Academic Rickets: Why Waldorf Education Should be Balanced (Not Enlivened)

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Nicholas was a Steiner-Waldorf student in middle school who was not completing his homework. I was hired to assess to determine why not. The answer was shocking.

I gave Nicholas a battery of assessments which revealed the problem. Nicholas was able to solve complex story problems intended for high school students; however, empires rose and fell in the time it took him to complete a single problem. Nicholas then failed to complete a page of simple addition and subtraction facts intended for first- and second-grade students. Testing revealed a similarly lopsided profile in Nicholas's reading and writing skills.

Nicholas was not able to complete his homework because he had a severe imbalance between his academic application (i.e., his ability to apply academic skills) and his academic fluency (i.e., his automaticity at basic academic skills such as math facts). His education had given him a severe case of academic rickets.

What is Academic Rickets?

Academic rickets is a term I coined to describe a specific type of imbalance that can show up in Steiner-Waldorf education. The term is inspired by an indication Rudolf Steiner gave to Waldorf teachers.

Healthy education should contain a balance between enlivening processes and dead, structuring processes. Academic rickets develops when education contains too many enlivening processes. Rudolf Steiner stresses the need for balance in education in *Practical Advice to Teachers*:

> "We . . . [feel] in ourselves the urge to enliven what is dying in concepts through . . . pictorial imagination. If you wish to be true educators, you must be on your guard against making everything abstractly uniform. Do not allow yourselves to say that we should not develop the death processes in the human being—that we should avoid training the conceptual realm of ideas in the children. This mistake . . . Is like that of a doctor who . . . then announces, as though he is a great teacher, that bones are a dying part of human beings. Therefore, he says, let us guard people against this dying element by keeping the bones soft and lively. If physicians acted on such an opinion, it would lead to a world of rickety people unable to fulfill their tasks." (Steiner 2000, 32-33)

In other words, education should contain a healthy balance of enlivening processes (e.g., pictorial imagination) and dead, structuring processes. It is foolish to want to make education uniformly enlivening.

Let's consider Steiner's rickets simile to see why this is so. Rickets is a bone disease caused by a dietary imbalance. It makes the dead part of the human being soft and lively. It arises when children receive insufficient vitamin D. It can cause the legs to bow, as shown in the following illustration. The bones literally do not support the human being.

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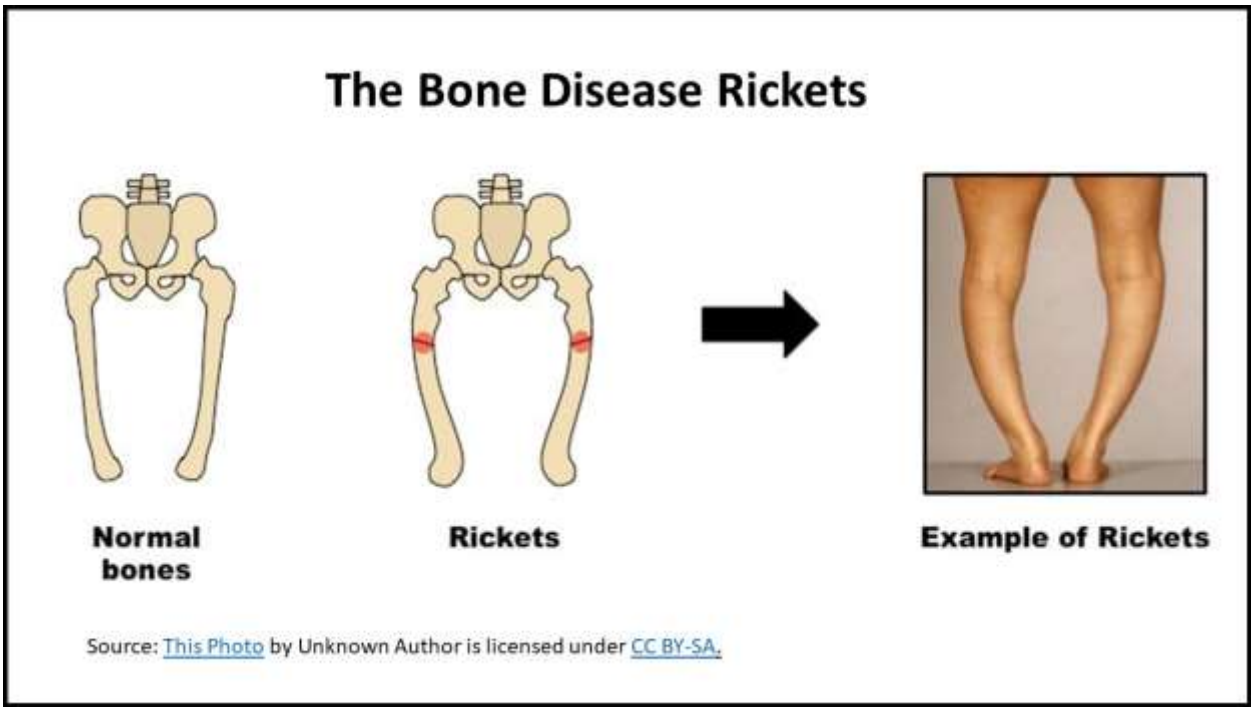

Something similar happens when students receive inadequate amounts of dead, structuring elements in their education: they develop academic rickets. As a result, they can no longer complete their tasks, as happened to Nicholas.

How to Prevent Academic Rickets

When I shared the results of the assessment with Nicholas's Steiner-Waldorf teacher, she asked, "So I should give Nicholas less homework?"

I corrected her: "No, you should give Nicholas different homework. He needs rote practice in the basic academic skills that he should have mastered in grades 1–3, starting with math facts."

The key to preventing academic rickets is to bring the dead, structuring elements. Steiner explains how to do so in a healthy way. Steiner tells Waldorf teachers that they must balance the enlivening processes and the dead, structuring processes. He reminds teachers that "unity does not arise by extinguishing one element, but by developing both sides" (2000, 33).

Therefore, Waldorf teachers should include both enlivening elements and dead, structuring elements in their lessons. Including too many enlivening elements (e.g., imagination, art, and games) is just as unhealthy as including too many dead structuring elements (e.g., rote practice, worksheets, and assessments).

To prevent academic rickets in Waldorf students, do the following:

1. Bring rote practice, worksheets, and assessment to balance the imagination, art, and games.
2. Do formal assessments of students' academic skills and capacities three times a year to see if students are mastering what you have taught.

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3. Use the assessment results to correct imbalances in academic skills, application, and fluency when they first appear, rather than waiting until a student has developed a full-blown case of academic rickets, as happened to Nicholas.

Conclusion

Nicholas was the first Steiner-Waldorf student I encountered with academic rickets, but he would not be the last. After assessing numerous Steiner-Waldorf students who were suffering from academic rickets, I would add to my advice:

"Steiner-Waldorf teachers, the goal is not to enliven education but to balance education. Rote practice, worksheets, and follow-up assessment are every bit as important as creativity. Please give your students the rote practice they need to succeed."

Bibliography

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Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl is the creator of Renewal of Literacy® and author of *The Roadmap to Literacy Books.* She brings the best of Steiner's indications together with the best of modern research to renew Waldorf education, starting with a renewal of literacy.

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