One week before the first Free Waldorf School opened in Stuttgart, Germany on September 7, 1919, Rudolf Steiner said to an audience of prospective parents, “A real education takes care that body, soul and spirit will be intrinsically free and independent. A real education takes care to put people into life” (Steiner, 1995, p. 63).

You step into a Waldorf school classroom and see colorful, hand-drawn pictures on the chalkboard. The gently painted, lazured walls have a sampling of student paintings and Celtic knot drawings displayed on them. An arrangement of flowers, autumn leaves, and pinecones is near the door. And, what is this grade 4 teacher saying?

“I understand that most of you like pizza. Is that correct?” —to which it seems all of the lively children answer, “Yes!” The teacher continues. “Well, we can have pizza next week, but it would be helpful to know the answer to this question first: Would you prefer one eighth of a pizza or one sixth?” A few students answer immediately, “One eighth,” and a few others say, “One sixth.” However, they do not all seem sure. “Well, let’s see if we can figure this out,” the teacher continues.

So begins the study of fractions for these inquisitive 4th graders. As there is no more effective place to start than with food, the teacher takes out a few cutting boards, knives, and a bag of apples. Soon they are eagerly cutting the apples into equal pieces in as many different ways as possible: into halves, quarters, eighths. . . . This gives the students an immediate and delicious experience that will help them to step with confidence into this new theme. Before class ends, the students draw apples split into even pieces and labeled in their main lesson books. These are their self-made reference books in which they record all their work.

In the following days, the students do more dividing by separating groups of objects and cutting paper. They learn the roles of numerator and denominator. Soon, they see how common and useful fractions are, not only with food but also in many other areas of human endeavour, from building a house, to designing a book, to planting a field. Fractions are everywhere.

Of course, most children have already encountered the idea of fractions earlier when trying to divide things fairly or while working with recipes. This kind of preconscious exposure is a common and important part of all learning. However, Waldorf teachers know that the ‘formal’ study of fractions is most effective if it comes after the children have an inner experience of themselves being ‘a distinctive part of a whole.’ Each child is a fraction of the class and of her/his family. As 4th graders, they have an inner sense of their own individuality as separate from their parents that they did not have in their younger years. This inner feeling of being a part of a whole lays a strong foundation.
for the understanding and relevance of fractions. With it, learning how to manipulate them is filled with both meaning and purpose.

Yes, fractions could be taught earlier. However, bringing them to consciousness at this point in children’s lives makes fractions not only useful tools for working in the outer world but also deeply resonant with their inner awakening. Fractions become so much more than just something else to be learned. They affirm children’s inner reality. After this four-week introduction to fractions, my 4th grade daughter proudly said, “Fractions are not nearly as hard as regular math. They’re fun!”

If you then step into other classrooms, you will see teachers standing before their students reciting poetry, or telling a story by heart; perhaps leading students in singing songs from around the world, or stamping out rhythmical patterns with their feet. You may see a teacher carrying out a science experiment or demonstrating how to create a certain mood in a painting. Eager children with bright eyes and rosy cheeks will be working individually and in unison. And, if you are lucky, you may notice the delicious smells of baking bread or of beeswax being modeled. Whatever the class, it will be a rich sensory experience with a focus on holistic learning, harmony, and beauty.

The aesthetics of Waldorf schools are distinctive, calm, and nurturing. Waldorf schools and pedagogy are designed to gently stimulate children’s heads, hearts, and hands, including all of their senses, and to promote their healthy development. But, aesthetics alone do not make a Waldorf school. Above and beyond the aesthetics is the empowerment of the teachers as the decision makers in all aspects of their classes, the understanding of children as physically, emotionally, and spiritually developing human beings, the conscious inclusion of the arts as an essential feature in the learning process, the deliberate identification and removal of hindrances to the children’s development from their environment, and the envisioned future goal of each child’s individual freedom.

Every day, Waldorf teachers bring their students to laughter and sadness, to new understanding and intense interest, to caring and empathy for others. These ‘beautiful’ lessons are soul-masses that help children to step more fully into life. They work to slowly awaken their intellectual abilities in harmony with their social, emotional, and physical development. These essential human capacities will enable them to achieve their fullest potential and to find inner freedom as adults. Waldorf teachers are granted a great deal of freedom in their work. With this freedom also comes a tremendous responsibility to make this a rigorous and artistic education that meets the children’s growing needs.

Children yearn to become adults, and therefore they look up to the people around them. Thus, teachers lead children most powerfully through the examples they set. It is essential that elementary school teachers are loved and admired by their students. With feelings of love and respect, children drink in what their teachers say, follow what their teachers ask, and learn from what their teachers do. They imitate their teachers. The capacity for freedom in adulthood is born from these forces of love, respect, and imitation that are best fostered in childhood. Waldorf teachers understand this responsibility and know they must lead their students with reverence and enthusiasm and in as artistic a manner as they can.

Children usually act based on their feelings instead of their thinking. This is more accurately characterized as impulsiveness rather than freedom. If children are often permitted to do whatever they like when they expect to be directed by their teachers, parents, or guardians, they will not be able to think or act out of inner freedom as adults. Instead, they will be controlled by the onslaught of advertisements, the media, entertainment, and by their emotions. They will be indulgent rather than free.

On the other hand, children also need breaks between periods of concentration and study, and they need time to act freely out of their own inspirations. Healthy ‘breathing’ in education has periods of focused teacher led activity followed by free play. This supports children’s balanced development, supports digestion and integration of the lessons they have been learning, and helps them form their own moral compasses.

Waldorf teachers plan their classes to meet the natural rhythms of their students. They structure their lessons so as to foster healthy inbreathing, with activities that require concentration and focus,
and healthy outbreathing, which allows for the expression of feelings and thoughts and the release of energy. They work sympathetically with the students’ major circadian rhythms (their daily cycle of waking and sleeping). They take into consideration the cycles of the day, week, month, season, and year when planning their classes and other school activities. Following these rhythms lessens some of the hard work of learning and teaching. ‘Rhythm replaces strength!’ is a very helpful Waldorf teacher motto.

Art and the Artistic: Carrying out Waldorf Education

Pondering all this, you enter the grade 5 classroom and immediately notice a detailed map of Ancient Greece drawn on the chalkboard. Students’ versions of Greek artwork adorn the lazard walls. A display of flowers and driftwood is behind the teacher, who is standing telling the class a story.

... Zeus was sitting by Lake Triton suffering from a terrible headache. His head pounded, and the pain was unbearable. He had eaten Metis, the goddess of cleverness, to avoid a prophecy. Nevertheless, the headache became so bad that he begged the blacksmith, Hephaestus, to split open his head with his ax. When he did so, the Goddess Athena leapt out, fully grown and in full armour. Athena quickly won the heart of Zeus and became his most beloved daughter, the goddess of wisdom...

Ancient Greek history, a cultural flowering that lasted little more than 150 years and yet has had profound impact on culture up to this day, is taught in Waldorf schools when the students are in the golden age of childhood, just before the advent of puberty. Their bodies are in a wonderfully balanced proportion and harmony. Their minds are not yet distracted by all the inner and outer changes that are soon to come. They love listening to stories from mythology and history as they are told to them by heart. They drink in accounts such as this, and how democracy was born in the small city-state named after Athena, Athens, and how, every four years, all battles were put on hold so that athletes could travel to Olympia to pay homage to the gods through their competitions. These tales enthral the students and inspire in them their growing sense of self and of the value of the shared ideals of humanity.

In this 5th grade year, Waldorf students come together with students from other regional schools to create their own Olympic Pentathlons, in which grace and teamwork are valued every bit as much as speed and strength. Dressed in togas they have designed and often sewn themselves, they come together for a weekend of sharing, competition, and friendship. These are remarkable gatherings in which they are all encouraged to shine and make new friends. It enables them to live more deeply into this rich curriculum they have been working with in their classrooms.

The event begins with each class making an offering of a poem, song, or play the students have learned. Then, the students are divided across classes into city-states to compete in the five events of the classic Greek Pentathlon: wrestling, long jump, javelin, discus, and running. Everyone has opportunities to excel as their classroom curriculum comes to life through their own efforts. Here, the best of Ancient Greece is celebrated. They experience this while making new friends and working together on the athletic field. By coming together and creating a community, they see how this process enlivens them in return.

Waldorf education is filled with artistic work created and being created by both students and teachers. Students sing and recite poetry. They draw and paint. They perform dramas and eurythmy. They model with clay and learn how to knit. “[I]f children are being educated only intellectually, their inborn capacities and their human potentials become seriously impaired and wither away” (Steiner, 1986, p. 17).

Art is the gateway to the soul. Waldorf teachers make use of every opportunity to engage the students in this way as they teach them what they need to learn to become adults who are both
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self-fulfilled and ready to contribute their gifts to society. However, this alone is not all that is meant by teaching artistically. It also refers to the artistic ways in which the teachers conceive of and present their lessons, how they interact with their students and colleagues, and how they imagine and structure their school as a creative learning community. Flexibility and spontaneity based on the needs of the students in the moment take precedence over the details of predetermined lesson plans. This artistic ideal is imbued in all facets of how Waldorf schools function.

Careful Observation: A First Step toward Understanding and Truth

You decide to visit one more class, grade 7. When you enter, you see the windows have been completely blacked out. You take a seat in the back of the room, and notice that the cracks around the door have also been covered. The teacher begins. “Our world is filled with light. It makes it possible for us to see. It helps plants to grow. It reveals the colors. Where does this light come from?”

There are a number of enthusiastic answers. “The sun.” “Light bulbs.” “Stars.”

“Yes,” responds the teacher. “There are a number of sources of light. But, what is its nature? What is light? Can we see light itself? Before we try to answer these questions, let’s have an experience of the absence of light, complete darkness, and try to notice all that we can. This may make it easier for us to understand light itself. It is important that we are silent so that we can observe without distractions, using all of our senses.” With that, the teacher turns off the lights.

The room falls into complete darkness and silence. As you adjust to this darkness you notice many things: that your eyes are adjusting, that the space feels larger. You may see dots of light, or feel scared or nervous. . . . You come to notice that your eyes can no longer see anything, not even your hand in front of your face. Then the teacher, using a rheostat and a hidden light source, gradually brings light into the room and asks the students to observe what is happening both in the room and in themselves. “What are the first things you notice? What comes next?” A rich discussion follows.

After this, the students are asked to write a poem about darkness and light. These are shared over subsequent days and are added to their main lesson books. More experiments revealing the mysterious nature of light are carried out. Through this rigorous phenomenological process, the teacher leads the students to ever-deeper levels of insight into, questions about, and interest in the physical world.

Waldorf teachers “want to learn from the nature of the developing child how children want to develop themselves as human beings, that is, how their nature, their essence should develop to become truly human.” (Steiner, 1995, p. 55) They know that their students want to be led—to be shown what is worthy to do and to know—and they are expected to discover how to best do this for their particular students. Out of a deep knowledge of the stages and progression of child development and of love for their students, they try to make what they teach relevant and come alive for their students. They try to identify their students’ strengths so that they can work through them to help their students overcome their weaknesses. They support their students in the unfolding of their inherent capacities. Through following their teacher’s guidance at this age, students will gain the possibility of attaining the capacity for free initiative as adults.

Main Lessons: Depth Rather Than Fragmentation

The first two hours of a Waldorf school day begin with an intensive block of study called Main Lesson. This is the heart of the school day, led by the main teacher, who teaches the same class of students over many years; ideally from 1st through 8th grade. As Waldorf schools are founded on the ideal of individual striving in the context of long-term supportive relationships, teachers go through many years with their students. They grow apace with them and, thus, provide a model of a life being lived working towards mastery.
Main lesson blocks focus on one subject for three to four consecutive weeks, after which this subject is allowed to rest and a new subject taken up. Focusing on one subject (i.e., math, science, history, or language arts) intensively facilitates a deep level of engagement. These highly integrated, teacher-led lessons build upon each other from day to day, enabling students to strengthen their thinking (head), feeling (heart), and willing (hands). Such immersion fosters interest and allows time for effective and efficient learning.

Waldorf teachers introduce a new main lesson block with an oral story and/or an experiment. Listening to a story allows students to exercise their creative imagination. Observing an experiment allows students to take notice of something carefully, from which they then describe all that their senses experienced in detail. Both strengthen sense perception and concentration.

Teachers begin main lessons with a variety of awakening activities that include movement, recitation, singing, math skills practice, discussion, and recorder playing. These focus the students’ attention, harmonize the class, and prepare them for work on the theme. There then follow academic and artistic activities to deepen student engagement, including writing essays, drawing sketches, painting pictures, modeling clay sculptures, solving problems, and doing further experiments.

Waldorf students create their own textbooks. They are given blank notebooks, into which they write essays, poems, and explanations, do calculations and measurements, and paint and draw pictures. They often add colourful borders to enhance the beauty of their books. They turn these blank notebooks into much cherished treasures. Each page reveals how well the student is connecting with the materials and themes being studied as well as how the student’s abilities to express herself/himself are developing. These are tangible, reliable expressions of each student’s capabilities, weaknesses, and progress. This is their work.

Curricula: Integrated Rather Than Disconnected

Let us now take a look in detail at Grade 7 Astronomy, an exciting block in the Waldorf science curriculum, to see how it fits into the overall Waldorf approach to pedagogy. The Waldorf science curriculum builds from kindergarten onwards, giving the students as many direct experiences of natural phenomena as possible. In the younger grades, science is not so much taught as it is directly experienced. More formal science education begins in grade 4 (the same year as fractions), when the
children are waking up to their separateness from others. Here begins the study of zoology, followed by botany in grade 5, and geology in grade 6. The study of Astronomy begins in grade 7, when students are ready and interested to learn about the ‘fixed’ and ‘wandering’ lights of the sky. They have learned about the world around them (in botany and zoology) and the world beneath them (in geology). Now, it is time to encourage them to look up. They have observed the sun, moon, stars, and planets for years, but do not really know much about them or their movements. It is an opportunity for students to begin to discern assumption from observation as well as theory from fact.

Waldorf teachers begin with a geocentric (earth-centered) perspective and later look from a heliocentric (sun-centered) perspective. It is vital that the students first understand how the night sky appears from the earth, from their own human perspective. This affirms their place on earth, their earth citizenship, and their own capacities to learn about the world through their own efforts. The movements of the sun, moon, stars, and planets are complex. They stretch the students’ ability to observe with care and think with patience before leaping to conclusions.

While the students wrestle to understand the connections between how the heavens move and what they see, they learn about the work of astronomers since ancient times. The lives of Ptolemy, Copernicus, Tycho de Brahe, and Galileo, for example, offer fascinating pictures of human striving for understanding and the many impediments that stand in its way. Their knowledge was hard won, as were the moral struggles that came along with it. Did they have the convictions and the courage to believe, and to tell others, what they saw with their very own eyes?

Once students have penetrated this earth-based perspective and strengthened their capacities for detailed observation and reflection, they are ready to experience the leap in understanding that comes with the heliocentric perspective. What was complex and beautiful now seems simpler and easier to understand, but where has man, the observer, placed himself in order to gain this perspective? The students soon realize that the observer is no longer on the earth. They soon realize that they can think this heliocentric model even if they have never actually seen it. They are consciously being led from sensory-based knowledge towards abstraction.

After studying the movements of the starry world for a few weeks, the teacher organizes a night observation. What might this be like?

It is a cold winter night. The eager students and teacher are dressed in multiple warm layers. Talking in whispers, they walk to the middle of an open field and lay back in the snow. Silence. There are some clouds in the western sky, but not many. Orion’s belt is spotted quickly to the east, and then the whole of the hunter’s constellation appears. The big dipper is found nearly directly overhead, and Polaris is identified in the north. “Oh, I found Taurus’ horns,” one student softly cries out. The students had learned about the constellations they might see in class and what to look for. But, as the clouds pass by, what is this very bright star in the western sky so close to the thin crescent moon? And look, there’s another bright star near the moon that seems to be reddish, not white. These are things to research the next day in the warm classroom.

This is one of many ways students can enter fully into the subject of astronomy. It is important to be mindful of their awakening capacities for logical thinking at this age and to use these to harness their interest in the outer world. As they enter puberty, teenagers’ inner world, as well as their ever-fluid status in their social groups, may become compelling. This can consume their thinking, feelings, and will if teachers, and other adults, do not support them to draw their attention back into the outer world.

It is equally important to connect the astronomy block with other themes in the 7th grade year so that the curriculum unfolds as a coherent, interwoven tapestry. It is planned in the context of the expanding worldview of the Renaissance. The students have journeyed from the graceful ideals of Ancient Greece in grade 5 through the raw power of the Roman Empire and into the dark ages that descended upon Western culture with the collapse of Rome in grade 6. The students have gone through a similar journey in their inner lives from harmony, to power, to disunion. Now, in grade 7,
new capacities are waiting to be born, and the many-faceted discoveries in the arts, sciences, and ideals of the Renaissance resonate deeply with the students. Their growing body of knowledge, insight, and interest matter to them as they try to understand the world and their place in it.

**Leading Toward Freedom: The Final Goal**

In addition to being based on an understanding of children’s physical, emotional, and psychological development as unfolding in a sequence of predetermined stages, Waldorf education is founded on a holistic understanding of the human being as comprising body, soul, and spirit. The physical body is enlivened by the capacities of the person’s soul for thinking, feeling, and willing. The body and soul are, in turn, guided in life through inspirations from the person’s eternal spirit and by divine grace. Waldorf pedagogy stands as an antidote to the pervasive materialism and the malaise of meaninglessness that plague our world. It emerges from a deep study of body, soul, and spirit as expounded in the work of anthroposophy. If we take the notion of a spiritual aspect of human existence seriously (not just as a matter of blind faith), then the implications for this in life and education are profound. Each human being matters. In each relationship, we meet an element of the divine in the other. All of life’s experiences are meaning-filled and form part of a larger meaning-filled whole. This spiritual perspective reveals deeper layers of holism that inform Waldorf education. These explorations are central to the work of Waldorf teachers and faculties.

Educators can only aim at ‘freedom’ obliquely. If they try to teach it directly, they will miss the mark every time. All true education is self-education. Educators may teach lessons, but “it is really the children who educate themselves through [the teacher]” (Steiner, 2007a, p. 126). Waldorf teachers know that their teaching can only be effective if it connects with their students’ feelings, engages their will, and sparks their thinking. This is why they teach directly out of themselves, from what they have made their own, not out of textbooks. It is also why flexibility and the artistic element are so central to the way Waldorf education is carried out. Teaching must stir the students’ hearts and souls for them to learn, not solely address their intellect, which is still mostly dormant.

The long-term goal of Waldorf education is to help students become free individuals in adulthood. This informs every teacher’s preparations, presentations, and interactions with students. Being free means the ability to view and consider things objectively and not to be swayed by personal preferences or prejudices; the ability to care about others as well as oneself and to put one’s will into action based on one’s objective judgments; the ability to base one’s actions on one’s thinking instead of only one’s feelings. Waldorf teachers are not teaching freedom, nor are they allowing children to do freely whatever they want. They are creating safety, warmth, and rhythm to best offer students engaging activities that will enable them to become free in their inner beings as adults.

**Beginnings: The First ‘Free’ Waldorf School**

The school was called ‘free’ for a number of reasons. It was not bound by pedagogical regulations set by the state. There was no outside body controlling the curriculum, the teaching schedule or methods, the hiring of the teachers, or the enrollment of students. It was revolutionary in that teachers were free to decide what and how to teach. Classes were not divided by gender, as was common at the time. Although the first students were factory workers’ children, it was planned that the students would eventually come from all social, religious, and economic strata. This was soon the case. Religious beliefs and ability to pay tuition were also not considerations in admission. Most importantly, the teachers and the whole school would “work for the [children’s] freedom, in the truest sense of the word” (Steiner, 2007b, p. 124).

In the wake of the massive destruction and social upheaval caused by the First World War, Rudolf Steiner founded the Waldorf School to counter the continuing worldwide tendencies towards
nationalism. The school offered a comprehensive, holistic education, featuring the arts and crafts integrated with academic studies. The aim was to foster each child’s tolerance of others, abilities to engage in life’s tasks in practical ways, and creativity. Central to achieving this was a well-balanced curriculum, motivation through the arts, and deep respect for individuality. As Steiner said,

We can be certain that, if we respect human freedom, our teaching will place people in the world as free beings. We can be certain that the root of education can develop freely if we do not enslave children to a dogmatic curriculum. Later in life, under the most varied circumstances, children can develop appropriately as free human beings.

(Steiner, 1996, pp. 41–42)

Enrollment in the first Waldorf school increased dramatically (from 300 to 1,200 students in five years) as did interest in the school by other cities and countries. By 1928, it was the largest non-denominational school in Germany, and other Waldorf schools soon opened in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Norway, Austria, Hungary, England, and the United States.

Now, nearly 100 years on, Waldorf education is still at the forefront of holistic pedagogical practices and educational research, with over 2,000 independent Waldorf schools and early childhood centers in over 60 countries around the world (Waldorf World List, 2016). Most of these are privately funded. Others are government funded, and all are modeled after the holistic intentions established by the first. Each school is founded by the communities it will serve. The cultural and geographic contexts and socio-economic needs and opportunities are central considerations in its subject offerings, festival life, and structures. Each school is a unique expression of Waldorf education in its local context while maintaining connections with the original founding intentions of the first school. This can be seen in the motto of the Waldorf school movement:

Accept the children with reverence,
Educate them with love,
Send them forth in freedom.

(Petrash, 2002, p. 16)

Notes
1 The vignettes included are of Main Lesson classes. See Cohen & Bresnihan (2017) and Petrash (2002) for others.
2 For examples of pages and details from main lesson books, see Carlgren (1976).

References