

Get On With It:
Why Waldorf Teachers Should Teach Literacy Skills
Wholeheartedly and Unabashedly in Grades 1–3

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Are Waldorf schools teaching students in grades 1–3 to write, read, and spell, or not?

Since publishing *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3*, I have heard from teachers who say that they are encountering resistance when they attempt to teach their students basic literacy skills in grades 1–3. The heart of the problem is Steiner’s indications, which are contradictory. Both sides can point to something Steiner says to justify a robust literacy program or a less direct approach to teaching. This article explores Steiner’s indications and debunks some common Waldorf myths. It touches upon the perils of translation and the difference between number systems. It examines the differences between German and English, shows why the schedule Steiner outlined is so ineffective for teaching language arts skills in grades 1–3, and presents a simple solution. This article offers a justification for teaching literacy in grades 1–3 wholeheartedly and unabashedly in Waldorf schools. It shows that a robust literacy program in grades 1–3 is in alignment with the spirit of Waldorf education and is a necessity for English-speaking Waldorf students.

Steiner’s Indications are Contradictory

Steiner has many indications that suggest that teaching reading is a problem, but he also is clear that Waldorf students need to be caught up with their peers by the end of third grade. This contradiction is at the heart of the conflict.

Steiner’s indications are contradictory. In *Waldorf Education for Adolescence*, Steiner claims that students who can read and write well at age nine grow up to become automatons and those students who are held back from reading and writing become complete human beings (101). In *The Kingdom of Childhood*, Steiner says, “It is a very bad thing to be able to write early. Reading and Writing as we have them today are really not suited to the human being till a later age, in the eleventh or twelfth year, and the more one is blessed with not being able to read and write well before this age, the better it is for the later years of life” (44). However, Steiner also says that students must be caught up with their peers by the end of third grade and must be able to switch schools without difficulty (2003, 126–127). This indication means that rising fourth-grade Waldorf students should be able to write, read, and spell as well as their public-school peers.

How can Waldorf teachers reconcile these contradictory indications when each side has a reasonable point? No one wants to harm the children, but Waldorf students must be taught academics.

When to Teach Academics

Since Waldorf education is based on child development, the place to start is to determine the age to begin formal academic schooling.

Steiner is clear that the time to start academic education is the change of teeth, which represents the freeing of the etheric body. In *The Kingdom of Childhood*, Steiner says, “The independent activity of the etheric body of man only really begins at the change of teeth. . . . [The etheric body] becomes free, emancipates itself with the change of teeth at the seventh year. Then it can work as an activity of soul” (110). In *The Education of the Child*, Steiner gives an example, “Because the capacity to understand what things *mean* is a function of the etheric body, the child should not learn the significance of the letters of the alphabet before the change of teeth” (56). Based on these indications, the students are ready to begin literacy at the change of teeth, which occurs at age six.

Yes, you read that right: students are ready to learn academic skills such as writing, reading, and spelling at age six, during their seventh year, at the change of teeth. Steiner frequently refers to the seventh year or the eighth year. They are not the same as age seven and age eight, as shown in table 1.

Table 1

Ages: 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Years: year 1	year 2	year 3	year 4	year 5	year 6	year 7	

Katherine E. Creeger, translator of *First Lecture on the Curriculum* found in *Discussions with Teachers*, takes up the difficulty of translating years into ages:

The German translates literally as “in their eighth or ninth year” and is sometimes mistranslated in English as “eight or nine years old”; thus references to beginning school in “the seventh year” can be taken to mean that “children shouldn’t go to school until they are seven.” What Steiner said, however, was “in the seventh year of their life—that is, “six-going-on-seven.” Trans. (186)

Waldorf education is based on child development. The time for students to begin academic work is at the change of teeth, which occurs in the seventh year, or at age six-going-on-seven. This age corresponds to first grade in the Waldorf schools.

When Does Steiner Say That Students Should Be Taught to Write and Read?

Now that the starting age for education is clear (i.e., age six, at the change of teeth), it is good to consider when Steiner recommends teaching writing and reading. Steiner is clear: writing and reading instruction belong in grades 1–3. There are many indications to back up this position:

In *First Lecture on the Curriculum*, Steiner says that by the end of first grade, the students should “be able to write simple things that we say to them or that they compose themselves” (1997, 184). He also says that they should also be able to read what they have written (*ibid*).

In *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner Volume 1*, Steiner twice states that age eight or nine is the ideal age for Waldorf students to learn to read (1998, 314 and 316).

In *Soul Economy*, Steiner states that Waldorf students should be caught up with their peers in other school systems by the end of third grade, sixth grade, and eighth grade. He states:

In my letter to the authorities, I stated that, on completion of the third school year, our students would have reached the same standards of basic education as those achieved in other schools and thus would be able to change schools without difficulty. . . .

Similarly, I said that our teaching between the end of the ninth and twelfth years—from the end of class three to the end of class six—is intended to achieve standards comparable with those of other schools and that our students would be able to enter seventh grade in another school without falling behind.

. . . And if a student needs to leave our school at the age of fourteen, there should be no problems when entering a high school or any other school leading to a university entrance examination. (Steiner 2003, 126–127)

For good measure, Steiner repeats the dictum that Waldorf students must be taught to read and write at the age it is expected of them in *The Kingdom of Childhood* (140). These five indications bring home the point: Waldorf teachers are to teach students to write and read in grades 1–3.

Therefore, formal literacy instruction begins in first grade. The first block should contain the letter pictures that Steiner describes so often in his lectures (e.g., the B/bear and the M/mountain or mouth). This block helps students make the transition from the imitation stage of their first seven years (ages 0–6) to the authority stage (change of teeth through puberty) which characterizes grades 1–8. Then Waldorf teachers are advised to move forward and teach the students the sounds for the rest of the letters of the alphabet. In English, this advice would include the common consonant digraphs that enable the 26 letters to cover the 40+ sounds in the English language. These consonant digraphs include the five most common because they appear in common sight words (e.g., TH in *the, this, that*; SH in *she*; WH in *what, when, which*; CH in *which*; and NG, which shows up in the ubiquitous suffix -ing). The students

will not be able to write and read simple things that they compose themselves by the end of first grade if they do not know the letters of the alphabet and the common consonant digraphs that make up so many sight words.

But You're Hurting the Children

A common objection to teaching the digraphs in first grade is that a robust literacy program harms the students. Teachers who espouse this position can point to numerous indications from Steiner to support their position. Steiner suggests that teaching writing in reading in grades 1–3 harms the students on numerous occasions. However, there is an interesting fact about these indications: they tend to show up as counterarguments in favor of Waldorf methodology rather than arguments in favor of postponing literacy instruction until the students are older.

Steiner never actually says that teachers should postpone writing and reading instruction. Instead, he uses these indications about the desirability of later writing and reading proficiency to argue against traditional educational practices such as rote learning. He also uses them to argue in favor of Waldorf methodologies that involve the whole child but produce later writing and reading. This point becomes clear when Steiner's indications are dissected and placed into a logical sequence.

It is necessary to revise Steiner's arguments to bring this point home. The organization of Steiner's arguments differs markedly in his books and in his lectures. When writing books, Steiner is logical to a fault and very organized. In lectures, Steiner's delivery can most charitably be described as stream of consciousness. He delivers his thesis statements, supporting details, and conclusion sentences in random order—sometimes pages apart. Reading a Steiner lecture requires some mental gymnastics to reconstruct his arguments. The following indications come from lectures, and they are dissected and restructured in standard persuasive paragraph/essay format for clarity in order to make a point:

Dissection of Indication about Automatons in *Waldorf Education for Adolescence* (100–101)

- Thesis: Teach and practice reading and writing through letter pictures, Eurythmy, art, music, and writing rather than rote drill exercises.
 - Supporting Material 1: Letter pictures do not alienate the child.
 - Supporting Material 2: Art (letter pictures) brings the content of the lesson closer to the student.
 - Supporting Material 3: Eurythmy involves the body and imbues the work with soul and spirit.
 - Supporting Material 4: Listening to singing does the same thing.
 - Supporting Material 5: Writing the content of language the students are learning is beneficial. (Note: It is not clear whether the students are copying the language or are doing Kid Writing and composing the material themselves.)

- Supporting Material 6: Rote drill exercises for reading and writing disregard soul and spirit (e.g., making the students write an A or an E through rote learning).
- Conclusion: Bring the two sides of instruction together so that the student can be complete and whole.
- Counterargument: While parents will complain that their eight-year-old children cannot read or write, it is only because they don't know how bad it is to inoculate foreign things in the children. Doing so creates automatons. It trains the child in the same way we train animals.

What is clear is that Steiner is advocating a holistic way of teaching. He wants the students to experience reading and writing in a multitude of ways, and he is saying that it is not a problem if the students learn to read and write later than their peers who learn through rote. Healthy education is one that involves art, movement, and the entire human being, not one that that downplays academic work. Steiner is opening a polemic against rote learning. He is not saying that teaching students who are seven or eight to read and write makes them automatons. It is *how* they are taught that *could* makes them automatons. One-sided education will make students learn faster, but their learning will be unbalanced. Therefore, Waldorf teachers should not teach exclusively through rote.

The same pattern emerges when other indications are dissected and reassembled:

Dissection of Steiner's Indication about Late Reading and Writing Being Desirable in *The Kingdom of Childhood* (40–44)

- Thesis: Teach out of imagination from the change of teeth until puberty (e.g., pictures and images).
 - Supporting Material 1: Teach letter pictures for consonant letters (e.g., the mountain for the letter *M*.)
 - Supporting Material 2: Use the picture to arrive at the sound and the letter.
 - Supporting Material 3: Do not teach reading first—teach drawing-painting and painting-drawing and let the letters arise out of these. Then teach reading.
 - Supporting Material 4: Teach vowels through emotions and interjections. Paint the gesture and show how the vowel letter emerges out of it. Then have the students do Eurythmy. The students get the vowels from the gesture and movement.
- Conclusion 1: Use observation and imagination so the students know the sounds and letters from the things themselves. Start with the picture, not the letters.
- Counterargument: “People will object that the children then learn to read and write too late. This is only said because it is not known today how harmful it is when the children learn to read and write too soon” (44). It is bad when students can read and write perfectly at age seven or eight. Reading and writing are more suited to students who are

10 or 11 (eleventh or twelfth year). Students who cannot write properly at 13 or 14 are more suited to spiritual development than students who write perfectly at ages 7 or 8 (ibid).

- Conclusion 2: “Naturally one will not be able to proceed as one really should today because the children have to pass from your Independent School into public life. But a very great deal can be done nevertheless when one knows these things. . . . It is quite wrong to teach reading before writing” (44). The reason it is wrong is that reading only involves the head, whereas writing involves the whole student.

When Steiner makes this claim about later reading, he is just trying to allay fears about how much time it would take to teach the first letters through pictures. Steiner is using hyperbole to make a point in his counterargument—he is not saying that students should not be taught to read until age 10 or 11. This fact becomes clear when this indication is compared with the rest of Steiner’s indications about teaching reading. See the five indications cited in the above subsection entitled “When Does Steiner Say That Students Should Be Taught to Write and Read?”.

These two examples show that pulling an indication out of the context of its larger argument creates a false impression. Steiner’s indications tend to be nuanced, but he is prone to using hyperbole in his counterarguments, and that hyperbole can distort his meaning—especially when it is taken out of context.

How to Reconcile Opposites (i.e., the Fact that Education Can Hurt the Children with the Indications on Teaching Writing and Reading in Grades 1–3)

Steiner’s indications appear to be pointing in opposite directions. On the one hand, education can harm the students. On the other hand, Steiner is clear that teachers must teach literacy skills in grades 1–3. How can Waldorf teachers reconcile the contradictions?

Here is one suggestion: Waldorf students are taught to write and read in grades 1–3, but not through one-sided education and rote learning. This interpretation matches Steiner’s indications from “Knowledge of Health and Illness” in *Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 1*:

When we receive a child into our school, we are expected to teach and train the youngster. We introduce all kinds of activities, such as writing, reading, and arithmetic, but really we are assaulting the child’s nature. Suppose that we are to give reading lessons. If taught in the traditional way, they are certainly one-sided, for we make no appeal to the child’s whole being. Essentially, we are actually cultivating a malformation, even a predisposition toward illness. And, when teaching writing, we are cultivating a tendency toward illness in another direction. In teaching young children, we are making

assaults on them all of the time, even if this is not always evident because the illness lies hidden and dormant. Nevertheless, we have to make continual attacks up the children. At our stage of civilization there is no other way. But we must find ways and means of making amends for those continual assaults on our children's health. We must be clear that arithmetic represents a malformation, writing a second malformation, and reading a third malformation, not to speak of history or geography! There is no end to it and it leads us into a real quandary. To balance out those malformations, we must constantly provide what will make good the damage; we must harmonize what has been disturbed in the child. It is most important to be aware of the fact that, on one hand, we must teach children various subjects but that, on the other, we must ensure that, when we do so, we are not hurting them. The right method in education therefore asks: How do I heal the child from the attacks which I continually inflict? Awareness of this must be present in every right form of education. (Trostli, 168)

Steiner is clear: The things children are expected to learn are an assault on their nature. One-sided education harms the students—it can even predispose students towards illness. However, educating the children is mandatory; given our civilization, there is no other way.

Steiner's solution is interesting. He does not say that teachers should refrain from teaching academics. He does not say that teachers should water down the academics or try to postpone teaching students to read beyond the third grade. Instead, he counsels Waldorf teachers to counter the damage they must do when they teach the children academics. Since teaching in a one-sided way cultivates illness, he advises teachers to teach in a wide variety of ways. Thus, the necessary damage is balanced out, and students receive the education they need for today's civilization. This type of education is outlined in my first book, *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3*, co-authored with Janet Langley.

Get On With It

Waldorf teachers are instructed to teach academics in grades 1–3. It is vitally important that Waldorf students catch up with their peers in basic reading, writing, spelling, and math skills by the end of third grade. There are numerous reasons:

First, recall that Steiner says that Waldorf students must be caught up with their peers by the end of third grade (2003, 126–127).

Second, Waldorf students must be free to switch schools. They cannot do so freely if their Waldorf education does not equip them to succeed in a more academically rigorous environment.

Third, students with anemic literacy skills are ill prepared for fourth grade in any educational system—including Waldorf. The entire Waldorf curriculum changes in fourth grade. It switches from skills blocks to subject blocks. Waldorf students who are not prepared to make this transition cannot benefit fully from their Waldorf education.

Finally, literacy is more than just being able to write, read, and spell—those are merely literacy *skills*. They are a prerequisite for achieving a different kind of literacy—that is, the knowledge of the world and humanity necessary to become a literate human being.

For these reasons, Waldorf teachers in grades 1–3 are advised to get on with it and to teach the students to write, read, and spell wholeheartedly, unabashedly, and without reservation. However, there are two roadblocks that will make this goal difficult for English-speaking Waldorf teachers and students: 1) the fact that English is not German; and 2) the problem with putting literacy skills to sleep at the end of main lesson blocks. Waldorf teachers and the greater Waldorf movement must address these points.

English is Not German

The first roadblock is the fact that Steiner’s indications for teaching literacy are for a foreign language—German. How big of a problem is transferring Steiner’s indications for German to English?

The answer: It is a huge problem. It is much easier to learn to write and read in German than in English.

Both German and English are phonetic languages, but the German language is more phonetic than English, as shown in table 2.

Table 2

Perfectly phonetic language	Phonetic languages			Non-phonetic language
*	*	*	*	*
Esperanto	German	French	English	Chinese

These differences in the languages translate into differences in learning outcomes: it takes English-speaking students longer to learn to read than it does German-speaking students. This fact has been verified by science. In *The Roadmap to Literacy*, I state:

It takes longer for English-speaking students to develop literacy skills than it does for students learning other languages. For example, at the end of 1st Grade, it has been found that German students read common German words with 98% accuracy, whereas, English students read common English words with 34% accuracy (Ziegler 2006, 430). Even more significant, it takes English-speaking students until the 3rd or 4th Grade to attain the same level that the German-speaking students reach at the end of 1st Grade (Ziegler 2006, 432). Other studies show the same effect. “Even at the age of nine, a French child does not read as well as a seven-year-old German. British children only attain the reading proficiency of their French counterparts after close to two full years of additional teaching” (Dehaene 2009, 230–231). (14)

When a German-speaking Waldorf teacher and an English-speaking Waldorf teacher both follow Steiner’s advice and allow their students to come into literacy skills on their own through Eurythmy and art, they will not get the same results. Instead, fewer English-speaking students will learn to read and spell. The English-speaking students simply have more material to learn.

As a result, a sizable portion of English-speaking Waldorf classes will not be caught up with their peers in basic literacy skills by the end of third grade, which is what Waldorf schools in the English-speaking world have been observing since the beginning. It is why Waldorf education has a bad reputation. Critics claim that Waldorf does not teach literacy, and they are not wrong. Literacy instruction in a typical Waldorf classroom in the English-speaking world is simply not adequate because it was designed for a foreign language. The Waldorf schedule exacerbates the problem.

The Block Rotation: The Problem with Putting Skills to Sleep at the End of Main Lesson Blocks

The second roadblock is the Waldorf schedule. Steiner set up his block rotation so that subjects would go to sleep at the end of a block. There is a glaring problem with this system: it does not differentiate between subjects and skills. As a result, it makes a bad situation worse when it comes to teaching literacy in English.

When Steiner set up his schedule, he invented blocks of study for different subjects. His objective was to avoid having students learn numerous subjects in one day, one right after another. (He calls this schedule the *timetable*. It is the opposite of main lesson blocks.) For more about blocks and main lessons vs. the timetable, see the following lectures: (Steiner 1997, 22) (Steiner 2003, 120), and (Steiner 1982, 88).

The Waldorf block system works well for subjects such as history and geography. It does not work well for skills such as literacy (reading, writing, spelling) and arithmetic. It does not harm the students when history goes to sleep for a month or two in fourth grade. In fact, Steiner says that forgetting subject matter helps the students, a topic I take up in *Continuing the Journey to Literacy*, the sequel to *The Roadmap to Literacy*. However, forgetting skills does harm the students. Reading skills, spelling skills, writing skills, and arithmetic skills are supposed to

become capacities that the students never forget. The key to developing these capacities is repetition. Repetition enables the brain to make the neural pathways necessary and then myelinate them, or coat them in a fatty sheath, so that the neural pathways never get changed or erased. Under the block system, students do not get the practice they need to myelinate literacy skills and arithmetic skills, *if* these topics are put to sleep for a month at the end of a block.

Steiner himself recognized that blocks of study are inadequate for some 'subjects.' Steiner says, "Many will no doubt object that in this kind of teaching [main lessons in block rotations] the children will forget what they have learnt. This only applies to certain special subjects, e.g., Arithmetic, and can be corrected by frequent little recapitulations" (1982, 88). Steiner never lists the "special subjects" that require "frequent little recapitulations." I propose that the subjects Steiner is referring to are nothing more than skills which require practice.

A good way to teach skills in the Waldorf schedule is to use practice classes: Schedule time for the "frequent little recapitulations" (i.e., *practice*) outside of main lesson blocks. Practice that is not related to the main lesson topic belongs in academic practice classes. The ideal Waldorf schedule would contain one academic practice class per day, and that class would occur in the morning after main lesson. That way the students would get two full hours on one topic in main lesson class and then get 40–50 minutes of practice in a different academic skill in an academic practice class. In grades 1–3 when the main lesson blocks rotate between arithmetic and language arts, such a schedule would guarantee that students get time for language arts skills (e.g., writing, reading, and spelling) and arithmetic skills (e.g., the four processes) every day. Having a daily academic practice class is a slight change to the Waldorf schedule that accommodates the difference between subjects and skills. It enables the block system to work as intended. The students get the benefits of learning subjects in main lesson blocks as well as the academic practice they need to develop literacy and numeracy skills.

The Waldorf Curriculum: Skills Blocks (Grades 1–3) Become Subject Blocks (Grades 4–8)

Why is it so critical that the block system work as intended? It is because Steiner's Waldorf curriculum undergoes a sea change after the nine-year change. The skills blocks of grades 1–3 switch to subject blocks in grades 4–8. Students who do not have the necessary academic skills at the end of third grade are ill equipped to continue the journey to literacy.

Steiner set up the entire Waldorf curriculum so that it would be in alignment with child development. Prior to the nine-year change, the Waldorf main lesson curriculum focuses on academic skills. After the nine-year change, it expands to include academic subjects. In grades 1–3 the students focus on academic skills. In grades 4–8 they learn both skills and subject matter. Waldorf students in fourth grade need the same academic skills as their public-school peers.

It is important to finish teaching students to read by the end of third grade because learning to read is not the same as being literate; it is merely the beginning of a whole new journey into literacy—the journey into subjects! In grades 4–8, the students use their skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic to study the world and the human being. The subject blocks include English, history, geography, natural science, science, and math (i.e., beyond arithmetic). If students still need to be taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, their education suffers. That main lesson class time to continue the study of literacy skills and numeracy skills comes at the expense of the rest of their education—the subject blocks. As a result, the students never become fully literate—the Waldorf teachers either sacrifice time spent on the subject matter so the students can learn to write, read, spell, and do arithmetic, or they sacrifice literacy skills and arithmetic skills so that the students can learn history, geography, natural science, science, and math/s (e.g., geometry and algebra).

For this reason, it is incumbent that all Waldorf teachers get their students up to speed in basic academic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic by the end of third grade.

Conclusion

I have written two books to address teaching literacy in the Waldorf schools. Together, they show Waldorf teachers how to teach all aspects of literacy in alignment with Steiner's indications—both skills and subjects.

My first book is *The Roadmap to Literacy*. (Note: It is co-authored with Janet Langley and contains a few contributions from Patti Connolly.) It focuses on how to teach literacy skills in grades 1–3, including, but not limited to, reading, writing, spelling, and grammar. This book is important for English-speaking Waldorf teachers because it shows how to teach English literacy skills in alignment with Steiner's indications for Waldorf education as well as child development and the phases of the English language.

My second book is *Continuing the Journey to Literacy*. It focuses on both literacy skills and subject content in grades 4–8. It is important because it shows how to expand literacy from simple reading, writing, spelling, and grammar skills to the entire Waldorf curriculum and all the subjects contained therein. It reveals how to teach language arts skills in all subject blocks: English, history, geography, natural science, science, and math. In the process, it shows Steiner's true indications (as opposed to the practices that have grown up over the years) and takes economy in teaching to a whole new level. This is necessary because some of Steiner's indications have been lost over the last 100 years. He has ideas for education that are not yet part of mainstream Waldorf education. (Steiner also has ideas that need to be updated for the twenty-first century. Those aspects are discussed too.)

Together my books show how to teach English literacy in a Waldorf way. They invite the reader to join a larger discussion: how to reform Waldorf education for the next 100 years. You are

invited to join the dialogue. Please check out my website www.renewalofliteracy.com (coming spring 2020) for more information about the books and for more stimulating blog posts and articles. Please take up these topics in faculty meetings, in study groups, and with mentors and mentees. Waldorf education is a great idea—it just has yet to be fully implemented, and it requires some adjustments when it is translated into English. My books can help you navigate the journey to literacy on behalf of your students. I wish you, your students, and your faculty a good trip. Happy travels!

Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl, February 26, 2020

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