

Alternative Assessment in Waldorf Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stimulus for and significance of the research

Today's education reform debate is dominated by the assumption that high-stakes standardized tests are the only valid means of assessment. This assumption has become dogma and standardized test results are now widely used to evaluate, reward, and penalize students, teachers, schools, school districts, and state education departments. In the realm of professional education, however, many scholars question the benefits of such testing and urge consideration of alternative assessment methods, many of which are comparable to those used in Waldorf schools for decades.

Why Waldorf schools

Waldorf education is independent and non-sectarian, offering a developmental curriculum integrating academic subjects, practical activities, and the arts for students from preschool through twelfth grade in some 250 schools in the U. S. Waldorf teachers use only curriculum-embedded classroom assessments in the elementary years, with demonstrable success. The fact that Waldorf education is independent (not public) is not a reason to omit consideration of the Waldorf experience from the debate. Its inclusion may help strengthen the position of those who argue for alternative assessment methods and open up public discussion of educational issues to new perspectives on assessment and accountability.

Objective of the research

The primary purpose of the research was to document how selected Waldorf teachers conduct assessments in their classrooms and to provide a systematic, detailed, and concise account of those methods. We also documented how they tracked, recorded, shared and used their assessments and we explain the procedures and policies of the three schools in the study for formal reporting. Another objective was to discuss the Waldorf approach in relation to the work of selected scholars in the fields of education and educational psychology.

Methodology of the research

We follow the methods of qualitative social research for gathering rich data, analysis by coding and interpretive presentation. This is a descriptive case study with affinities to ethnographic research. For five months we tracked nine teachers in three different schools, teaching grades three through seven. We focused only on their teaching of main lesson (core) subjects, during the first two hours of the school day. We gathered data on their goal-setting processes, teaching plans, daily teaching activity, and methods of assessment. Our data were teachers' journals, focused conversations, questionnaires, and selected classroom visits.

The findings

We preface a two-part data presentation with an overview of Waldorf pedagogical

fundamentals that influence how individual teachers set learning goals and make assessments. These are: the Waldorf understanding of the long-term goal of education for social benefit and development of individual potential, the Waldorf eight-year comprehensive elementary curriculum, the class teacher who stays with the same group of students through the elementary grades, and the three-day rhythm for presentation of material.

For goal setting, we found that the following features were prominent and prevalent and give examples from the data:

Teachers construed goals as benchmarks—never as endpoints—in a continuum of expectations for progress in cognitive, affective, psycho-motor, artistic, and social development.

Teachers set experiential goals: that students would engage in lively experiences that would awaken their interest and motivate them to want to learn more. Strategies for ensuring lively experience included movement and games, multi-sensory engagement, stories and narration (instead of reading of textbooks), and multi-subject integration.

Teachers set subject-specific objectives for content knowledge, understanding and skill acquisition.

Teachers included goals for progress in math, language arts, and good study habits in every block regardless of the block topic.

Teachers stated goals in terms of dispositions, capacities and capabilities; they always included social goals.

Artistic activities were always incorporated into subject goals.

For assessment, we first explain that Waldorf classroom assessments were always in continuity with instruction, not disconnected as a separate process. We found the following prominent features and give examples from the data:

Teachers' assessments were open-ended; even grades given at the end of blocks were construed as indicators of a continuing development of capacities, skills, and knowledge-acquisition.

Teachers continuously assessed the quality of students' engagement (experience), for example, in circle (movement) activities, which enabled individual assessment of social, psycho-motor, affective and other capabilities; in performance activities; and in writing and artistic activities, in which the process as well as the product was assessed.

Teachers' assessments at the ends of each block, for comprehension and retention of the subject material, were multi-dimensional, that is, based on varied inputs and kinds of evidence including: written assignments (dictations, journals, essays), student-created main lesson books, artistic assignments, participation in oral recall, homework, quizzes and tests, group projects, drawings and diagrams, class participation; they continually assessed progress in math and language arts by means of writing and speaking assignments and math games, regardless of the block subject.

Teachers assessed student-created Main Lesson Books for content, creativity, attention to instructions, neatness and attention to detail; artistic work was valued as a basis for assessment of development of cognitive abilities and aesthetic sensibilities.

Teachers assessed in order to inspire and motivate, and in ways that minimized excessive or inappropriate competition; they included many group and peer assessments and options for student self-assessment.

Teachers devised their own systems for tracking and recording student progress, including check lists of written and other assignments and notes kept on individual students. They followed their schools' policies in regard to format and frequency for sharing classroom assessments with parents in conferences and in recording assessments in a combination of grid-style and narrative formal reports at the ends of blocks (for upper grades), mid-year, and year's end (we provide examples). They prepared lengthy end-of-year narrative reports for every child aimed at providing a comprehensive and individual picture of progress in cognitive, affective, social, and physical-motor areas of development (we provide an example in an appendix).

Discussion

We consolidate the findings of the previous two parts as a bulleted description of the Waldorf approach to assessment. Throughout the discussion section we draw on our professional and personal knowledge of Waldorf pedagogy and generalize from the data on the assumption that the teachers in the study were representative of Waldorf teachers generally. The main emphases in Waldorf assessments that are different from standard (non-Waldorf) practice are that: Waldorf teachers practice only classroom assessments; these assessments are comprehensive of all domains (areas of development)—cognitive, affective, psycho-motor, and also social, character, and aesthetic development; assessment is multi-dimensional (based on many pieces of evidence over time) and age-appropriate; performance assessments are prominent; the purpose of all assessment is pedagogical (not for grading or ranking).

We then address the issue of the reliability and validity of Waldorf assessments in the absence of externally-imposed standards and standardized external testing under the question: Can we trust the teachers? We cite scholars who argue that standardized tests are unfair, untrustworthy, and capable of measuring only a limited set of cognitive skills. In support of trust in the case of Waldorf teaching, we call attention to Waldorf teachers' professional credentials, mentoring and teacher evaluations, collegial oversight of compliance with schools' standards that are comparable to external ones, and parental involvement. We find confirmation of the Waldorf approach of trusting the professionalism of teachers in the example of the public schools of Finland. We address the question of school accountability, explaining the procedures and mechanisms through which Waldorf schools are accountable to students, families and beyond.

Finally, we support our belief that Waldorf education can make an important contribution to today's search for better ways of measuring educational outcomes by showing that its methods comport with and validate recommendations from a wide range of scholars, especially those advocating a shift from assessment *of* to assessment *for* learning. The Waldorf approach to assessment aligns with proposals from scholars for teacher-created, curriculum-embedded, multi-dimensional student evaluations. We also note briefly the Waldorf approach in relation to the topics of art and cognition, multiple intelligences, and computers in the classroom.

Appendices

Eight appendices provide the following: profiles of participating teachers; profiles of their schools; the Waldorf elementary-level curriculum in the form of a chart; an example of one school's official grade-level standards; an example of the year-end narrative report; a detailed description of a seventh grade history block; organizational information from the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America; and an overview of the Waldorf position in regard to school independence, parental choice and financial accessibility.