Inferno*, the late medieval tale of *Parsifal*, Shakespearean drama, and contemporary fiction from a variety of traditions. Students are challenged to express their feelings and thinking in creative writing; projects may involve composing poetry, writing letters that might have passed between characters of one of the works studied, or—a perennial favorite due to the power of the resulting performances—composing (and performing) a monologue by an invented character. They also learn to analyze literary works and to compare works of art with one another thoughtfully. The eighth-grade, tenth-grade, and twelfth-grade plays are especially notable moments when students must expressively master progressively more sophisticated texts. This year, the eighth grade is performing Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*, the tenth grade Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and the twelfth grade Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

Our students also explore vast panoramas of world history. The early grades explore traditional story, mythology, and oral history, while in the middle school pupils attain an overview of the cultures of

Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and modernity. This broad survey of historical times is recapitulated in the high school at greater depth and with the analytical power high school students are able to bring to bear; in these years they also study the transformations wrought by religion, political thought, and science over the last millennia, the foundations of the US economy and government, and—a perennial favorite—the vast panorama of Chinese history, from the semi-mythological philosopher Laozi to China's situation as a great power today.

In mathematics, the early grades lay the arithmetic foundation, developing flexibility in approaching problems analytically or visually, and strengthening the ability to move between problems and solutions. Middle school students learn about the practical uses of mathematics in business (e.g. percentage mark-ups and discounts, interest rates, and that most unfortunate development in any business, negative numbers). Middle school pupils go on to discover the power of formulas and algebraic reasoning and to manipulate geometric figures, while high school students chisel their thinking through logical proof and develop the mind-bending imagination required to comprehend infinities in numbers and space as well as to deploy infinitely small quantities in calculus.

Coming back around to the sciences, in the early childhood years, pupils experience nature's manifold moods, weather, elements, and species, laying a foundation for reflective thinking about the world. The early grades raise important questions about environment and ecology: what animals live in our area? How do they live? What about in other areas? Middle-school students work to understand the interplay of health, physiology, and anatomy, as well as exploring acoustics, electricity and magnetism, heat and cold, optics, the transformation of substances between phases (exemplified in the burning of a candle) and reversible chemical reactions such as burning and slaking lime.

In the senior year alone, our students study marine biology, the American Transcendentalist literary and philosophical tradition, the history of China and of modern times, biochemistry, architectural aesthetics, ethical philosophy, and calculus. Just in the two weeks immediately preceding my writing this article, this class has been reading the philosophies of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, exploring bioethics with a genetic consultant, studying game theory and music theory, immersing themselves in contemporary African-American culture, and preparing individual anthologies of their own poetry.

It is not surprising that after this tremendously exciting passage, spending time with any pupil in the last years of our school is an extraordinary experience. They are mature and reflective thinkers, confident in speaking with both peers and adults, sensitive to complexity, and passionate about the potential of their and others' lives. Visitors to our high school often remark on the joy of conversing with such intellectually bright and engaged thinkers. Our alumni often remark that, going out into the world, they come to understand that they have become generalists in a quite unique way, with remarkably wide interests and able to master any field they choose.

In this sense, in part through the great thoughts they study, our students themselves are becoming chiseled gems, that they too may awaken wonder, fructify the imagination, and stimulate joy wherever they go, making this world a better place to live. As Aristotle said, intellect without moral purpose is barren; only in the service of such purpose does it become fruitful for life.