



Montessori Education and Waldorf Education

There are many similarities between these two educational movements. Both were started in Europe in the last century and now have schools all around the world. Both have time-tested educational philosophies that offer modern parents a choice to the public-school options in the United States. In terms of the challenges they face in 2019, Montessori and Waldorf schools struggle to maintain the authenticity of the founder's principles.

With these similarities stated there are important differences. The most significant difference is that many Montessori schools have embraced the modern trend of early conceptual training. Whether this is congruent with the Montessori philosophy is up to the experts to decide. It is not consistent with the Waldorf philosophy.

Waldorf Schools see child development unfolding in three distinct seven-year cycles. Each seven-year period has unique characteristics. From birth to seven years, the child is engaged in endless imitation. This is why Waldorf Kindergarten classrooms emphasize beautiful spaces. The child soaks in everything in their environment, the behavior of the adults as well as the classroom aesthetic. During this first cycle, play is the child's work. The kindergarten offers a play-based experiential learning environment which is in stark contrast to the early academic schools and their "pressure cooker classrooms." ¹

The Waldorf view of child development given by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, is aligned with the child development scientist Jean Piaget's research. Piaget discovered that rational thought and the corresponding adult intellect naturally dawn at the *advent of puberty*. Before that, from the age of 7 to 14, the child lives in a realm of fantasy and imagination which serve as the foundation for the formal thinking that emerges in the 14-21-year phase. One could see the change of teeth as the beginning of this second 7-year cycle of development, and puberty marking the end of the second and the beginning of the third. From this perspective, it is misguided to use an intellectual approach during the second 7-year period. If you were to visit a Waldorf School high school, you would find a rigorous academic environment. The third seven-year period is the appropriate time to train the intellect not the second phase.

For these reasons Waldorf Schools do not engage the children in early conceptual learning. Rather, the facts of reading, writing and arithmetic, are imbedded in an imaginative language that corresponds to the child's consciousness during that phase. This is a story-based style of teaching from fairy tales in grade one to Roman Mythology in grade six.

Seventeen years after the beginning of the "No Child Left Behind" legislation, studies have shown that putting pressure on young children and asking them to do things they are not ready to do has resulted in alarming increases in anxiety from two years of age and into adolescence. ²

Why are we rushing and pressuring our children? If we look to the natural world, it is the *simplest* creatures that develop the fastest. Insects live whole lifetimes in a month. My dog Bruno was a pup



one day and a full-fledged adult two years later. Human beings are extremely complex creatures and *very slow to develop* into adulthood. Science tells us it takes humans 18 to 21 years to reach maturity. In the Waldorf schools we allow children to be children during the “pre-intellectual” phase and the evidence shows this is profoundly beneficial and gives the students the experience that learning is fun which is a fundamental attitude of life-long learners.

The most essential difference between Montessori and Waldorf is the role of the teacher in the grade school. In Montessori the work in the classroom is led by the interest of the student. Teachers let the student decide what to work on and then guides them. In Waldorf Schools the work in the classroom is led by the main lesson teacher who follows the students through the grades. The teacher becomes the “lens to the world” for the child. The students trust in the teacher and look up to her as an authority. As the main lesson teacher follows the students through the grades the bonds with the children and the parents grow deeper and stronger. The children thrive when the circle of adults who love them and have their best interests in mind is expanded. To have someone they can look to for guidance is soothing to the young child.

To find out more about The Acorn School, please visit our website at www.aschas.org.

Notes

1. The non-profit advocacy group Alliance for Childhood based just outside of Washington, D.C., issued a report titled “Crisis in the Kindergarten: why Children Need to Play in Schools,” drawing from nine new studies of public-school classrooms around the country. Kindergartners in the studies spent four to six times as much of the school day being drilled in literacy and math as they did playing.
2. For children aged 3-17 years with anxiety, more than 1 in 3 also have behavior problems (37.9%) and about 1 in 3 also have depression (32.3%).
<https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/> data

The author, Lee D. Stevens, Ph.D., is a Psychologist and Educator. He serves as the Director of The Acorn School of Charleston which he and his wife Alecia founded in 2014. Dr. Stevens worked as a Waldorf Class Teacher for 20 years at schools in Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles and New York City.